

HOLLYWOOD (MIS)REPRESENTATIONS OF ARABS AND THE MIDDLE EAST FROM A PRODUCTION PERSPECTIVE – THE CASE OF FX CHANNEL'S *TYRANT*

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ABSTRACT

Very often, scholars and cultural critics regard Hollywood's portrayal of Arabs, Muslims and the Middle East as stereotyped, clichéd and, in some cases, downright offensively racist. Yet, there are very few scholarly works that investigate this issue from a production perspective. Drawing from theories on cultural production and creative personnel, and combining them with fieldwork I conducted on the set of *Tyrant* (2014-2016), FX Channel's Middle Eastern drama, this article seeks to contribute to this literature by exploring the complexities of the accurate representation of Arabs, Muslims and the Middle East when working with a mixed cast in a series intended for a diverse audience, which by necessity also deals with politics.

1. INTRODUCTION

Building on the solid foundation of postcolonial literary studies in general, and Edward Said's approach to "Orientalist literature" in particular, a growing body of academic literature has investigated Hollywood's portrayal of Arabs, Muslims and the Middle East (Aguayo 2009, Georgakas 1989, Kozlovic 2007, Mandel 2001, McAlister 2001, Semmerling 2006, Shaheen 2008). Discourse analysis and textual analysis are among the principal methods when exploring issues of (mis)representation. One notable exception, opting for a production perspective, is Kyle Conway's *Little Mosque on the Prairie* (2017), based on fieldwork conducted on the set of the Canadian sitcom (2007-2012) focusing on a Muslim community in a fictional prairie town.

Very often, scholars and cultural critics regard Hollywood's preferences in portraying Arabs, Muslims and the Middle East as politically loaded, biased, stereotyped, clichéd and, in some cases, downright offensively racist. Many cultural critics viewed *Tyrant* (2014-2016), FX's Middle Eastern drama, along the lines of this discourse. Set in a fictional country in the midst of upheavals, with a plot rich in obvious references to the Arab uprisings of 2011 and beyond, the first season of the series received harsh critiques. In 2015, the production of seasons 2 and 3 was relocated from Israel to Hungary, an emerging location for Hollywood runaway productions (Sayfo 2020) where I had the opportunity to conduct fieldwork and to study the preproduction and production process. I spent hundreds of hours on the set and conducted around ten semi-structured interviews, alongside informal conversations with more than twenty above-the-line creative personnel, while investigating the birth of clichés and (mis)representations.¹

Through the case study of *Tyrant*, this article seeks to contribute to the meagre body of literature on Hollywood's representation of Arabs, Muslims and the Middle East from a production perspective. In the first part of the article, I will discuss the show's stereotypical representations of Arabs and the Middle East, then provide insights into the production culture, discuss the complexity of production practices and dynamics, cover the creators' considerations about the (assumed) demands of the audience, the importance of the

writers and directors and their cultural backgrounds, the involvement of American Muslim organizations in the production, and investigate the problems of "accuracy". The goal of the article is to answer the following questions: What are the pitfalls faced by a non-Arab crew working on the representation of Arabs and the Middle East? Are clichés and (mis)representations necessarily intentional and forced from top-down, as many might assume? How are long-established clichés reproduced? And, finally, what are the possible professional considerations behind the choices of two highly sensitive issues, namely accent/language and the representation of women?

2. *TYRANT*, THE "MOST ANTI-ARAB" PRODUCTION EVER SEEN ON TV

Echoing the academic discourses cited above, journalistic criticism often regards Hollywood as biased in its portrayal of Arabs and Muslims; bias that is often attributed to geo-political considerations allegedly served by Hollywood. *Tyrant* attracted a fair amount of this type of criticism (Newbould 2014, VanDerWerff 2014). Borrowing its theme from *The Godfather*, the 2014 show by Israeli producer Gideon Raff and American Howard Gordon revolves around Barry/Bassam Al-Fayeed (Adam Rayner), the younger of the two sons of the brutal dictator of Abuddin, a fictional Middle Eastern country. Having run from his past for over twenty years, Barry, a pediatrician, lives in the United States with his American family. However, when he decides to return to the country to attend his nephew's (Cameron Gharaee) wedding, he is unwillingly drawn into a political crisis caused by the death of his father and finds himself in the midst of a growing popular revolution against his brother Jamal (Ashraf Barhoum), the new self-appointed president of Abuddin. Barry, an advocate of democratic values, soon confronts Jamal and attempts a coup. As the coup fails, Jamal leaves Barry to die in the desert. Fortunately, Barry is found by Bedouins who shelter him in their village, where he meets Daliya, his host's wife. Very soon, the army of the Caliphate (an ISIS-style terrorist group) occupies the village, and Barry recruits a revolutionary group of tribal people as well as urban liberals to confront and defeat the radicals. After hard battles and a victory won with the army's support, he returns to the palace to reunite with his family and is forgiven by the increasingly paranoid Jamal. After Jamal is shot, Barry takes over the presidency with the intention of building a free and democratic Abuddin.

1 Interviews were conducted with Howard Gordon (executive producer), Gwyneth Holder-Payton (co-executive producer), Christopher Keyser (showrunner), Attila Szalay (cinematographer), Addison McQuigg (writer), Anna Fischko (writer), Lee Gordon (set decorator), Ray McNeill (property master), Julia Patkos (costume designer), Adam Rayner (actor), Khaled Abul-Naga (actor).

