Rejecting the Ottomans, Revisiting the Mamluks

Historical Drama and Identity in Post-2013 Egypt

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Abstract

This article queries the sociopolitical implications of a wave of popular interest in the legacy of the Mamluk dynasty (1250–1517) in post-2013 Egypt. Although the era’s sultans have traditionally been derided in mainstream culture as tyrannical ‘foreign’ leaders, they have recently been reframed as the last nationalist rulers before the Ottoman invasion. This revised characterization underpins the newfound fascination with their socio-political legacy, which has manifested in various cultural productions, including a new television series, Mamalik al-Nar (Kingdoms of Fire). In this article, we analyze the show’s content, its popularity in Egypt, the debates it has generated on social media and the regional production and distribution networks in which it is embedded. Through this analysis, we argue that the series—and the Mamluk ‘revivalism’ to which it is connected—is part of an unresolved debate about what it means to be Egyptian today.

Keywords

Egypt – Egyptian nationalism – historicity – Mamluk Sultanate – Pan-Arab television – political legacies – social media
Introduction

On 10 December 2019, an Egyptian Twitter user posted a picture of a piece of paper with the Holy Ka'ba in the background. On the paper, he had written: ‘Umrah on behalf of the Egyptian martyr Tumanbay, asking you to recite al-Fātiha.’ He captioned the picture: ‘when art has a purpose and makes people understand their true, accurate history’, and added the hashtag Mamalik al-Nar (Kingdoms of Fire), a reference to a historical drama series set during the waning days of Egypt’s Mamluk Sultanate (1250–1517).

The tweet begs several questions: what is the ‘true, accurate history’ being referenced here? Why would an Egyptian viewer perform ‘umrah on behalf of Tumanbay II, Egypt’s last Mamluk sultan before the Ottoman conquest of 1517? Why is Tumanbay, who came from Circassia, being hailed as an ‘Egyptian martyr’?

The Twitter user is not alone in his preoccupation with Mamalik al-Nar, which first aired in November 2019. On the contrary, the Internet has been flooded with material related to the show. A Google search using the Arabic title yields 832,000 results, including Wikipedia entries, Arabic media coverage, episodes from the series and social media activity on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, where viewers have eagerly analyzed and debated the show’s characters, plot and production. While the volume of this digital data is a testament to the show’s success, it also reflects a growing interest in the political and cultural legacy of the Mamluk dynasty in post-2013 Egypt. Indeed, the Mamluks, despite their non-Arab and non-Muslim backgrounds, have recently appeared in diverse cultural contexts as emblems of ‘true’ Egyptianness (Hendawi 2022).

This Mamluk revivalism, as we describe it, can be found in walking and museum tours, design activities, film and book discussions and architecture and conservation initiatives. Many of these activities have been undertaken by renowned cultural producers—for example, the recent ‘Mamluk Collection’ launched by the jewelry designer Azza Fahmy and the award-winning literary series, Sons of the People: The Mamluk Trilogy (2018), written by the sociolinguist Reem Bassiouney. The breadth and diversity of these activities are

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1 ‘Umrah refers to a minor pilgrimage to Mecca made at any time of year. It is distinct from the hajj, which is performed annually and limited to certain dates.
2 We refer to the show as a ‘series’ instead of a ‘serial’ because it was not renewed for a second season.
3 One may perform or delegate someone to perform hajj or ‘umrah on behalf of the deceased, the aged or the terminally ill—typically family members.
4 Most Mamluks were of Turkic or Circassian background and were forced to convert to Islam.
5 Although many of these projects appeared around the time of Mamalik al-Nar’s release, we
significant, suggesting that the revivalism is reaching a broad cross-section of Egyptian society.

This surge of interest in the Mamluks taps into earlier historiographical efforts to frame the Mamluk era as evidence of the ‘glory of Egypt’ (Sung 2017: 128); however, this idea has taken on new meaning since Egypt’s 2013 military coup, which removed then president Mohamed Morsi and abruptly ended the rule of the Society of the Muslim Brothers (MB). The coup inflamed regional tensions, particularly those between the Egyptian military and the Turkish government, the latter of which had supported the MB. In this article, we argue that this regional antagonism has fueled Egyptians’ preoccupation with the era, generating a robust popular discourse around the Mamluks, not simply as architects of the ‘golden age’ of Islam but as ‘domestic rulers’ and key Egyptian nationalists who defended Egypt (albeit unsuccessfully) against the Ottoman invasion. As we demonstrate, the representation of Tumanbay (1476–1517) in *Mamalik al-Nar* exemplifies this resignification of the Mamluks as nationalists: he is portrayed as a populist hero with divine morality, beloved by Cairo’s residents, and willing to sacrifice himself for ‘ahl misr’ (the ‘people of Egypt’).

