MIDDLE EAST

# *For Egypt, TV Show’s Shocking Twist Is Its Sympathetic Jews*

By **DAVID D. KIRKPATRICK** JUNE 23, 2015



A scene from the Egyptian television series "The Jewish Quarter," which follows a Jewish family living in Cairo in 1948. The series has astonished Egyptians with its compassionate treatment of Egypt's Jews and its depiction of their fierce anti-Zionism. El-Adl Group

CAIRO — The scene is Cairo’s Jewish Quarter in 1948, and Laila Haroun has news for her parents. Her brother, Moussa, has left to

settle in the new state of Israel in spite of the war with Egypt and its Arab allies.

“Your son is a traitor,” Laila shouts across their elegant living room. “You gave birth to him as an Egyptian Jew, not an Israeli Jew, which he never will be!”

Her revelation sets up the central conflict in this year’s most talked-about Egyptian television series, “The Jewish Quarter,” which has astonished Egyptians with its sympathetic treatment of Egypt’s Jews and its depiction of their fierce anti-Zionism.

The villains in the piece are the Islamists of the Muslim Brotherhood, not the Jews, and Laila’s love interest is a Muslim military officer celebrated as a hero in the Jewish community. The military’s real-life role in expelling Egypt’s Jews under President Gamal Abdel Nasser is omitted completely.

The series, which on Tuesday broadcasted the seventh of about 30 episodes, appears to be the first on Egyptian television in at least six decades that has respectfully depicted Jewish families at prayer in a synagogue or Sabbath dinner.

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It is a stark turn from the overt anti-Semitism that has dominated Egyptian television for decades. The Israeli Embassy in Cairo commended the first episodes, commenting on an embassy-run Facebook page that for the first time, “it shows Jews in their real human state, as a human being before anything, and we bless this.”

But after four years of tumult — including after the Arab Spring revolution that promised to end Egypt’s military-backed autocracy, and a new military takeover two years ago that removed an Islamist president — the series is stirring fierce debate here about both Jews and Egypt. In addition to raising questions about the status of Jews, discussion of the series has become a contest among cosmopolitan, nationalistic and religious visions of Egyptian identity.

Some have praised “The Jewish Quarter” for celebrating the more pluralistic ethos that prevailed under the British-backed monarchy, seeing the Egyptian Jews in the series as personifications of a more liberal culture destroyed by Nasser’s 1952 coup.

Many others have assailed the series in frankly anti-Semitic terms, for “making the Jews look better than the Egyptians,” as one viewer complained on the Facebook page of the filmmakers. Some have expressed horror that a Muslim military officer might marry a Jew (the fate of their romance is part of the suspense).

Islamists and others have argued that the broadcast of the series reflects President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi’s tacit alliance with Israel against the forces of political Islam since his ouster of President Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood two years ago.

“Israeli media outlets have considered it a result of the new era of Egypt-Israel relations after the coup,” Al Jazeera declared this week in a report about the series, and “some have linked it to the closeness between Sisi and Israel” in shared opposition to Islamist movements.

“How can this be aired in the Muslim world and in a Muslim country, when these are considered the enemies of Islam and Muslims?” an unnamed Muslim woman said in the report.

Fewer than a dozen Egyptian Jews remain in Cairo, and the leader of their small community, Magda Haroun, faulted the first episodes of the series for omitting a Torah from the synagogue, for overstating the wealth of the Jewish community of the 1940s and for dressing Jewish women in unrealistically revealing costumes.

“Maybe the dresses and skirts were shorter then, but a slit up to the middle of the thigh?” Ms. Haroun said in a post on Facebook. “I don’t think so.”

Leftists, on the other hand, gripe that the series falsely labels their communist predecessors as secret Zionists — a longstanding slur from both Islamist and nationalist rivals. Ms. Haroun, the daughter of a leading Egyptian leftist of the day, complained on Facebook that the series suggested that Jewish communists had “played on the minds of people to turn them to Zionism.”

Nasserites and the military receive the most flattering treatment.