However, as tensions grow, he is drawn into an alarming spiral of becoming a tyrant similar to those he previously despised.

Soon after the debut of the pilot and throughout season 1, some of the critics labeled the show as hateful and racist, accusing producer Howard Gordon of “brainwashing” the American people (Hanina 2015). One of the most outraged commentaries came from Jack Shaheen, an academic and public writer who monitors Hollywood’s representations of Arabs, and who blamed the show for providing “some of the most racist anti-Arab images (I have) ever seen on American television” (2014). Shaheen accused *Tyrant* of presenting Arab characters as barbaric types – “backward, rapist, warmongers, rich and spoiled” – and of even depicting an “Arab child as a murderer” (2014).

Other reviewers regarded the show as a parallel to American Middle East policies, which cast Bassam as an “American savior” of the Arabs, who are depicted as “uncivilized power-hungry Bedouins, whose only refuge from secular dictatorships and Islamic fundamentalism is liberal democracy” (Hussain 2015). Some agreed with this criticism and assumed *Tyrant* to be a part of “Fox propaganda”, noting that “Raff and Gordon have merely produced a fictional and glorified account of how the Obama administration would have liked to have dealt with the Arab Spring and Syria in particular” (Jones 2014). The American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee denounced *Tyrant* for “its deeply entrenched racism against Arabs and the Middle East”, demanding that FX cancel the show. Ibrahim Hooper of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) likewise voiced his concerns, for “in *Tyrant*, even the ‘good’ Arab Muslims are bad” (ADC 2014).

This harsh reception was by no means unexpected, particularly in view of the creator’s previous works. In 2004, CAIR accused Howard Gordon’s *24* (2001-2010) of perpetuating stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims, and objected to the persistent portrayal of Arabs and Muslims in the context of terrorism (Alsultany 2012: 18). Later, Gordon was also extensively criticized for his controversial show *Homeland* (2011-2020) revolving around terrorism and the Middle East. Although Gordon declared that he strove to create nuanced characters and to tell the story of *Tyrant* from an “Arab point of view”, many critics pointed out stereotypical representations of Arabs and Muslims as defined in the relevant literature: the “Three B-s”, the Belly Dancers, Billionaires and Bombers (Qumsiyeh 1998); Villains, Sheikhs and Maidens (Shaheen 2003); the “dangerous” Muslim man, the “imperiled” Muslim woman, and the “civilized” European (Razack 2008), along with other clichés such as chaotic Middle

Eastern streets, Bedouin romance, and other “Orientalist fantasies”. Even though some critiques seemed to ignore the creators’ lofty goals, clearly, there is a tension between producer’s intentions and the actual textual outcome, which, as we shall see, can be in part be explained by paradoxes in representation faced by the creators during the production process.

3. THE ASSUMED DEMANDS OF THE AUDIENCE

Speaking of the representation of Arabs/Muslims on American television, Alsultany (2012: 27) asserted that the primary goal of commercial television networks is not education, social justice, or social change, but to generate profit by keeping as many viewers glued to screen for as long as possible. Caves (2000: 3) contended that in the film industry, uncertainties about success often pushes companies to devote immense efforts to gain a sense of what audiences actually want, as an attempt to control high levels of risk. Cantor (2011: 26) notes that producers of television series communicate not only to the viewing audience, but also to “those in control of the medium, the network executives and advertising agencies”. Critics are also in position to financially make or break a series, while ad agencies usually threaten to jump ship to other networks when superior ratings are found elsewhere (Caldwell 2008: 89). Therefore, the (assumed) demands of the audience as consumers should be considered as a major force that shapes the text.

Although aware of international markets, Hollywood is liable to make TV series for principally domestic audiences, and only secondarily for foreign ones, which, as Alford (2009) concluded, can be seen as one explanation for a tendency to focus on political narratives that are familiar to Americans, as existing knowledge and a sense of familiarity reduce the risk of having to deal with the audience’s ignorance. In the case of *Tyrant*, the producers, directors and writers I interviewed agreed that the American audience’s (assumed) desires and expectations should not be ignored. The competition for viewers was immense, as some four hundred scripted shows were aired on American networks in 2015 (Koblin 2015). Knowing that almost 80 percent of all new shows fail and are canceled each year due to low ratings in American television (Caldwell 2008: 23), the pressure on producers was high.

The political environment, coupled with Hollywood trends and the audience’s (assumed) demands and knowledge,

has the potential to affect representations. Investigating the representation of North American Arabs/Muslims since 9/11, Alsultany (2012: 21-31) describes the tendency towards “simplified complex representations”, a set of improvisatory strategies used by television producers, writers, and directors to give the impression that the representations they offer are complex. Exploring the issue from a production perspective, Conway (2017) defined two paradoxes: the “synecdoche”, where one person stands in for a group of people; and “saleable diversity”, the dilemma of representing Muslim communities in a diverse way, which is nevertheless understandable to a general audience. Set in the Middle East with Arab/Muslim characters standing in for all dramatic roles, the producers of *Tyrant* faced a paradox that I would define as the “problem of saleable accuracy” in the sense that producers set a limit for the depth of the characters and the environment in order to meet the (assumed) demands of the audience.

