

The Dilemma of Arab Media

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Several conflicts and contradictions that are unique to the Arab World govern the Arabic-language media scene. Perhaps the most important conflict is between nationalist and religious ideologies. Modern Arab political regimes, mostly formed after WWII, can be divided into secular nationalist (Arabist) regimes, emphasizing the linguistic bond between speakers of Arabic, and religious (Islamic) regimes giving priority to the fact that most Arabs are Muslim. Geographically, the main sphere of Islamic regimes has been the Arabian Peninsula, including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and other Gulf countries, while nationalist secular regimes dominated the Mediterranean side of the Arab World, ruling countries such as Syria, Egypt, and Libya. The two strands competed ferociously for the control of the Arab World over the past decades.

The recent advent of “Arab Spring” further deepened the political conflicts of the region, and the accompanying media coverage exposed the underlying contradictions in an unprecedented, sometimes farcical manner. To understand the situation, one should bear in mind that Arab politics are not only “not what they seem,” but actually “very far from what they seem.” I will give one example from each side to illustrate this point.

First let us look at the “secular camp.” Starting from 1963, both Syria and Iraq were ruled by different factions of the Baath Party, a nationalist secular party declaring that its most important mission is to unite Arab countries. Since Syria and Iraq are bordering each other, one would have expected them to unite, or at least form a coalition. Instead, the rulers of each country claimed that they represent the “real Baath,” and entered a bitter feud with each other. When Iraq entered a war with Iran in 1980, Syria’s Baathist regime stood with Iran, a non-Arab, religious regime, against the Arabist secular regime in Iraq. The Syrian-Iranian alliance is still in place today, and Iran is supporting the Syrian regime against the rebels. The inherent contradiction in such an alliance is visible in the media. Syria TV devotes a good part of its commentary to criticize the “medieval religiousness” of anti-government forces, mocking their bearded looks and highlighting stories about suppression of women and public executions. In contrast, regime loyalists are portrayed as modern and liberated people with stylish Western clothing and an open-minded view of the world. However, in fact the regime’s allies, the Iranian regime and Lebanon’s Hiz-

bollah, both actually advocate religious agendas. The end result for the perplexed Arab TV audiences is to watch veiled female and bearded male anchors on Iran’s Al-Alam TV and Hizbollah’s Al-Manar TV praising the secular Syrian regime, which is in turn criticizing the overly religious views of its opponents.

Now let us look at the other, Islamic, camp. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia follows the doctrine of Wahhabism, an ultra-conservative interpretation of Islam. In 2012, when Egypt’s first free elections brought a religious group (the Muslim Brotherhood) to power after nearly 60 years of secular military rule, I innocently saw that as a triumph for the Islamic strand in the Arab World. However, Saudis did not share that feeling with me. When Egypt’s Islamist president was ousted in a coup d’état on 3 July 2013, Saudi-funded media sang in praise of the Egyptian military and talked about the “battle against terrorism.” Saudi envoys and economic aid were sent to support the renewed rule of the secular generals. If this is not mind-boggling enough, consider this: Qatar, another Wahhabi country, had exactly the opposite standing on the matter. The Qatar-based Aljazeera worked so hard to prop up the Muslim Brotherhood that it didn’t even bother with any pretense of neutrality anymore. This may seem irrational but could be partly explained by the rivalry between the two Wahhabi brothers, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, which may be reminiscent of the rivalry between Baathists in Syria and Iraq.

In the past, Arab filmmakers and creators got used to tackling the two major political strands of the Arab region, playing cat-and-mouse with the censorship apparatuses of the regimes. They also sometimes depended on European funding to have a wider margin of creative freedom, but largely remained loyal to the question of Palestine and rejected European pressure to normalize relations with Israel as long as occupation continued. They weren’t easy times, but some anchors were there to hold on to. The current ruthless triumph of political interest over ideology created such a fragmented and contradictory scene that filmmakers now seem to be walking in the middle of a minefield. Whether this will result in a new artistic wave is yet to be seen. For now the only sure thing is that cameras continue to roll everywhere, trying to catch up with the fast and unpredictable developments sweeping the whole region.

■ Talk

The Arab Spring — A Talk with Filmmakers and Najib El Khash

10/14 16:00–17:00 | Yamagata Citizen’s Hall Gallery Space | Admission Free