International Journal of Middle East Studies (2021), **53**, 125–131
doi:10.1017/S0020743821000052

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ROUNDTABLE

When Upper Egypt Spoke: Dramatized Rebellion

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Every Ramadan, when Egyptian TV shows enjoy their prime season, at least one series about Upper Egypt is produced and millions of viewers across the country get hooked on it. Those popular dramas usually include a southern hero who is a good-hearted yet poor young man, and his reluctant turn to crime to stand up against corruption and oppression. With romantic depictions of dark and handsome outlaws, the protagonists of these shows always win the deep sympathy of their fans as they rebel against unfortunate conditions and resist local officials, rich elites, and/or corrupt police officers. One of the most iconic and memorable shows, which came out in 1992, was titled *Dhiʾab al-Jabal* (Wolves of the Mountain, Fig. 1). It narrated the story of Badri, a young man from Qena province, who faced police injustice and escaped to the mountains on the west bank of the Nile River to hide, and then joined a gang of bandits. The honest and kind mountain fugitives aided him until he proved his innocence, reunited with his lost sister, and married his sweetheart.[1] For many viewers across the country, Badri and other lawless idols embody the only glimpse of resistance they experience in their repressed lives—albeit virtually on a TV screen.

In today's Egypt, drama is perhaps the only place where Upper Egypt, or al-Saʿid, can speak. The southern part of the country has been politically marginalized and economically underdeveloped for the past two hundred years. Ever since a "modern state" with a Cairo-centered government was created in the early 1800s, the inhabitants of Upper Egypt have been peripheralized and silenced by different ruling elites, whether under the dynasty founded by Muhammad ʿAli Pasha, during British colonialism, or in the post-colonial state. Nevertheless, due to long decades of marginalization, the subaltern inhabitants of the south often spoke, and in rebellious tones. Numerous state records kept at the Egyptian National Archives (Dar al-Wathaʾiq al-Qawmiyya) document how low- and middle-class men and women of the villages and small towns of Upper Egypt resorted to either massive revolts or engaged in quotidian acts of resistance that sometimes included petty crimes directed against their local and state oppressors. The above-mentioned popular TV series only dramatized an existing reality. My own research focuses on the archival records of the province of Qena, which was the capital of an autonomous state in the south for centuries before being integrated into the modern Egyptian nation–state.[2] This essay will focus on Qena itself to make a case for the margin's ability to speak in unconventional ways that mainstream history has largely failed to record.

Whether written in Arabic or foreign languages, the prevailing historiography of Egypt generally assumes that in the 19th and early 20th centuries the Saʿid was a happily integrated part of the nation–state, whose patriotic pioneers of modernization and later anti-colonialism were the northern bourgeoisie. The domination of nationalistic, elite, and Cairo-centered approaches to recording Egypt's history has rendered the narratives of Upper Egypt and southern places like Qena province irrelevant in the larger tale of the country. Only a few historians have attempted to recount the history of Upper Egypt and restore the voices of its peoples on the margins, most notably Peter Gran and Martina Rieker.[3]

[1]This TV series was written by an Upper Egyptian scriptwriter, Muhammad Safaʾ ʿAmir, who has penned many similar popular drama series which take place in the south. *Dhiʾab al-Jabal* also included songs by the esteemed Upper Egyptian poet ʿAbd al-Rahman al-Abnudi. See Lila Abu-Lughod, *Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 248.

[2]For a book-length history of this province, see Zeinab Abul-Magd, *Imagined Empires: A History of Revolt in Egypt* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013).

[3]Peter Gran, "Upper Egypt in Modern History: 'A Southern Question'?" in *Upper Egypt: Identity and Change*, ed. Nicholas Hopkins and Reem Saad (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2004); Martina Rieker, "The Saʿid and the City: Subaltern Spaces in the Making of Modern Egypt" (PhD diss., Temple University, 1997).