According to producer Howard Gordon, even the very concept of offering a principally Arab perspective was regarded as a risk factor that could potentially exclude a certain part of the American audience, and considerations regarding the audience’s demands set certain constraints on creativity and, ultimately, on cultural accuracy.² As FX CEO John Landgraf put it, “It’s not that you can never show something that looks like a street riot at la Tahrir Square. It’s that, generally speaking, all of it has to have this kind of formalistic exotic beauty to it, because if we can’t seduce people into this world, then we fail” (Rose 2014b). Therefore, the plot of *Tyrant* intentionally summons countless clichés and an even greater number of references to actual events shown in American news in order to give the audience a sense of familiarity and hence reduce the risk of rejection. On the other hand, it should be noted that Hollywood does have a history of using an imagined audience for authorial justification (Caldwell 2008: 223).

Some of the harshest criticism leveled at *Tyrant* came after the premiere of the pilot. As some critics correctly pointed out, the first episode mustered a set of stereotypical and clichéd characters of “cultural capital” (Alsultany 2012: 27) like the Americanized Arab (Barry), the dictator’s misbehaving son (Ahmed), the brutal Arab (Jamal), and the abused Arab/Muslim woman (Nusrat). Neither were the luxurious palaces, chaotic streets and poor neighborhoods particularly authentic or nuanced, and the plot itself, showing Barry returning with his American family from the United States

to the Middle East for a “short visit”, recalled a cliché long established in Brian Gilbert’s *Not Without My Daughter* (1991).

However, clichés of this type can be explored within the frame of economic logics. In 2013, when *Tyrant*’s pilot was prepared, FX ordered about half a dozen pilots of different shows from affiliated producers to select the ones to be funded and developed into a series. In other words, the producers’ primary goal was to secure a foothold by gaining the applause and approval of the studio’s testing audience, representing different ages and ethnicities, and to convince the decision-makers at FX to invest in the production of the season. Therefore, the creators decided to minimize the risk of rejection by building on the audience’s knowledge about the Arab world, assumed to be minimal and to be based on previous Hollywood productions and superficial news reports at best. At the same time, the pilot also involved broad characterizations in order to keep options open for further changes and evolutions.³

4. CREATIVE AUTHORITY AND THE PROBLEMS OF WRITING ON ARABS BY NON-ARABS

The “accuracy” of any representation of any group of people is hardly measurable, given that it is highly subjective and depends on the speaker’s notions. Therefore, rather than investigating the “accuracy” of *Tyrant*’s representation of Arabs and the Middle East, my main question was as follows: What did the creators regard as being authentically Arab and Middle Eastern, and who had the authority to decide what is authentic and what is not during the production process?

People working on the show agreed that due to his reputation for blockbusters like *Homeland* and *24*, producer Howard Gordon was given complete creative freedom by FX. For seasons 2 and 3 of *Tyrant*, Gordon’s concept was to avoid hurtful representations of Arabs and Muslims, and to construct a fictional Middle Eastern country as realistic as possible. So what went wrong with Gordon’s plan?

Producers of TV shows are cultural producers and television is a “producer medium” (Newcomb and Alley 1983), as its three major creative parts – story, cast and editing – are largely controlled by the producer (Cantor 2011: 5). Others have argued that executive producers (showrunners) have a fundamental role in television (Wild 1999). Caldwell (2008:

2 Howard Gordon, personal interview, 20 April, 2016.

3 Howard Gordon, personal interview, 20 April, 2016.

199-202) noted that the logic of authorship in contemporary television is institutional rather than personal, therefore it is negotiated and collective. In this sense, producers represent collective rather than individual above-the-line interests. In general, scholars analyzing “cultures of production” largely regard cultural production as a messy, fragmented business that provides major space for creative autonomy (Fowles 1996, Du Gay 1997, Hesmondhalgh 2002, Banks 2010). I found that collective authorship and creative freedom were key factors in the (re)creation of clichés, stereotypes and misrepresentations.

Tyrant's crew included less than a handful of Arab creative personnel, mostly actors.⁴ Therefore, Abuddin was constructed by creative personnel of diverse backgrounds with wholly different sets of artistic and economic priorities, who had but a limited interest in Middle Eastern affairs or Arab-American issues other than what concerned their actual job. For roughly one-half of those I interviewed, the lines between Muslims, Arabs, and other ethnicities of the Middle East were blurred, and the categories were even interchangeable. In this regard, British creative personnel, socialized as they were in multicultural London, and Israelis generally had a deeper knowledge of the people of the Middle East. Cultural consultants' suggestions were respected, but often regarded as secondary to other considerations. Observing the preproduction and production phases, it was striking to see how a large number of stereotypes, clichés and cultural inaccuracies are not forced from the top, but are proposed during the creative process by creative workers such as directors, writers, actors, and designers as a consequence of their aesthetic autonomy as well as of their professional priorities, absent from the viewers' eyes.