Through an analysis of *Mamalik al-Nar* and the social media activity it has generated, we contend that Egypt’s Mamluk revivalism is contributing to the post-2013 renegotiation of ‘Egyptian identity’. However, this claim requires qualification because *Mamalik al-Nar* is not a domestic media project; instead, given the specifics of the show’s development and distribution, it is more accurately understood as a pan-Arab production. As such, it is embedded in a broader geopolitical and media landscape, itself rife with tension related to Turkey and its regional influence. This positioning makes the Egyptian response to the show and the way it articulates with Egypt’s Mamluk revivalism even more compelling. Thus, while one of our aims is to demonstrate how *Mamalik al-Nar* participates in Egypt’s renewed interest in the Mamluks and the debates about national identity to which the show is connected, another is to highlight that this entanglement occurs despite the program’s pan-Arab origins. In this way, our article addresses the power of pan-Arab television to shape local viewers’ engagement with questions of history, national identity

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6 The show was not the first historical drama or even television serial to grapple with the Mamluk Sultanate: earlier productions, such as the films *Al-Mamaleek* (*The Mamluks*; 1956) and *Wa Islamah* (*Oh, Islam*; 1961), also focused on this period, albeit with contrasting perspectives on the nature of Mamluk rule (Stadtman 2011). More recently, in 2005, Egypt released *al-Fursan*, a historical drama series focused on an early Mamluk ruler, al-Zahir Baybars (Skovgaard-Petersen 2013a).
and self-perception. In so doing, it also illustrates what happens when media moves transnationally and is taken up in new contexts, where it may be bent to serve new agendas (Larkin 2008).

The geopolitics of the regional media landscape, coupled with the rise of digital space in the Arab world, suggest that new methods are required for—and enabled by—the study of contemporary Arab television. This shift is reflected in our own research methodology: for this project, we watched *Mamalik al-Nar* independently via the video-sharing platform Dailymotion and then jointly analyzed the series. We subsequently reviewed media about the show, including newspaper articles and popular television talk shows, before turning our attention to social media. Beginning with the series’ hashtag, we looked at a selection of Twitter posts from 2019–2021, paying particular attention to Twitter users who self-identified as Egyptian (e.g., by including the Egyptian flag in their profile). Even though we did not undertake an exhaustive review of Twitter activity related to *Mamalik al-Nar*, the cross-section of posts included below demonstrates that viewers have used social media to engage with questions of historicity and the representation of religion and political authority as well as with the show’s framing of the relationship between ‘self’ and ‘other’.7

The remainder of this article is divided into five sections. First, we contextualize the Arab media landscape, looking at how film and television have been produced, circulated and used in the region. We then grapple with the historiography of the Mamluk dynasty, drawing on commentary from several scholars to highlight the emergence of a new historical narrative underpinning Egypt’s Mamluk revivalism. Following this, we overview the television series, highlighting details from the show that are central to our claim about the program and its ability to address Egyptian concerns about national identity (despite being a pan-Arab production). In the final sections of the article, we attend to the propositions introduced above: first, we contextualize *Mamalik al-Nar* in the region’s media and geopolitical landscapes, demonstrating how the program reflects and refracts tensions within each of these contexts. We then examine social media and the show’s reception among Egyptian viewers. Analyzing a series of recent Twitter posts, we illustrate how the program has engendered debates about identity, history and politics in post-2013 Egypt.

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7 We recognize that Twitter users’ intentions may differ from our interpretations of their posts.
An Overview of Regional Media Production

Television is widely considered the most significant form of media in the Arab world, and television drama series have long been one of the most popular entertainment genres (Abu Lughod 2005; Al-Ghazzi 2013; Gordon 2018; Shoup 2005; Skovgaard-Petersen 2018). Historically, Egypt dominated the regional media landscape, standing as the ‘premier producer’ of television (and film) throughout much of the 20th century (Abu Lughod 2005: 7). Moreover, Egyptian media has long played an important socio-political role on the domestic front. According to Lila Abu Lughod, Egyptian television serials—especially those aired during Ramadan in the 1990s, helped the state to ‘construct images of the good nation and citizen, call[ing] (in the Althusserian sense) viewers to that vision, and groom[ing] them for the role’ (Abu Lughod 2005: 12). As we discuss below, although Mamlak al-Nar was produced and released in a very different media environment, Abu Lughod’s analysis is still important for understanding the series.