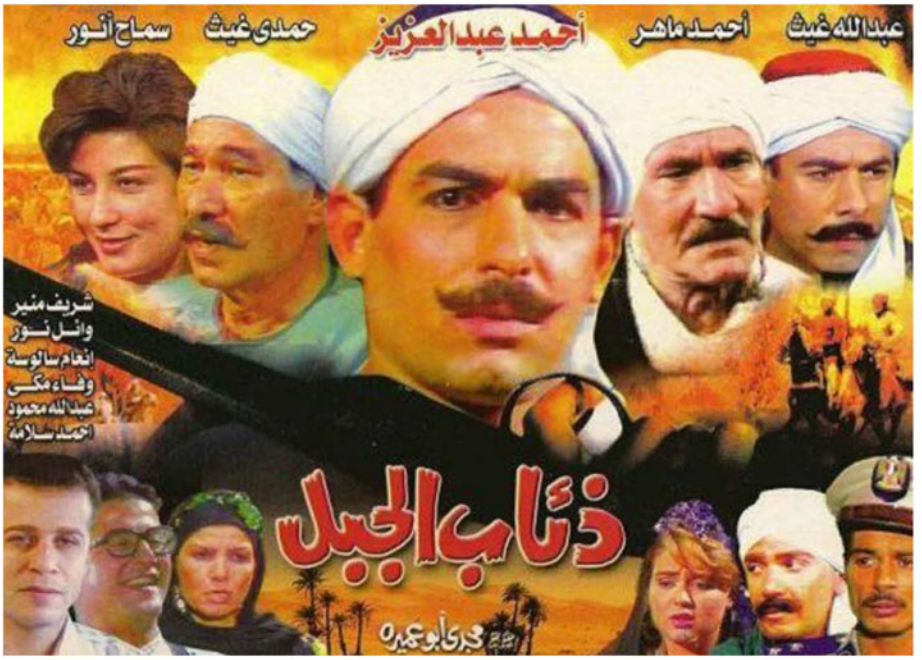

Figure 1. Advertisement for the 1992 TV drama *Dhi'ab al-Jabal*. Property of the author.

Long before the creation of a modern state, in medieval and early modern times, Qena province was a vibrant center of commercial agriculture, manufacturing, and long-distance trade. The province was the home of wealthy Muslims and Christian Copts, large landowners, hadith scholars, and craftsmen.[4] Qena owed its rise to economic and subsequently political prominence during this period to being an integral part of what many world historians call "the Indian Ocean world economy." Before the advent of a modern, European-led world system, the Indian Ocean global economic networks incorporated the Red Sea, the Arabian Sea, and the entirety of the Indian Ocean beyond them, and served as the engine for Afro-Asian trade. Upper Egypt, especially Qena and its Red Sea and Nile ports, was a central meeting point in a regional market that incorporated places such as the Hijaz, Yemen, India, Sudan, Abyssinia, and Morocco.[5] The economic prosperity of Upper Egypt allowed the formation of an autonomous state in the south whose capital was always a Nile port city within Qena province. During the Mamluk period, between the 13th and 16th centuries, a prominent Arab tribe, the Hawwara, controlled land ownership, long-distance trade, and sugar industries in Upper Egypt and succeeded in founding a powerful dynasty in the south that lasted through the Ottoman period.[6] This state reached its maturity in the 18th century with a system of just government, almost amounting to an early republic, as asserted by contemporary European observers.[7]

When the Ottoman Empire invaded Egypt in the 1500s, it did not conquer the south. Rather, it concluded peace treaties with Hawwara tribal rulers, leaving the native dynasty in power in return for an annual tribute. During three centuries of Ottoman rule over Egypt, the country was divided between a

[4]See Abu al-Fadl al-Idfawi, *al-Tali' al-Sa'id al-Jami' li-Asma' Nujaba' al-Sa'id* (Cairo: al-Dar al-Misriyya li-l-Ta'lif wa-l-Tarjama, 1966).