As the set of season 2 of *Tyrant* was located in Hungary, creative management was partly split between Gordon/Keyser in Los Angeles and co-executive producer Gwyneth Holder-Payton on the set. Given the nine hours' difference between Hungary and Los Angeles, and bearing in mind the producers' demands, both assumed and genuine, Holder-Payton had the authority to make all day-to-day and immediate decisions, work with creative personnel of diverse backgrounds and priorities, and to select minor actors and supporting cast members.

4 When speaking of creative personnel, I follow the definition proposed by Hesmondhalgh, and mean workers such as writers, actors, directors and musicians; craft and technical workers such as camera operators, film editors and sound engineers; creative managers such as television producers, magazine editors and A&R personnel; administrators; executives; and unskilled labor (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2013: 9).

As is usual for American TV series, each season of *Tyrant* was supervised by a showrunner who had the authority to decide the overall concept and storyline. In the hands of Gideon Raff, the first season was basically a soap opera, with the main focus on personal relations and family affairs. In season 2, supervised by Howard Gordon, increasing attention was paid to social and political issues. Season 3, supervised by Christopher Keyser, retained some of its focus on family affairs, but offered a much broader canvas of Middle Eastern societies, political movements and organizations.⁵

Each season had a group of seven writers participating in the creation of the overall story and episodes, with each of them personally in charge of writing a particular episode.

Caldwell (2008: 206) pointed out how “low-culture” Hollywood embraces “high-culture” graduates from elite universities who practice “downward cultural mobility” by affiliating with Hollywood. This was particularly striking in *Tyrant's* writer's team, set up by white Americans, mainly graduates of drama schools and the English faculties of renowned American universities, with no personal or educational connection to the Middle East at all. This background largely affected their priorities when writing and also limited the cultural depths of their texts. In our personal discussions, the writers all claimed that their first and foremost goal was to “tell a good story” in terms of a narrative that would potentially attract audiences, while simultaneously contributing to their professional capital. They all agreed, at least in principle, that the story should be as authentic as possible in terms of culture, history and the actual dynamics of the real world, but they also pointed out that even the most authentic story can fail if lacking in dramatic strength, a strong storyline or a failure to address the audience. Nearly all of the writers also admitted that personal focuses of interest, and even viewpoints on certain social and political issues, could be reflected in the texts, even though it should not be at the expense of the professional considerations of storytelling. Yet, the way the scripts were written and worded often suggested that some culturally sensitive scenes such as Islamic prayers, funerals and political arguments, were generally preceded by some research and/or discussions with consultants. When I inquired about the limits of the depth of cultural accuracy, most writers took it for granted that the American audience have no or only limited knowledge of actual events in the Middle East. This belief prompted them to construct narratives inspired by actual events that would

5 Christopher Keyser, personal interview. 15 June, 2016.

be legible for the widest audience possible, hence making the overall production marketable.⁶

Even though, as Gordon claimed, *Tyrant* ultimately espoused an Arab perspective, the writers had an American audience in mind, which ultimately led to the inclusion of culturally inaccurate phrases in order “to make the audience feel a certain way”.⁷ One case in point is a scene in season 2 showing Jamal’s discussion with Sheikh Taymullah (Dimitri Andreas), a moderate Muslim cleric, about his personal fears of death. At one point, the sheikh says: “Everyone dies”. When I asked the episode’s writer why he did not choose a Quranic quote that would have been more authentic for a sheikh, he explained that he had been unable to find an appropriate quote that expressed the message he had in mind. In a number of cases, the lines of Arab characters included quotes from English and American literature, Shakespeare, Yeats’s poems and Frederick Douglass that were regarded as being better suited to communicating a certain idea to the audience. The dramatic potential of the story would often prevail over cultural accuracy, as for example in the blossoming romance between Barry and Dalyah in season 2, something that could hardly happen in a Bedouin environment where the spaces of men and women are strictly separated.

5. PRESENTING SUBJECTIVE NOTIONS OF ISLAM AS OBJECTIVE

The criticism that followed the pilot of *Tyrant* had the potential to damage the reception of the first season and thus its economic success. As Arabs are an “invisible minority” in the United States, split along national and sectarian lines (Tehrani 2009), it was not the Arab-American, but the American-Muslim lobby that was powerful enough to be recognized, which pushed FX to reassure American Muslim organizations that the show would be respectful towards Islam (Chasmar 2014). Howard Gordon requested consultations with the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC) and Muslims on Screen and Television (MOST), and he also hired a Palestinian filmmaker to serve as a consultant for the first season’s set in Israel (Yahr 2014).

From the beginning, inviting American Muslim groups to act as consultants was seen as a chance to become involved in the creative process of representing their communities by

Hollywood (Rosenberg 2014). The cooperation was beneficial for both sides. With Muslims on their side, FX and the producers hushed some of the critical voices and took an important step towards the potential market of American Muslims. As for MPAC and MOST, they improved their reputation in Hollywood as a moderate organization of authority over Islamic affairs, paving the way for further cooperation. This is very much in line with Alsultany’s assertion (2012: 28) about the trend of simplified complex representational strategies that reflect the commodification of the civil rights and multiculturalist movements in the United States.