The introduction of satellite television, exploding across the region in the 1990s, displaced Egypt as the locus of media production and generated new centers for the financing, production and distribution of Arab television (Gordon 2018; Kraidy 2019). While Syria and Turkey became the source of many of the region’s most popular dramatic serials, the Gulf yielded powerful media funders, distributors and satellite channels (Kraidy 2019: 152). In her research on Syrian television, Christa Salamandra highlights the challenges this new media landscape has wrought, demonstrating how industry professionals have struggled to balance the growing influence of Gulf funders and producers, continued state regulation of television and a pan-Arab audience with particular religious sensibilities (Salamandra 2008; El-Hibri 2017). As Salamandra’s work—and that of other scholars—has shown, although this new regional media landscape is international and collaborative, it is also ‘undergirded by geopolitical concerns’ and prone to politicization (Kraidy and Al-Ghazzi 2013: 20). Consequently, it must be understood as a site for the negotiation of geopolitical grievances and alliances (Kraidy and Al-Ghazzi 2013).

In another vein, it is worth noting that this new regional media landscape has facilitated the revitalization of historical television serials, not only in Egypt but throughout the region. Although such programs have long been a part of Arab television, new funding from the Gulf has radically improved

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8 See also Rebecca Joubin’s (2013; 2016) work on Syrian television.
their quality, thereby contributing to their increased popularity (Skovgaard-Petersen 2018: 325). Simultaneously, historical drama series have gained traction in places where media production and consumption are heavily state regulated. In countries such as Syria and Egypt, they have offered opportunities for the state and its affiliated media producers to reinterpret public history (Gordon 2018), send ‘subtle’ educational messages about the present (Skovgaard-Petersen 2013) and critique contemporary society through comparison with the past (Shoup 2005). One way in which messages and social critique have been conveyed is by foregrounding historical figures (Gordon 2018). In this regard, focusing on individual characters has been used not only to propel the narrative and for heightened dramatic effect, but to advance pedagogical agendas as well. This is evident in the biopic-style historical dramas produced in Egypt during the 1990s, e.g., Nasser 56 and Umm Kulthum (Gordon 2018), and in newer historical dramas, including Mamalik al-Nar.

3 Revising Mamluk Historiography

‘Historians and anthropologists are at cross-purposes on the question of truth’, argues Charles Stewart (Stewart 2016: 85). While historians seek to provide evidence-based, verifiable accounts of the past, anthropologists investigate how groups in specific spatiotemporal contexts view the world based on their perceptions and representations of the past (Stewart 2016: 86). In other words, anthropologists see history as socially constructed through ideas, narratives, practices and symbols, themselves marked by both inclusions and exclusions (Trouillot 1995). Given this view of history, anthropologists have also emphasized the fluidity of historical narratives, i.e., the way the ‘past’ is continually revised in response to new efforts to ‘domesticate’ it (Lowenthal 1996). In turn, this process of domestication enables communities and other social groups to tell stories about who they are in the present. Historical narratives are therefore continually being reconstituted in response to the preoccupations and anxieties emerging from contemporary ‘spatiotemporal contexts’.

The argument we make in this article is predicated on this claim—namely, that scholarly and popular narratives about the Mamluk era are being reconstructed in Egypt to address post-2013 concerns. This reconstruction hinges on a reframing of the Mamluks vis-à-vis the nature of their rule, their conflicts with the Ottomans, the role of ‘slavery’ in their political and social institutions and their cultural productions, all with an eye to re-presenting the Mamluks as Egyptian nationalists. To get a sense of the texture of these new narratives, we assess commentary from three scholars and public intellectuals: Tarek Swe-
lim, an art historian; Omneya Abdel Barr, a conservationist and architect; and Reem Bassiouney, the sociolinguist and award-winning author. Though touching on different topics, their comments speak to this emerging popular discourse about the Mamluks.

We start with a podcast interview with Tarek Swelim in which the question of slavery is explicitly addressed. In response to an initial question about the identity of the Mamluks, Swelim first describes the era as the ‘golden age of Islamic Egypt’ and then explains:

... the Mamluks were young boys who were caught, captured, brought in, whatever you wanna consider it. They used to be brought into the kingdom and they went to a military school, which was situated in the Citadel of Cairo and they were training there. They had an education, they had a religious education, they had a military education for a few years to become very tough soldiers and then they graduated from that school, and after they graduated or [were] freed, they became open to a market of rich people who would buy them and this is where they could start a wonderful career and everyone according to his different qualities … the interesting thing is that the Mamluks were pagans or from other religions, non-Muslim, they were converts to Islam and they were given new names and they were given a totally different identity that had nothing to do with their origins, so by doing that, the child had a good career and he could live a good life.