[5]For a full analysis of the Indian Ocean world economy, see K. N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilization in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985); and Janet Abu Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250–1350* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

[6]See Muhammad al-Maraghi al-Jirjawi, *Tarikh Wilayyat al-Sa'id fi al-'Asrayn al-Mamluki wa-l-'Uthmani al-Musamma bi-Nur al-'Uyun bi-Dhikr Jirja fi 'Ahd Thalathat Qurun* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Nahda, 1997).

[7]George A. Haddad, "A Project of the Independence of Egypt, 1801," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 90, no. 2 (1970): 174.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743821000052 Published online by Cambridge University Press

military Mamluk regime in the north, whose capital was Cairo, and a civilian tribal regime in the south, whose capital was Qena. Officially called in Ottoman imperial records Wilayat al-Saʿid, the southern regime reported directly to the sultan in Istanbul and maintained administrative independence from Cairo. The last legendary ruler of this state was Shaykh al-ʿArab Hammam Ibn Yusuf al-Hawwari, who ruled continuously from the 1720s until his death in 1769. Hammam controlled most Upper Egyptian land through the Ottoman tax-farming landowning system (*iltizām*), and he extended property and tenancy rights to peasants and Copts. Sharīʿa court records and other archival evidence produced by his state show that he treated his subjects with a high degree of justice, and he applied noticeable equity to the considerable Coptic minority of the south.[8] The officers of the French campaign who occupied Egypt at the end of 1790s described Hammam's state as a model to follow in creating a "national" and "just" government in Egypt comparable to the French Republic.[9] Rifaʿa al-Tahtawi, the well-known Egyptian intellectual who studied in France in the early 1820s and translated French civil law into Arabic, among other works, called Hammam's state *jumhūrīyya iltizāmīyya*, or a republic based on a tax-farming economy.[10]

As soon as Muhammad ʿAli Pasha assumed power in Egypt in 1805, he sent his eldest son, the ruthless military leader Ibrahim Pasha, to conquer southern Egypt and dismantle its centuries-old sovereign state. It took Ibrahim six years of vicious war with the inhabitants of the resilient south to achieve this difficult mission. He won his last decisive battles in Qena province in 1811. Ibrahim was subsequently appointed governor of Wilayat al-Saʿid and resided in Qena, from where he quickly established Cairo's monopolies over the rich agricultural long-distance trade and manufacturing resources of Upper Egypt. Al-Jabarti, the contemporary 18th-century Cairene chronicler, recounted many horror stories about Ibrahim's economic management of the region, affirming that he "did to the peoples of the south what the Mongols did when they invaded the countries. He humiliated the nobility and behaved in the worst manner with the people, robbing their harvests and money, taking their cows and sheep . . . and imposing unbearable taxes on them."[11] Muhammad ʿAli Pasha attempted to fully assimilate Upper Egypt into his Cairo-based centralized and modernized government with coercive new landowning laws and industrial systems. Lower-class peasants and laborers in Qena province were subjugated by the pasha's agricultural and manufacturing monopolies and served as corvée (cheap labor) in public projects or on state-owned plantations.[12]

The south did not remain silent for long under the pasha's brutalities. Only a decade after its conquest, between 1820 and 1824, a series of unprecedented massive revolts erupted in Qena province. Throughout the long, rigid forty-year reign of Muhammad ʿAli, Egypt saw outbreaks the like of which had not been seen before, in either the country's north or south. Ahmad al-Salah, an Arab shaykh, led the first and by far largest revolt, mobilizing about 40,000 followers for his cause. Rebels under his command included small peasants, seasonal laborers, and other Arab tribal shaykhs who shared many grievances against the state. From his home village of al-Salimiyya, al-Salah emerged as a sufi mystic and self-proclaimed messiah to declare a holy war against the pasha. He seized the local state's treasury and storehouses and hired his own administrators to rule over Qena for two months. Muhammad ʿAli soon sent his modernized troops from Cairo to bring an end to the separatist regime. His conscripted soldiers burned villages, destroyed houses, displaced women and children, and exterminated the rebels.