Although the story of *Tyrant* is located in the fictional country of Abuddin in the Eastern Mediterranean, certain cultural representations often came second. The main priority for MOST and affiliated American Muslim consultants was not an authentic depiction of the Arab Middle East, but a favorable portrayal of mainstream Islam and the characters who represent it: Fauzi (Fares Fares), a moderate pro-democracy journalist; Halima (Olivia Popica), a feminist pro-democracy student; Sheikh Taymullah (Dimitri Andreas), a government-friendly elderly cleric; and Sheikh al-Qadi (Khaled Abdul-Naga), a moderate Islamist cleric supporting the democratic transition of Abuddin. Alsultany (2012: 14-15) pointed out that in an Arab-American context, what makes a Muslim “good” or “bad” is not his or her relationship to Islam, but rather to the United States. In the case of *Tyrant*, set in a Middle Eastern environment, the difference between “good” and “bad” Arabs/Muslims is not their relation to the United States, but to American values such as freedom, democracy, and the like.

American Muslim consultants had no objections to casting the fictional, ISIS-inspired terrorist group, the Caliphate and its members in the worst possible light, even if these representations were inaccurate and bore little resemblance to any real-life Islamist group. Therefore, while breaking with many clichés of previous representations of Arabs in general, the terrorist characters appearing in *Tyrant* share features as described in some academic studies and by cultural critics. Viewed from another angle, unrealistic representations were of little concern to the authors as the Caliphate was intended to fill the dramatic role of a group of unnuanced villains.

Even though not all advice was accepted, consultants were in general regarded as sources of authentic knowledge by the producers and the creative personnel. Therefore, their specific, often non-Middle Eastern approach to and understanding of Islam made its way into the texts, and their personal views were presented as being authentically Middle Eastern, again

6 Howard Gordon, personal interview, 20 April, 2016.

7 Christopher Keyser, personal interview, 15 June, 2016.

re-affirming Hollywood's intellectual tradition of regarding the categories of Arabs and Muslims as interchangeable.

6. CREATING AN ARAB COUNTRY AND ITS PEOPLE BY NON-ARABS

Although hired by the producer, the director still has a broad level of authority and autonomy as the highest-ranking creative personnel on the set. Almost each episode of *Tyrant* was directed by a different person. While Holder-Payton had the ultimate word in conceptual decisions, it was interesting to see how each director had their own work style, priorities and focus of interest. Cultural accuracy or dealing with stereotypes and clichés was not always among their top priorities.

The directors of seasons 2 and 3 were Americans and Britons of diverse background. When I asked about the reasons for excluding Arab directors (and writers), I was told about the lack of suitable Arab professionals with an experience in Hollywood production. In a personal interview, Holder-Payton explained how she intentionally wanted to compensate for the absence of Arab directors by involving as many directors of minority backgrounds as possible, as she assumed that individuals who had experienced marginalization in the world of directors dominated by white men would be more open towards the sensitivities of other marginal people (Cunningham 2015).

Indeed, when seeing the directors at work, I had the impression that the ones with some sort of minority background, like Polish-Jewish Alex Zakrzewski, African-American Earnest Dickerson, Black-British Alrick Riley as well as women like Deborah Chow, Charlotte Brandstrom and others tended to be more sensitive and open regarding suggestions on cultural nuances than male directors of majority background. When shooting "Faith" (2.03), Zakrewski even decided to completely redesign a set (originally as a living room) on the day of the shooting to make it culturally more authentic as a place where male members of an Arab family gather for a funeral wake. On another occasion, he accepted minor suggestions made by some of the extras of Middle Eastern background, when rehearsing the scene of a Bedouin feast. In a scene that supposed to feature Abu Omar, the leader of the Caliphate making sex to his wife and two slave women at once (something unrealistic for a hardcore Islamist), it was Ernest Dickinson who took the ultimate decision to leave Jane out of the scene and to instead have Abu Omar making love to the two slave women only. In contrast, the majority white male directors tended to have stronger visions, accepting more important

suggestions based on cultural concerns mainly in cases involving highly sensitive issues that could have caused serious problems for the show's reception. Personal considerations occasionally played a role too. In season 2, a scripted scene showing Jamal flogging himself was deleted not only for being problematic for evoking a Shia Muslim tradition in a – presumably – Sunni Muslim environment, but also because director Peter Weller personally objected: as a PhD in Mediterranean culture, he regarded it as a Christian ritual that would be incompatible with a Middle Eastern Muslim milieu.

At the time the pilot (1.01) was released, Gideon Raff claimed that Abuddin was mainly inspired by Syria (Willmore 2014). Later, Howard Gordon described the country as fictional and the plot as a mash-up or collage of all Arab countries (Rose 2014a). During seasons 2 and 3, the palace and some interiors sets were set up in a studio, while the village and town sets were built in a sand quarry on the outskirts of Budapest, Hungary, while a few scenes were shot in exterior sets. Being entirely constructed, the sets largely reflect the designing authors and creative personnel's personal visions of the Middle East.