In this excerpt, Swelim summarizes an established narrative about the Mamluks—they were Turkic ‘slaves’ recruited by Egypt’s last Ayyubid sultan, al-Salih Najm al-Din Ayyub, to fill the ranks of the Ayyubid army. They rose to power in 1250 by overthrowing their rulers amidst a French crusader invasion and, in seizing control of Egypt, inaugurated a new political dynasty.

According to this narrative, they wielded a formidable military force supplied by so-called slave soldiers from the Qipchaq/Kipcak steppes—a vast region spanning parts of what is today Central Asia and Eastern Europe. While Muslim rulers had relied on such soldiers since the early 9th century, the Mamluk formulation of ‘slavery’ as an institution was distinctive: during a long period of military training, Mamluks transitioned from an ‘enslaved’ status to a ‘freed’ status as members of the military ruling elite—what were known as ‘royal Mamluks’ (Egger 2018: 293). After manumission, their masters assigned them high-ranking positions within the military and granted them estates; however, they continued to be known as Mamluks, despite having been ‘freed’. 
As a result, the Mamluk dynasty was distinct from other slave-based regimes because the rulers themselves were originally enslaved.\(^9\)

Despite the centrality of so-called slavery to the Mamluk Sultanate, Swelim omits an explicit reference to the institution from his account. He uses other verbs to describe the transaction—‘brought in’ and ‘captured’—and ends with a generic statement—‘whatever you wanna call it’, leaving it to the listener to decide. When asked directly about slavery, he responds:

> there is a very big difference between ‘slave’ and ‘mamluk’. From a Western point of view, when you say that somebody is a Mamluk, it’s owned. You are owned by somebody, you belong to somebody, but in the Near Eastern concept of ‘mamluk,’ it’s totally different because when that kid is bought in from Central Asia to Egypt, he is a *gholam*, he is a boy, he is a child—he can be regarded as a slave. Once he enters the school and starts to get his education, he is no longer a slave but becomes a Mamluk. [The] Mamluk system is based on a good mutual relationship between the owner, and that’s the master, and the owned.

*El Rashidi 2020*

Throughout the podcast, Swelim repeatedly skirts the question of slavery in this way, all while reiterating that the Mamluk system succeeded because it ensured a ‘good, mutual relationship between owner and owned’.

While this re-framing of Mamluk ‘slavery’ is central to the re-narration of the Mamluk era, this project also entails emphasizing the Mamluks’ seemingly peerless cultural productions, particularly in the realms of art and architecture. This aim is evident in the architect Omneya Abdel Barr’s comments during an interview with Azza Fahmy, whose ‘Mamluk Collection’ was mentioned above. She notes:

> the Mamluks were not only in Cairo. Big cities like Damascus, Aleppo, Jerusalem and the two holy cities of Medina and Mecca were under the Mamluk sultanate at the time, and therefore, Cairo was the capital, and Cairo started getting this interior dimension … since the money was there … it was doing well [economically], so all the artists that came, it was like

\(^9\) It should be clear that the Mamluk system of ‘slavery’ differed from the transatlantic slave trade; however, differentiating between these two institutions is beyond the purview of this article. Moreover, we are not interested in debating the applicability of the term ‘slavery’ to the Mamluk system; rather, our concern is to demonstrate how slavery is being re-framed in popular discourse.
a magnet. They came because this is where the projects were. The sultans were embarking on very exciting patronage in the city, building beautiful complexes because architecture was also a tool to spread the message that this is the power of empire, and this is a solid empire. And therefore, you read in the Mamluk sources, and it tells you of people coming ... from Damascus, even from Turkey, to work in Egypt.

Abdel Barr foregrounds Cairo as the center of the Mamluk Sultanate while also emphasizing the idea that the city was a venue for artistic activity, churning out cultural productions during this period. Later, she highlights the quality of these productions and the level of skill required, contending that the Mamluks ‘perfected ... work on metal, wood and on marble, on carving on stone. It feels like no material was invincible for them, just whatever it is, they [were] capable of perfecting it and formulating their ideas’ (Abdel Barr and Fahmy 2020).

The suggestion that the Mamluks were unmatched in artistic development—and the Mamluk era thus represented a distinctive period of cultural production—is reiterated by Reem Bassiouney, the author of the Mamluk-focused novel, *Sons of the People: The Mamluk Trilogy*. In an interview about the book, she notes:

I feel strongly about this distinction [between the Mamluks and the Ottomans] because I argue that the Mamluks represent the last golden age of Islam in terms of art, architecture, science, and literature. Almost three centuries of independent Mamluk rule ended in 1517 when Selim I entered Egypt[,] and we entered the Ottoman period. The Ottomans, unlike the Mamluks, were not affiliated to Egypt, and the center of their power was Istanbul, not Cairo.