Al-Salah fled to the Hijaz, but rebellion again escalated in Qena province in many other forms: it turned into a daily life of resistance, championed by subaltern men and women who were joined by outlaws. Peasants fled state-owned plantations and the pasha's corvée labor sites, avoided taxes, and escaped the plots that the state forced them to cultivate for its agricultural monopolies. Workers in the pasha's modern factories abandoned production lines. The state called all these types of runways *mutasāḥḥibīn,* "those who sneak away." Of these fugitives, the largest and most audacious groups of resistance eventually emerged: the bandits or the *falātīyya*, who formed small gangs in almost every village and town in the province to attack government bureaucrats and disturb the province's security. One

[8]See Layla ʿAbd al-Latif Ahmad, *al-Saʿid fi ʿAhd Shaykh al-ʿArab Hammam* (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-Misriyya al-ʿAmma li-l-Kitab, 1987); Abul-Magd, *Imagined Empires,* ch. 1.

[9]Haddad, "Project," 174.

[10]Ahmad, *al-Saʿid,* 21.

[11]ʿAbd al-Rahman al-Jabarti, *ʿAja'ib al-Athar fi-l-Tarajim wa-l-Akhbar* (Cairo: Lajnatal-Bayan al-ʿArabi, 1958–), vol. 7, 234–35.

[12]See Abul-Magd, *Imagined Empires*, ch. 3.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743821000052 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of the most prominent topographical characteristics of Qena is the mountains that border its localities along the eastern and western banks of the Nile. Where the village ends, mountains begin, and it was in these mountains that the *falātīyya* bandits found refuge and planned their operations.

For the following few decades, Upper Egypt remained silent under the pasha's dynastic successors. In the mid-1800s, British imperial expansion dismantled the old Indian Ocean world economic system of which Upper Egypt was an integral part for centuries and replaced it with a new global economy led from European capitalist centers. As Egypt was incorporated into this new modern system, Cairo's khedives shifted the country's economic center to the cotton-producing north, the Delta, to accommodate British demand. Moreover, Qena's peasants and laborers now suffered the khedives' free trade agreements with foreign capitalists, which forced them to open their local markets to European steamships that came to buy their agricultural produce at low prices. During this period, Qena province was inundated by Cairene and foreign settlers who developed plantations and formed a new landed elite, dispossessing numerous peasants and reducing them to seasonal laborers.[13]

By the early 1860s, the economically peripheralized and politically oppressed south spoke again in a rebellious manner. Simmering discontent culminated in another massive revolt that erupted in Qena province in 1864. A sufi shaykh named Ahmad al-Tayyib, the son of the very leader of the above-mentioned revolt in the 1820s, managed to mobilize tens of thousands of followers in an attempt to overthrow the government. Like his father, he took refuge in the mountains, where he joined the *falātīyya* bandits to launch attacks against state bureaucrats, Nile boats belonging to foreign merchants, and farms and mills belonging to large local landowners. This revolution was ignored by state historians or mentioned only briefly as an act of disobedience prohibited by shariʿa law.[14] Luckily, however, its eruption was recorded by a British traveler residing in Luxor, a city in Qena province, who wrote about it extensively in her letters home. Lady Lucy Duff Gordon (d. 1869) called this revolt "a communist" upheaval, because the rebels audaciously demanded the redistribution of wealth.[15] The separatists once more were crushed by Cairo's modern troops and received cruel punishment as deterrence. However, the revolution continued at the hands of the *falātīyya* in the mountains, who intensified their assaults on prosperous government bureaucrats and wealthy settlers across the province.[16]