Alsultany (2012: 29) highlighted that fictionalizing Arab and Muslim countries tends to add to the conflation and generalization of Arab and Muslim identities. As I myself observed, this fictionalization has an impact not only on perceptions of the text, but also on its creation. Given the fictiveness of Abuddin, set designer Ricky Eyres, set decorator Lee Gordon, prop master Ray McNeill and costume designer Julia Patkos enjoyed a relatively broad aesthetic autonomy to create the visuals of the show. Therefore, they used elements from Morocco to the Middle East and the Gulf as inspiration, despite the fact that the concept of Abuddin would rather have called for a Levantine-style design. The craft of set building and set design call for extensive forms of focused analysis, conceptualization, and aesthetic distinction, however, working conditions can potentially disturb the process (Caldwell 2008: 118). Budget constraints and the availability of elements for "authentic decoration" were a concern throughout the preparation process of *Tyrant*. The ultimate excuse for inaccuracies voiced by set and costume designers was that they were "not making a documentary", which provided a large space for creativity, allowing them to focus on professional and economic priorities rather than on cultural accuracy.

In the case of *Tyrant*, design was a site where the reproduction of existing clichés and misrepresentations was indeed striking. Designers agreed that even though they were undoubtedly influenced by earlier trips to various Arab countries (mainly Morocco, Dubai and Jordan), they drew their main

inspiration from online research and from previous artistic productions, including paintings, films and TV reports on the Middle East. They also concurred that some of their concepts and ideas could have been subconscious, inspired by designs they had come across some time earlier in life. Subconscious or not, some of the orientalist fantasies – criticized by Edward Said in his *Orientalism* for being a representative of power relations between the West and the Orient – were partly reproduced in *Tyrant*. According to Julia Patkos, the costumes of the actors playing Bedouins were indeed based on nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European paintings by Frederick Goodall, Emile Vernet-Lecomte, and John Singer Sargent, which according to Edward Said invoked racial hierarchies. Some twenty similar artworks were hung on the walls of the presidential palace set. Unaware of the academic discourse on Orientalism, Patkos explained to me how she was aesthetically enchanted by the clothes in the paintings, and felt it was a professional challenge to create costumes by using particular elements. Similarly, Gordon's intention was to create a "romantic" atmosphere for the palace, which led him to choose Orientalist paintings. McNeill also added an economic perspective, noting that one rationale was that these pictures were available on iStock and were royalty free.

Another example is the dilemma of camels in season 3. Holder-Payton was generally enthusiastic about having animals on the set, since including animals, and especially camels – strongly criticized by Shaheen (2003) – was regarded as visually strong and would also enhance the value of the show. However, the Jordanian artist who was commissioned to prepare some of the graphics for the show warned that the presentation of camels would be racist towards Arabs. At the other end of the spectrum, consultants argued that having camels in the show was not racist, but rather stereotypical and clichéd. Unlike racist representations, stereotypes and clichés were not seen as presenting a potential to risk to the show's economic success, and the camels were eventually given the green light.

7. AN ARAB COUNTRY INHABITED BY NON-ARABS

In season 1, Arab-Israeli Ashraf Barhoum was the single Arab actor in a main role.⁸ Although Egyptian-American actor Omar

8 Fares Fares who played Fauzi explained to me in a personal conversation that even though he has a Lebanese Christian background, he was socialized in Sweden, and hence regards himself as Swedish.

Metwally was considered for the lead role of Barry al-Fayeed, there were concerns about his ability to lead a show (Rose 2014b). Therefore, Adam Rayner, an actor of American and English background was chosen, drawing strong criticism. For some, it recalled Hollywood's old racist practice of blackface, while others explained the choice with the weak lobbying power of Arabs in Hollywood (Fienberg 2014). Responding to the critics, the producers noted that they had chosen to westernize Barry by making Amira, his mother, a Briton.

Howard Gordon and other producers explained that the relative exclusion of Arab actors could be ascribed to limited resources, as both pre-production time and the pool of Arab actors capable of playing the full emotional gamut of the English language was limited.

However, as time passed, increasingly more actors of full or partial Arab origin were cast in response to critics. In season 2, Egyptian-British actors were cast for minor roles, while in season 3, Egyptian Khaled Abul-Naga was cast for a major role, and Arab-Israeli Ashraf Farah, together with a number of young European actors with some sort of Arab background for minor roles.

Actors had a certain measure of autonomy in their roles, as they consulted with writers and directors, and occasionally even contributed to the development and evolution of their characters. For non-Arab actors, the depth of cultural engagement was largely an individual/artistic choice. While about half of them felt it was enough to improve their Arabic accent, others went to great lengths to develop a cultural understanding in order to make their character's personality and motivations as authentic as possible.

While for non-Arab actors, an accurate portrayal of their characters was an abstract responsibility, for Arab actors it was a more emotional affair as well as a matter of professional capital in their own countries. Ashraf Barhoum and Khaled Abul-Naga both claimed a strong cultural authority over their characters, and reacted sensitively when some of their suggestions were rejected by the writers for dramatic or other professional considerations. One case in point was the first draft of "Fathers and sons" (2.08) that showed Jamal getting mentally confused and seeking advice from a soothsayer, described in the script as a woman with exotic looks. After reading the script, Barhoum expressed his concerns that any kind of soothsaying was un-Islamic, hence offensive to Muslims and persuaded the writers to replace the soothsayer with a sheikh, counteracting thereby the writer's intention of highlighting Jamal's mental crisis and loss of sanity. In other cases, Barhoum and Abul-Naga were relatively free to add

lines, often in Arabic, in order to make their characters more authentic.