Motawy 2020

Her comments echo those of Abdel Barr; however, she offers further insight into the popular re-narration of the Mamluk era when describing it as a period of ‘independent rule’ that ‘ended’ with the arrival of the Ottomans. By juxtaposing the Mamluk Sultanate against the Ottomans and characterizing their rule as ‘independent’, she implies it was also a period of domestic rule.

Though they are just three examples, these commentaries from Swelin, Abdel Barr and Bassiouney indicate the formation of a new narrative about the Mamluks and their ‘affiliation’ (to use Bassiouney’s expression) with Egypt. In this new framing, the Mamluk Sultanate represents an era of domestic political
rule characterized by flourishing cultural and artistic expression. It is in light of this new representation that *Mamalik al-Nar*, to which we now turn, must be understood.

4 **Overview of *Mamalik al-Nar***

*Mamalik al-Nar* first aired on Shahid, a streaming platform for Arabic content owned by the Middle East Broadcasting Center (MBC).\(^\text{10}\) As noted above, the series is a pan-Arab international production: filmed in Tunisia, it was produced by the Emirati production company Genomedia Studios and aired on MBC, a Saudi-owned satellite channel, before becoming available to stream on Starzplay, an American-owned company headquartered in Dubai. In addition, the show was written by the Egyptian screenwriter, Mohammed Suleiman Abdel Malek, directed by the British film and television director, Peter Webber, and populated by an array of young and established actors from countries across the Middle East and North Africa, including Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Tunisia.

The show was an instant regional success, garnering favorable reviews in the media and a legion of fans and critics alike who debated, discussed and endorsed the program on social media. Due to its online availability, the show has continued to attract new viewers, who have used social media platforms to share comments about the show, ensuring that it has remained quite visible in the years since its release. Many have praised what they see as the show’s historical revisionism, particularly regarding Ottoman rule in Egypt (Idiz 2019). Nevertheless, the program has also faced scrutiny and critique: while some journalists and scholars have criticized the demonization of the Ottomans as tyrannical occupiers of Egypt (Marie 2019), others have highlighted perceived historical inaccuracies such as the show’s failure to account for Tumanbay’s final betrayal at the hands of a former ally—choosing instead to suggest that he surrendered himself to Selim I (1470–1520), the Ottoman sultan who spearheaded the invasion of Egypt (Shaaban 2019).

The lavish production tracks the last years of the Mamluk Sultanate, culminating with the Ottoman conquest in 1517. It toggles between Tumanbay and Selim I, beginning in 1481 when the two rulers are young boys coming to

\(^\text{10}\) Currently based in Dubai, MBC is the largest media company in the Middle East. It was launched in London in 1991 as the first network to provide a satellite-based, free-to-air, 24-hour television broadcasting across the Arab world. (For more on the MBC Group, see Khalil and Kraidy 2009.)
rejecting the ottomans, revisiting the mamluks

The series is anchored by the juxtaposition it sets up between the Ottomans and the Mamluks. This opposition is articulated through—and continually reinforced by—various aspects of the show, ranging from the personal attributes of the characters to the costumes, lighting, music, props, scenery, landscape and use of color. Even the editing expresses this opposition, as the series frequently cuts from scene to scene, often depicting an interaction between a particular set of characters from one dynasty (e.g., a mother and son) and then replicating that interaction, albeit with very different connotations, in the other. Using these tools, the show quickly establishes a stark moral divide between characters, with the Ottomans as the villains and the Mamluks as the heroes.

To that end, Ottoman characters are frequently represented as nefarious, religiously-irreverent, scheming and indifferent to the bonds of family and kin. Scenes in which they appear often rely on darkly-colored sets, blue-gray filters, and ominous music. In contrast, the Mamluk characters are represented more sympathetically and with greater nuance as family-oriented, loyal, trustworthy and warm-hearted (even if some appear either indifferent to the practices of slavery and torture or predisposed to violence and political betrayal). The scenes in which they feature are also much brighter, relying on the warmth evoked by the natural sunlight and desert landscape to suggest a feeling of openness, and drawing on a stirring, dramatic soundtrack to convey a sense of optimism. Thus, while the show paints a picture of the Ottoman dynasty as cruel and unfeeling, it offers a humanized portrait of the Mamluk Sultanate, implying that although the dynasty and its rulers may have been flawed, the Mamluks were still Egypt’s valiant protectors.