Historians say that the Nasserite, pro-military nationalists of that era and the Islamists of the Muslim Brotherhood leapt together to the forefront of the fight against the new state of Israel. And in the “Young Egypt” movement, some of the pro-military nationalists actively scapegoated the Egyptian Jews in Cairo.

But the series omits the role of such nationalists in persecuting and ultimately pushing out many of Cairo's Jews. Instead, it blames the Islamists of the Muslim Brotherhood almost exclusively, suggesting that the group's leaders were more interested in attacking their Jewish neighbors than in fighting against Israel.

Hassan el-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, is portrayed as a laughable stooge. "The war is not only in Palestine, but jihad here is no less than jihad there," he declares in the series, dipping into a notorious conspiracy theory about a popular Western beverage: "For this reason, I am demanding that Coca-Cola be considered a forbidden drink, and for a postage stamp with the picture of Al Aqsa Mosque to be sold for only 1 piaster, to be bought by Egyptians for the sake of Palestine."

Mohamed el-Adl, director of the series and the nephew of its writer, said he was not convinced that Nasser had expelled the Jews. But in any case, the story in the series ends before Nasser became president. "I can't tell you something about something that I do not know," Mr. Adl said of Nasser's role in the exodus. "But I doubt it."

He said he was perplexed by the praise from the Israeli Embassy. "The series is not supporting the Israelis. It is against them," he said. "Israel is the first enemy of Egypt."

But he insisted "The Jewish Quarter" was "honest with history."

The series is one of dozens of Egyptian serials released for the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which is the Super Bowl of Egyptian television. Ramadan serials customarily run for about 30 daily episodes, and each episode of "The Jewish Quarter" currently airs on several channels at many times of the day.

Past serials with overtly anti-Semitic themes are still sometimes broadcast as reruns. "A Knight Without a Horse" (2002) was based on the notorious anti-Semitic fraud "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion." "Rafaat el-Haggan" (1988) is a spy thriller that depicts Israel as a land of depravity populated by greedy moneylenders. "Nagy Attala's Team" (2011) is a comedy about an Egyptian Embassy guard in Tel Aviv who robs an Israeli bank to retaliate for the occupation of Palestinian territory.

"The Jewish Quarter" is named for a neighborhood where people of the three Abrahamic faiths once all lived together. In its opening scene,

Muslims, Christians and Jews take shelter together in a synagogue during an Israeli air raid. (The temple is now boarded up and forgotten, hidden behind stalls selling cheap hairpins.) A Muslim romantic rival to Laila, the Jewish protagonist, makes fun of a Christian woman, and Laila defends her.

Soon, Laila’s brother, Moussa, has sneaked off to Israel to become a settler. Her romantic interest, Ali, the army officer, returns from the front as a hero. But then he is captured and tortured by the Israeli military. Violence against the Jews begins when the Muslim Brotherhood sets off a bomb hidden in an orange cart.

Laila is played by one of Egypt’s biggest stars, Menna Shalabi. But the series is not above rolling out hoary anti-Semitic stereotypes. A Jewish jewel merchant, greedy and secretive, uses a fake tax collector to try to dupe a Muslim storekeeper into selling a bean shop at a bargain, pursuing the scheme even at a funeral after the bomb in the orange cart.

Still, Joel Beinin, a historian at Stanford who has written about Egyptian Jews of the period, said the series “is more consistent with the facts than almost anything else that has appeared in Egyptian mass media in recent decades.”

Most Egyptian Jews of the 1940s identified themselves as Egyptians and not as Zionists, he said. When the Arab nationalism of the 1950s made it untenable for Egyptians to maintain identities as both Arabs and Jews, very few migrated to Israel. “It did not translate into, ‘Oh, well, I might as well go be Zionist,’ ” he said.

Lucette Lagnado, an Egyptian-born Jew whose memoir, “The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit,” describes her family’s forced flight from Cairo, argued that the popularity of the series reflected a desire to return to the more harmonious ethos of that earlier era.

But as for omitting Nasser’s role, she said, “That is a problem, isn’t it, for those of us who suffered directly under Nasser?”

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Merna Thomas contributed reporting.

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