Given the sensitive nature of his role as a moderate sheikh, Khaled Abul-Naga had even more power over his character and often changed his lines. This is best illustrated by the contrast with Greek-British Dimitri Andreas, who also played a moderate sheikh, who did not change his lines even when it was culturally inaccurate (see the example of the quote “Everyone dies”, discussed above).

A liberal political activist himself, Abul-Naga, even managed to influence the overall plot.⁹ After the release of season 1, Naga was disappointed by the show's focus on Islamist extremists as the main opposition to the rule of the president and suggested to Howard Gordon that a greater emphasis should be laid on youth and student activism, which he believed had triggered the Egyptian and other uprisings of 2011. As a consequence, in seasons 2 and 3, the storyline of liberal student Halima and her fellow student activists was added.¹⁰

Playing the role of Sheikh Abdullah, leader of the Caliphate, Israeli-Arab Ashraf Farah had little responsibility for the accurate portrayal of an ISIS-like terrorist, hence he was mostly unaware of culturally inappropriate representations, like Abdullah, an Islamist, quoting from Yeats's poems rather than the Quran or some other religious text. Altogether, in a number of cases, Arab actors were regarded by the producers and directors as sources of authentic knowledge on Arabs and the Muslim world.

8. THE STORY OF A BILINGUAL ABUDDIN

In film and cinema, accent is a primary indicator of otherness and national identity (Naficy 2001, Lawless 2014). In her work on Indian accents in American films, Shilpa S. Davé (2013: 3) argues that accent “can mark or distinguish someone or something in relation to something else” as it “can create contrast by its very difference”. In the context of Hollywood's representations of Arabs, accent is often regarded as a means of highlighting the speaker's otherness, and, in some cases, of racial profiling. Among others, Disney's *Aladdin* was criticized for showing villains speaking

an accented English, while heroes spoke in American dialect (Artz 2004).

Targeting primarily American audiences, the language of *Tyrant* is American English in the case of American characters (as well as in the case of some protagonists such as the Americanized Arab Barry and his family), while the other characters imitate an Arabic accent. Reviewing season 1, *Time* magazine suggested that the use of more Arabic could add to the complexity of the show and would contribute to underscoring how Barry's character “has to straddle two worlds.” The article also accentuated that having “Arabic characters” speaking to each other in heavily accented English alienates Middle Eastern characters from the audience and positions them as “Others” in a story that was supposed to be told from their perspective (Poniewozik 2014).

From a production perspective, the approach was both economic and practical. For season 1, the show hired a dialect coach in order to standardize the actors' dialects. For seasons 2 and 3, incoming actors of American, British, Israeli, Iranian, Italian, Romanian, and other backgrounds worked individually on their accents by asking the advice of Arab friends or watching relevant YouTube videos. Using more Arabic with the given cast was regarded as an unnecessary challenge, given the fact that most of the actors as well as the vast majority of extras in seasons 2 and 3 did not speak Arabic. Gordon also believed that replacing English with another language would have increased the risk of rejection by the audience, hence having the potential of economic risk. These considerations pushed producers to regard English spoken with an Arabic accent as an indicator of Arab identity. As the show took an Arab view as its main perspective, and both heroes and villains spoke an accented English, producers and writers were convinced that in their case, accent could not be an indicator of “otherness,” even more so since the characters speaking American English, including Barry himself, are not consistently shown in a positive light as the story moves forward.

Occasionally, the writers included Arabic phrases such as prayers in the lines and Arabic chants of various crowds in the script. As these included government soldiers, pro-democracy demonstrators, and terrorists alike, Arabic could hardly be regarded as an intentional symbol of vilifying people. The choice of whether the crowd of extras should chant English or Arabic slogans during demonstrations and other crowd scenes was ultimately the director's decision that was often made in the last minute, on the set. This approach ended up with a “bilingual” Abuddin, randomly speaking English or Arabic.

9 In late January 2011, Abul-Naga participated in the demonstrations of Cairo's Tahrir Square, having signed liberal Mohamed El-Baradei's manifesto for political reform on March 28, 2010.

10 Khaled Abul-Naga, personal interview, 22 June, 2016.

9. THE LIBERATED WOMEN OF ABUDDIN

Scholarly works have often highlighted that Muslim women are depicted as racialized women who are the subjects of multiple hierarchies of power. As Myra Macdonald observed, Muslim women are often portrayed as a homogenous group of victims denied their voice (Macdonald 2006). Writing on press representations, Yasmin Jiwani (2005) agreed that coverage of Muslim women stresses the “binary oppositions between the liberated West and the oppressed East”, leaving women “silenced and objectified”. It was even suggested that the portrayal of Arab and Muslim women as un-free was a tool of twentieth-century American cinema to justify the war on terror (Maira 2008).

Some critics of season 1 regarded *Tyrant's* women as “hyper-exotic creatures” who were “exploited and dehumanized” by Arab men, most probably referring to Nusrat (Sibylla Deen) being raped by her father-in-law on her wedding night (Chamseddine 2014). In response to these criticisms, in seasons 2 and 3, the producers empowered some of the female characters: Dalyah evolved from the second wife of an elderly Bedouin man into a freedom fighter and politician; Leila (Moran Atlas), the First Lady, stepped out of her husband's shadow and ran for presidency; Halima, a student, became a freedom fighter and then a political activist; and Nafisa, wife of a cleric, had a powerful influence on her husband's political decisions.