Nowhere is this juxtaposition more starkly articulated than in the depictions of Selim and Tumanbay. The former is portrayed as an archetypical, almost caricatured, villain: callous, violent and seeming to teeter on the brink of madness,
he is often shown either reclining on cushions surrounded by scantily-clad women or else murdering his kin in cold blood. In short, he is diametrically opposed to the character of Tumanbay, who is depicted as an empathetic, kind and self-sacrificing hero. Even as a child, he is doggedly committed to the pursuit of justice—a moral uprightness that follows him into adulthood and leads him to disavow the Mamluk system of slavery and call for the freedom of all those enslaved under it.

Tumanbay is likewise depicted as ‘one with the people’. Throughout the series, we frequently see him on the streets of Cairo breaking up fights, warmly greeting individuals or reuniting with his childhood sweetheart, Nalbay. In one scene, he tells a companion: ‘these are my people; Cairo is my country (bilady)’. Whereas Selim has an insatiable appetite for power, Tumanbay is reluctant to assert any—indeed, though he is beloved by both the Mamluks and the residents of Cairo, he frequently bemoans his station to Nalbay, fantasizing about a simple life with her away from the city and its politics. Likewise, while he is depicted as a pious Muslim, especially in the final moments of his life, Selim is shown to be largely indifferent to Islam, allying himself to a shadowy group of dubious religious affiliation and invoking religious rhetoric only when it serves his purposes.

In many regards, Tumanbay does not fit the model of a nationalist hero. Much like other Mamluks, he does not share common origins, ethnicity or cultural ties with the people of Egypt, the ‘urban non-elites’ living in Egypt at the time of the Mamluk Sultanate (El-Bendary 2015). However, the show’s characterization of Tumanbay positions him somewhat outside of the sultanate and its political machinations, placing him on higher moral ground. Moreover, he is clearly framed as Egypt’s doomed defender, bravely trying to protect Egypt from a colonizing ‘other’, and ultimately sacrificing himself in the process. In this regard then, Tumanbay does seem to qualify as an Egyptian leader. In her scholarship on language and identity in modern Egypt, Bassiouney suggests that ‘the social variables used to demarcate the Egyptian identity … include language, ethnicity, religion, locality … shared historical glory, and finally, moral values and character traits, such as those related to generosity, courage, kindness, patience and work ethic’ (Bassiouney 2014: 42). Tumanbay exhibits many of these traits: he is pious but not fanatical, powerful but not tyrannical and charismatic but humble. In short, he embodies many of the characteristics of ‘Egyptianness’ described by Bassiouney—albeit, a formulation of this identity that stems not from his ancestral bonds, bloodline or place of birth, but rather from his humility, moral rigor and piety. In our view, this characterization of Tumanbay has rendered him a touchstone for viewers when reflecting on what it means to be Egyptian in the aftermath of 2013.
Rejecting the Ottomans, Revisiting the Mamluks: *Mamalik al-Nar* on the Geopolitical Stage

This analysis of Tumanbay as a quasi-nationalist hero would suggest that *Mamalik al-Nar* is aimed at Egyptian viewers, and thus grounded in the Egyptian context. However, the program is deeply embedded in the geopolitical dynamics underpinning regional media production and distribution. Part of our contention is that these trans-local entanglements interact simultaneously with socio-political currents in the domestic Egyptian context.

As noted in the introduction, the dynamics of regional media production underwent dramatic reconfiguration in the 1990s in terms of the type of media programming that was produced, where, how and by whom (Kraidy and Al-Ghazzi 2013: 19). Though the increasing dominance of various Gulf countries—and the way their internal agendas and religious orientations have been reshaping the industry—is a critical component of the new pan-Arab media landscape, Turkey has also come to play an influential role in this environment. In recent decades, as part of a concerted effort by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) to improve Turkey’s relations with the Arab world, the country has pushed its way into the regional market, capitalizing on the growing number of satellite channels to dub and export its dramatic serials, which have been enormously popular with Arabic-speaking audiences (El-Hibri 2017: 36). According to Marwan Kraidy and Omar al-Ghazzi, these programs offer a vision of an accessible ‘Turkish modernity’ that has found deep resonance in the greater Middle East (Kraidy and al-Ghazzi 2013).

These industry dynamics have long been tangled up in broader regional economic, political and religious tensions. Indeed, the success of Turkish media parallels the country’s growing economic and political influence in the region, the result of the AKP’s ‘cultural diplomacy’ initiative (El-Hibri 2017). Turkey’s efforts to reorganize the geopolitical landscape have been remarkably successful; however, they have reinforced antagonisms between Egypt, Turkey, and their respective political allies, which include Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar (Kraidy 2019: 151).