When the British occupied Egypt in the 1880s, the peripheralization of the south continued, as did its rebellious activities. The colonial administration worked with Cairo's ruling elite to forge a nation–state, unifying the north and the south in one capitalist market. The process undertaken by local capitalists to invent a national identity in colonial contexts is well described by Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities*; his analysis helps explain the relations between Egypt's north and south under the British. Another attempt at assimilating Upper Egypt into a Cairo-centered state took place, this time through a series of mega-capitalist enterprises, including an agricultural bank and a large sugar company that were owned by foreign shareholders and had an impact on the lives of thousands of local inhabitants. These projects penetrated deeply into the villages and small towns of Qena province. Among other consequences, they brought about the eviction of indebted peasants from their lands, left the death of cheap workers at construction sites or modern factory premises unaccounted for, and favored the newly arrived and wealthy residents of the province with public services at the expense of the impoverished natives. Finally, when the province suffered from food shortages and a lack of access to clean water, cholera and plague epidemics broke out across the area in the 1890s. Large-scale revolts similar to those of the 1820s and 1860s could hardly emerge under such conditions, and daily forms of subaltern resistance became frequent and often were more violent.[17]

Police records of both Qena and Cairo from the early 1900s describe a noticeable surge of "criminal" activities undertaken by usual or unusual perpetrators in the province. At this point, everyday resistance took the form of attacking village shaykhs and mayors, refusing to pay taxes, vandalizing government buildings, or sabotaging public projects. A new group of mountain outlaws, whom the government called

[13]See Abul-Magd, *Imagined Empires*, ch. 4.

[14]This group of authors included ʿAli Mubarak, *al-Khitat al-Tawfiqiyya al-Jadida li-Misr al-Qahira*, Vol. 14 (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-Misriyya al-ʿAmma lil-Kitab, 1994), 95.

[15]Lucie Austin Duff-Gordon, *Letters from Egypt* (London: Macmillan, 1865), 341–42.

[16]See Abul-Magd, *Imagined Empires*, ch. 4.

[17]See Abul-Magd, *Imagined Empires*, ch. 5.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743821000052 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Figure 2. Jamal Sulayman as ʻIzzat Hanafi in the 2006 TV drama *Hada'iq al-Shaytan*. https://www.facebook.com/246981858648468/photos/a.246983938648260/1195187137161264/?type=3.

maṭārid al-jabal, had inherited the place of the previous century's *falātīyya* bandits. Fugitive peasants and workers escaping heavy taxes and corvée labor fed the *maṭārid*, as they had the *falātīyya*. They similarly took refuge in the mountains of the province to hide and operate, and adopted the clever tactics and strategies of their predecessors. The new bandits launched operations such as raiding the houses of those they considered to be illegitimate representatives in parliament or in Cairo's councils, or attacking police patrols.

Between the 1920s and 1940s, the most legendary bandit in Egyptian history appeared in Qena. Chilling news about al-Khutt reached King Farouk and his royal cabinet in Cairo, and he became the namesake of every other vicious bandit who has appeared in Upper Egypt to this day. The king ordered the chief police commander in Upper Egypt, ʿAziz Abaza Pasha, to hunt down al-Khutt. The pasha immediately formed a skilled police squad, calling it the "Death Team" (Firqat al-Mawt), and tasked it with bringing him al-Khutt's head. One night, exhausted after a fruitless search, ʻAziz Pasha decided to go to a movie at a local theater. During the film a man sitting next to him kindly lit his cigarette for him. The next morning, the pasha received a letter, signed by al-Khutt himself, thanking him for the nice time they spent together at the movies. Al-Khutt, née Muhammad Mansur, started his criminal career as a teenager when he shot dead the son of a village shaykh who had prevented him from grazing his sheep in a field and slapped him in the face. After killing nineteen other members of the same shaykh's family, al-Khutt ran away to the mountains with all of his brothers and formed the most fearless gang that the south had ever witnessed. The police searched for him relentlessly, but he always managed to escape through his tricks and wit. When al-Khutt was finally captured and shot dead in 1947, a memorial photo was taken of his corpse lying on the ground surrounded by the many proud officers who murdered him.[18]