These portrayals and evolutions can be explained by a number of factors. The first might be described as political, as the writers ultimately believed – a belief also shared by MOST and other American Muslim cultural consultants – that Muslim women are not as oppressed as many in the West might believe. Therefore, they portrayed women as active individuals, rather than as mere objects of men. This could certainly be understood as an engagement in the discourse over Muslim women and their preferred role in their societies. I observed a political engagement of this type in an argument over the first version of the script of “A Rock and A Hard Place” (3.05), which included a scene showing Halima making love to her boyfriend. After reading the script, two female consultants of Arab-American Muslim background argued that the portrayal of Halima in such an “immoral” way would ruin her character in the eyes of many Muslim viewers, and hence taint her message of democracy and liberal values. Understanding their concerns, the writers deleted the original love scene and instead included a dialogue between Halima and her boyfriend discussing the hardships of being a young liberal woman in a conservative society.

Writers and producers were also driven by professional considerations such as passing the Bechdel Test.¹¹ An equally defining factor was the general trend in Hollywood television series' portrayal of women: many blockbuster shows of the period such as *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019), *House of Cards* (2013-2018), and *Vikings* (2013-) reflect a trend of including strong female characters with political ambitions in the story (O'Keeffe 2014). However, specific representations had multiple aims. One example is showing Leila, wife of the ex-dictator Jamal, becoming Minister of Foreign Affairs, then running for presidency in season 3, which could be seen as a political statement on the writers' part, as an important element of the storyline, and also as a response to the dominant trends of Hollywood. The script of “Ask for the Earth” (3.08) described Leila as a “present-day Benazir Bhutto”, which again shows Hollywood's perspective of regarding the terms of Arab and Muslim as interchangeable.

Muslim women's bodies, especially their covered bodies, are the markers of their communities' place in modernity (Razack 2008: 16). The veil in particular has been deployed as a symbol of the victimhood of Muslim women and as a means of derogating Islam (Kumar 2005, Alsultany 2012: 72). Challenging some Western assumptions, Lila Abu-Lughod (2002) insists that the veil can mean very different things to different women, with most of them being far from oppressive. Nevertheless, different types of veils such as the hijab and the niqab are regarded as an indication of the status of Muslim women.

Writers, directors, and costume designers of *Tyrant* regarded the veil more of a matter of aesthetics than as a symbol of power. Therefore, the fact that the majority of the female characters in *Tyrant* were not or were only veiled part-time can hardly be explained by a “colonial obsession with unveiling” (Macdonald 2006). Still, in some cases, the veil was nevertheless a symbol of politics and ideology. Halima's portrayal without a veil was an intentional symbol of her liberal political views. Similarly, Leila, shown largely unveiled in seasons 1 and 2, became veiled in season 3 for narrative considerations, as she started her own political career in coalition with a Muslim cleric. In season 2, Dalyah was introduced wearing a loose veil, leaving some of her hair visible, an outfit largely inspired by orientalist paintings. Later, she lost her scarf in the rush when she was rescued from her captivity in the Caliphate. The showrunners' decision not to re-veil her was explained by her personal transformation into a strong woman, which in turn

11 Addisson Mcquigg, personal interview, 22 May, 2016.

could be perceived as an “obsession with unveiling”, although it could equally well be seen as a way of presenting Daliyah as a young and sexually attractive woman in order to attract a male audience, hence enforce the show’s economic success.

The presentation of Caliphate women like Jane (Caitlin Joseph) was also liberal by Islamist standards. Although women of such an ISIS-like group wear the niqab, covering their faces except for the eyes, producers and writers decided that the face of the actors should be uncovered, otherwise audiences would not recognize them. Therefore, Jane was covered in black while her face was left visible. These concerns did not apply to the extras playing the role of Caliphate women who wore a proper niqab.

In general, choosing and designing the costumes was a matter of aesthetics, often leading to heated debates and compromises between producers, directors, costume designer, and the actors themselves, because of their clashing aesthetic, professional and personal priorities and preferences.

10. (MIS)REPRESENTATION AS AN UNFORTUNATE “BUSINESS AS USUAL”

The production process of *Tyrant* largely undermined the high-minded goals of the producers to create an “authentic” representation of Arabs and the Middle East. Firstly, producers, showrunners and writers had to grapple with the paradox of “saleable accuracy”, as Hollywood, in its capacity as a creative industry, has its own logic and practices in storytelling, and creators focused on the (assumed) demands of the American market as its primary audience. Stereotypes and clichés were often used by authors as a tried and tested way of creating a sense of familiarity for the audience, hence ensuring the project’s economic success. Following this logic, they actively contributed to the reproduction of the stereotypes and clichés established by former literary and cinematic works. At the same time, a number of clichés were reproduced unintentionally by taking artistic and economic considerations, and personal preferences first.

Ultimately, (mis)representations, at least in the case of *Tyrant*, can also be linked to the relative absence of Arabs in the Hollywood industries and the ignorance of some creative personnel. As the number of Arabs and Muslims working in American creative industries is extremely low, their images are mainly constructed by creative personnel of diverse backgrounds, and they are often driven by aesthetic and professional rather than cultural considerations.

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