*Mamalik al-Nar* reflects and reinforces these dynamics, both those internal to the media landscape and those pertaining to broader geopolitics. On the one hand, the pan-Arab nature of the production speaks to the rise of powerful media actors outside of Egypt. On the other, the show’s content, with its heavy-handed critique of the Ottomans, and its portrayal of Selim I as the undisputed villain, suggests a calculated attempt to push back against Turkey’s growing regional influence. The media has responded enthusiastically to this messaging, often framing the show in binary terms. For example, Amr Adeeb, one of...
Egypt’s most popular television hosts, dedicated an episode of his influential talk show, al-Qahirah al-Yom, to a ‘soft/cold war drama’, arguing that Turkey and Egypt, along with their aforementioned allies, use media as a form of soft power to challenge the discourses produced by their rivals.

Even the show’s engagement with Islam traffics in these tensions. As discussed above, the Ottomans are depicted as largely detached from religion while the Mamluks, and notably Tumanbay, are shown to be humbly observant in their daily lives: they pray, read the Quran, seek guidance from religious leaders, etc. Yet, this is a calibrated, even folklorized (to use Salamandra’s word) portrayal of religious identity, in the sense that the Mamluk version of Islam is contained and ‘safe’: it is relegated to the quotidian world and disconnected from the political sphere (Salamandra 2008). This characterization is significant because it serves as a subtle critique of the Mb’s version of political Islam.

These regional tensions and dynamics help to embed Mamalik al-Nar in the broader geopolitical context. However, the show is simultaneously grounded in—and being refracted through—specific locations, such as Egypt. Consequently, as we demonstrate in the next section, it is stimulating location-specific discussion and debate.

#Mamalik al-Nar

On 23 June 2020, Yasser Hareb, Mamalik al-Nar’s Emirati producer, posted a tweet and tagged the actor, Khaled El-Nabawy, and the production company, Genomedia. He played a short clip from the show in which Tumanbay addresses the Egyptian people as they prepare for war. He tells them:

you asked me to take responsibility [for] the lands, and I did, and now I am asking you to defend your country by yourselves. The Ottoman enemy ... whenever they enter a land, they steal its fortune, kill its ‘ulama and enslave its people. Today ... we need to test our love for this land and to announce our love for the umma’ from each minaret ... Let us fight together. To every Egyptian and Arab on this land, to every man and woman, let us make the enemy’s road full of hell. The glory of our country is to be born here ... let us die for our country and our children.

The post proved quite popular: after being retweeted on the series’ Twitter account, it was viewed 34,300 times, shared 208 times and liked by 619 viewers. Many Twitter users actively engaged with the post, both replying to Hareb’s tweet and posting new tweets using selected lines from the clip.
In this excerpt from the show, Tumanbay makes several significant discursive moves. First, by referring to ‘your country’, he suggests that he is not Egyptian; however, towards the end, he shifts his positionality by referring to ‘our land’ and ‘our country’. This shift echoes the idea that although the Mamluks were not born in Egypt, they have nonetheless become Egyptian. Hence, Tumanbay suggests that identification with Egypt is not inherited but must be earned and reasserted through patriotic acts. Second, he denounces the Ottoman ‘enemy’ by providing evidence of their myriad crimes, thereby reminding viewers of the historical animosity between the Ottomans and the ‘Egyptian people’. Finally, he emphasizes that fighting for the land of Egypt is both a national duty and a religious responsibility. By suggesting that national and Islamic sentiments go together, Tumanbay challenges Turkey’s posturing as the guardian of Islam and quells any doubts viewers might have about the Mamluks’ conversion to Islam.

This analysis of Tumanbay’s speech suggests that *Mamalik al-Nar* fits within Abu Lughod’s analysis of television in Egypt as a ‘tool of national pedagogy’ (Abu Lughod 2005). Her view of television as a vehicle through which governments and state institutions articulate their vision of the nation, frame its members and cultivate allegiance seems applicable to *Mamalik al-Nar* because of the Egyptian government’s pro-military, anti-MB and anti-Turkish stance. In other words, by presenting the Mamluks as domestic military protectors responsible for defending ‘ahl misr’, to use Tumanbay’s words, against the enemy at the gates—the Ottoman ‘other’, the show serves as raw material to reinforce the Egyptian government’s animosity towards Turkey.