Almost forty years later, Egyptian cinema would dramatize the life of al-Khutt in an unexpected way. In 1984, iconic comedian ʿAdil Imam starred in a film titled *Ihtaris min al-Khutt* (Beware of al-Khutt). During these four decades, Egypt had become an independent republic whose first president, Gamal Abdel Nasser, was a dark-skinned, lower middle-class young officer from Upper Egypt. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Nasser subsumed the south into his centralized government, but on equal terms, and the region found no reason to rebel this time. Nasser built a high dam in the south, and his socialist policies extended full education, employment, health care, and social housing rights to the, at long last, politically and economically contented inhabitants of Qena and the rest of Upper Egypt. Unfortunately, Upper Egypt was again marginalized from the 1970s onward, a situation that has continued until the present. In the ʿAdil Imam comedy, produced in Hosni Mubarak's Egypt in the 1980s, a rural, once naive young man, having migrated to corrupt Cairo, wittily outmaneuvers his cunning rival and wins the heart of the woman he loves by pretending to be al-Khutt.

Under Mubarak's long years of peripheralization, Upper Egyptian resistance heroes spoke more in TV dramas and on cinema screens than in the actual reality of everyday life. In 2006, a thirty-episode Ramadan series, *Hada'iq al-Shaytan* (Devil's Gardens), depicted in detail—using both facts and fiction—the tragic life of ʿIzzat Hanafi, a legendary bandit from Asyut who had been arrested in

[18]"Khutt al-Saʿid," *al-Ahram,* 31 October 2010.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743821000052 Published online by Cambridge University Press

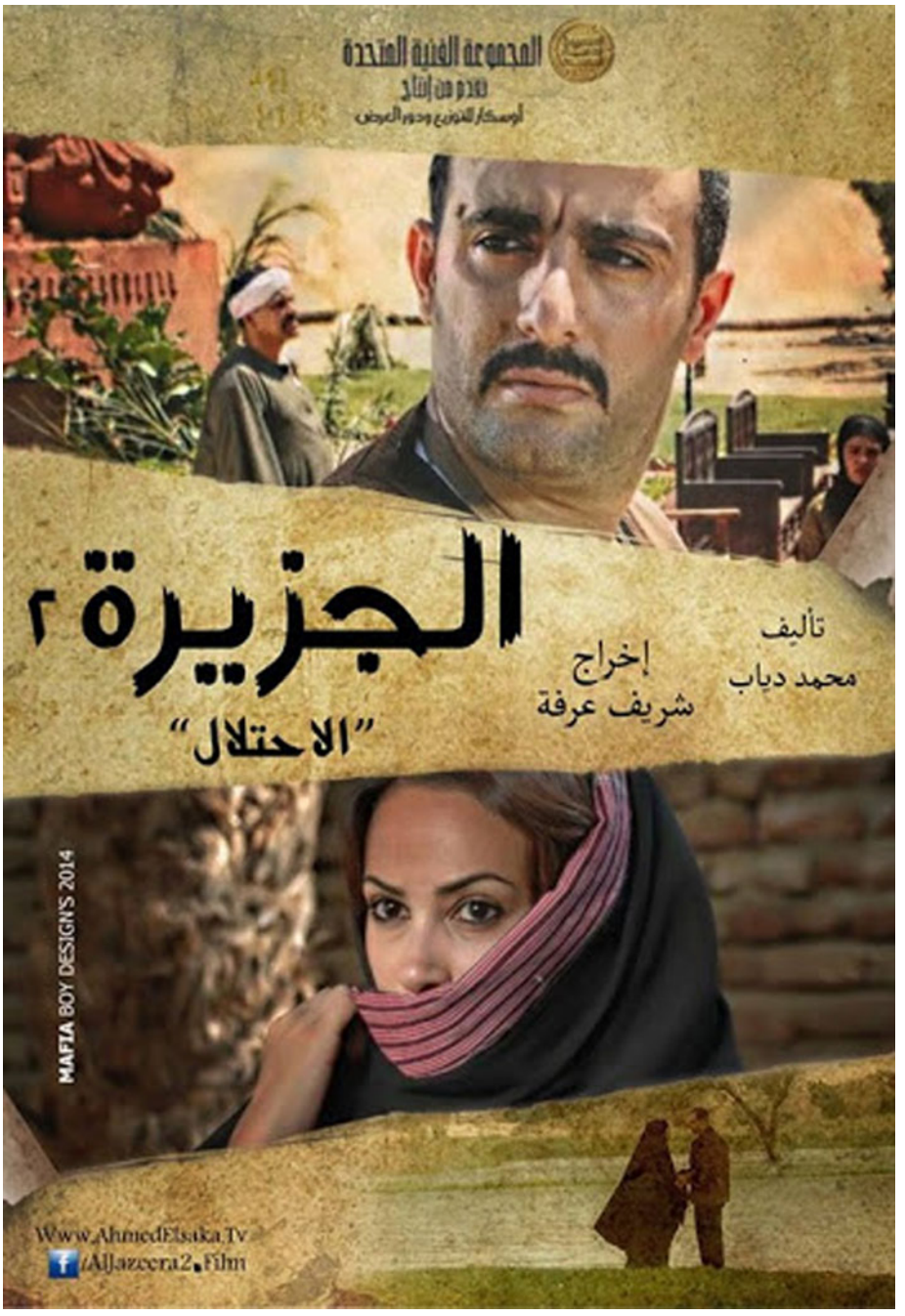

Figure 3. Ahamad al-Saqqa as ʿIzzat in the 2008 film *al-Jazira*.

2004. The series was filmed as the real ʿIzzat awaited execution in a prison cell, and aired in September 2006, only months after the shocking news of his hanging (in June 2006) filled the national media. Before being besieged and arrested in his armed fortress on a Nile island, ʿIzzat's thrilling story included a complicated relationship with corrupt local police officers who had helped rig elections, parliament members who collaborated in his drug dealing, and even Islamist terrorists. The well-known Syrian actor Jamal Sulayman, known for his manly dark looks and romantic roles, popular among Arab women, played the ill-fated ʿIzzat in this show (Fig. 2).

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Apparently, viewers could not get enough of their criminal idol. Egyptian action superstar Ahmad al-Saqqa was called upon to play ʿIzzat Hanafi again in the 2008 box office hit *al-Jazira* (The Island; Fig. 3). In a key scene in the film, during a police raid on Hanafi's island hideout, Hanafi shouts to his men: "From today, there is no government! I am the government! I am the government!" (*Min innahārda mā fīsh ḥakūma! Anā al-ḥakūma! Anā al ḥakūma!*).[19] This fiercely rebellious political statement trended immediately and widely among youth across Egypt, who found it uplifting in the context of oppression under Hosni Mubarak, his son Gamal, and their security apparatus. On the eve of the 2011 Egyptian uprising, a group of Cairene youth created a rebellious Facebook page named for this haunting proclamation of the martyred ʿIzzat.[20]

Today, like the rest of the country, the Upper Egyptian margin is fully silenced. Without real rebels, southern fictional heroes are imagined and continue to be dramatized on screens for the suppressed masses to watch. After almost thirty years of airing, the TV series *Dhiʾab al-Jabal* is now one of the most popular classics in the history of Egyptian drama, and its epic plot has inspired many other TV series produced about the south. However, there has been a recent twist: the current military regime has established a total, indirect monopoly over media production. The hero of one of the latest Ramadan series about Upper Egypt, *Naisr al-Saʿid* (Eagle of the Saʿid, 2018) was a police officer, not a favorite rebel.

[19]Al-Shirbini al-ʿAttar, "Min al-Nahar da Mafish Hakuma . . . Ana al-Hakuma . . . ʿIzzat Hanafi Shamshoun al-Saʿid," *Saout al-Omma*, 23 May 2018.

[20]Facebook, accessed 9 March 2010, http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=8412576147.

Cite this article: Abul-Magd Z (2021). When Upper Egypt Spoke: Dramatized Rebellion. *International Journal of Middle East Studies* **53**, 125–131. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743821000052