In fact, Twitter users who responded to the post often expressed anti-Turkish sentiment. In one widely circulated tweet, an Egyptian viewer wrote: ‘the series exposed what Turkish drama tries to hide’. Similarly, another Twitter user posted: ‘*Mamalik al-Nar* ... the dark history of the Turks ... from Selim, the serial killer, to Erdogan, the terrorist’. It is noticeable that in these tweets the distinction between drama and history has been collapsed because ‘Turkish drama’ is treated as synonymous with ‘Turkey’ and its history. The blurring of the boundaries between the show and what it purports to represent is significant—and indeed, this slippage is what enables television drama to serve as a vehicle for ideological and political messaging. In this context, Egyptian viewers and social media users reproduce the show’s challenge to Turkey’s Islamic imperial claims on Egypt. Their tweets thus generate a political message synchronized with the official position of, and the ideological message propagated by, the current Egyptian regime.

Although Twitter users frequently reproduced this ideological messaging, they also added interpretive layers that problematized or critiqued it. For exam-
ple, some tweets questioned the blunt juxtaposition of the Mamluks against the Ottomans. Turning to Wikipedia, one Twitter user wrote: ‘Mamluks are of Turkish origin for all stupid admirers of the series #Mamalik al-Nar’. By erasing the distinction between the Mamluk Turkmen and the Turks, the user also implicitly contested the show’s narrative of the Mamluk protector versus the Turkish invader. Similarly, another Twitter user wrote that ‘Mamluks are beggars, they are Turks, Circassians and Mongols, none of them was Egyptian, there were sons of (...).’ This user likewise did not differentiate between Mamluks and Turks; however, they went further to contest the idea that Mamluks could become Egyptian. Similarly, a third user wrote: ‘when I watch [the] Mamalik al-Nar series[,] I see how our history is full of frauds. Throughout history, we were protected and governed by foreigners of any ethnicity until the first Egyptian came as President Gamal Abdel Nasser. Do not be surprised by Egyptians who are against him, they are all stupid and ignorant’. All of these Twitter users looked to the television series to engage in a specific mode of historical revisionism. Although they did not recapitulate what was presented in the show, they still used it to contest existing categories and concepts central to how Egyptians perceive national identity.

Other tweets raised questions about whether nationalist sentiments should override Islamic ones. One female Twitter user critiqued the show in this regard, contending that the central role played by Selim I in spreading Islam should have been acknowledged regardless of his crimes against Egypt. She wrote: ‘but the series narrates the era of Selim, which contributed to the spread of Islam, even with its evils and killings ... Ottomans are the ones who contributed to the spread of Islam, and Selim in particular became the Guardian of the pilgrimage routes to Mecca and Medina upon his entry into Cairo after defeating them (the Mamluks) and was named the Muslims’ Khalifa’. Other Twitter users echoed this idea that the show mischaracterized the Turks’ relationship to Islam by highlighting Turkey’s current efforts to support Muslim countries in need. In this regard, another Twitter user posted: ‘the humanitarian airplanes of Turkey continue to support 17 countries, at the forefront of which are Muslim countries’. These contributors suggest that the series’ creators omitted a critical layer of history, namely the Ottomans’ role in protecting Muslims.

By questioning the difference between the Ottomans and the Mamluks, the religiosity of the Ottomans or the Egyptian-ness of the Mamluks, these viewers refused to take the historical narrative of Mamalik al-Nar at face value. Instead, they used the series as a starting point for debate about and self-reflection on fundamental questions of national and religious identity and ethnic and cultural diversities.
Conclusion

In this article, we have tracked a shifting perspective on the legacy of the Mamluk Sultanate via an analysis of *Mamalik al-Nar*. Egyptian popular culture—of which *Mamalik al-Nar* can be considered a part—has recently depicted the Mamluks as ‘authentically’ Egyptian. We have used the show to query this historical revisionism. Our aim has been to assess the significance of the Mamluk past to post-2013 nationalist identity projects in a context of anti-Turkish sentiment, counter-Islamism and rising militarism.

Though many aspects of the television series, from its casting to its production and distribution, attest to its embeddedness in the geopolitics of regional media production, we have considered how the show has been received and re-interpreted by Egyptian audiences. In this way, we have attempted to shed light on what happens when a pan-Arab media production is refracted through a local context. At the same time, our analysis has been grounded in an understanding of contemporary television as an enduring site for the construction and negotiation of national identity. As we demonstrated in the last section of the article, *Mamalik al-Nar*’s viewers used the show to engage in this process of negotiation.

A strong sense of identity is central to how we imagine ourselves and the nation-state to which we belong. Bassiouney (2014: 23) argues that the 2011 Egyptian uprising and its aftermath triggered fundamental questions about identity in Egyptian public discourse: ‘who are “the Egyptian people?” Who represents them? What do they want?’. These questions have dominated discussions about ‘politics’ while also permeating popular culture. By focusing on a drama series concerned with Egyptian history, we have analyzed some of the ways in which Egyptians have grappled with these questions in the face of political agendas promoted by the Egyptian state and its allies.

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