Fighting Religious Extremism with Faith-Based Entertainment-Education: The Portrayal of ISIS in Arab Drama

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Abstract

ISIS’s media projected the group’s vision of an Islamic utopia upon declaring its so-called Caliphate in 2014. In response, many counter-messaging campaigns have emerged. Although many examine ISIS’s media and anti-extremism interventions, very few assess faith-based initiatives in Arab countries. Integrating two bodies of scholarly literature on religious and political conversions and entertainment-education, this study explores al-Siham al-Marika, a faith-based Arab drama portraying life under ISIS. The study uses mixed-methods to analyze the show’s religious underpinnings, the depiction of positive/negative role models, and the portrayals of religious-political conversions. Focusing on spiritual outcomes, the show illustrates cross-cultural differences in conceptualizing rewards and punishments and uses drama to bolster the persuasive power of religious-political conversion narratives. The study concludes with a discussion on the implications of faith-based entertainment-education in combating extremism and its potential role as a catalyst for bridging the perceived schism between religion and popular culture in some Muslim societies.

Keywords

entertainment-education – Islam – conversion narratives – ISIS – Arab drama – counter violent extremism
Introduction

ISIS's media depictions of a pan-Islamic Caliphate project haven't reflected the group's power on the ground per se. In thousands of media products, the group carefully choreographed and selectively pictured life under its auspices with depictions of epic victories and an ideal religious society (Damanhoury & Winkler, 2018; Milton, 2018; Tan et al., 2018; Wignell et al., 2017; Winkler et al., 2018; Winter, 2018). A few weeks after ISIS had lost Mosul in July 2017, for example, it claimed to have introduced a new Islamic currency in defiance of the international monetary system (Al-Hayat Media Center, 2017). In late 2018, when ISIS controlled almost no land, it featured scenes of a fully functional Caliphate involving fighters, doctors, police agents, media workers, and teachers (Al-Hayat Media Center, 2018). Yet, the group's media messaging has generated positive responses when depicting puritanical communities (Cottee & Cunliffe, 2018), triggered global distress upon releasing beheading videos (Friis, 2015; Redmond et al., 2019), and catalyzed support (Mitts, 2019). Today, ISIS's easily accessible media archive documents a vision of an Islamic utopia.

This level of media sophistication is a result of a robust infrastructure that has evolved since the early 2000s. By 2004, al-Qaeda in Iraq (ISIS’s predecessor) had outpaced al-Qaeda affiliates in media productivity and online exploitation (Atwan, 2008). The group claimed to have a Ministry of Information that oversees provincial media offices in Iraq and centralizes production with Al-Furqan serving as the group's flagship media arm (Whiteside, 2016). As ISIS announced its presence in Syria in 2013 and broke ties with al-Qaeda shortly after, it began to establish specialized media organizations to produce content in various formats. By 2016, ISIS produced videos, radio programming, publications, infographics, and child content in multiple languages and claimed to have over 30 provincial media offices in about a dozen countries (Hegghammer, 2017; Pennington & Krona, 2019). ISIS's media has been integral in building and sustaining its image and recruiting youth eager to join its Caliphate project.

Faith-based anti-ISIS messages have thus emerged to counter the group’s vision of an Islamic state. Over one hundred Muslim scholars released a multi-lingual online letter to al-Baghdadi, debunking the religious underpinnings of ISIS’s self-proclaimed state. Muslim organizations condemned ISIS’s actions (Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, 2015), organized international events (Feldman, 2015), and launched counter-messaging campaigns (Varagur, 2015). UK imams, for example, adopted the template of ISIS’s flagship English-language publication Dabiq to produce the Haqiqah (truth) magazine, exposing the group's theological deviance. The Egyptian-based, Emirati-funded
Sanad Network also brought Muslim scholars together to produce multi-lingual media products, demystifying ISIS’s religious rationalizations.

This study explores al-Siham al-Marika (The Rogue Arrows), a faith-based anti-ISIS project that first aired in 2018 as well as its religious discourse. After introducing the TV series and its Muslim televangelist roots, I highlight conceptual linkages between nonfictional self-presentations of religious-political conversions and fictional characters in entertainment-education, explain how the study expands on previous work, and lay out the mixed-methods approach employed here. The findings highlight the level of audience engagement with the show, the project’s religious underpinnings, the depictions of positive/negative role models, and the portrayals of conversions away from ISIS. The study concludes with a discussion on the implications of faith-based entertainment-education programming in combating extremist ideologies. It argues that a faith-based approach not only presents much needed nuance in the Sunni Muslim context but also adds a spiritual framework to narratives that alters typical approaches in entertainment-education and anti-extremism messaging.

Contextualizing Al-Siham Al-Marika

Al-Siham al-Marika is a faith-based entertainment-education drama that refutes ISIS and its claims in 30 episodes. The show’s name propagates a theological argument against Muslim extremists, deeming them khawarij—a term referring to a Muslim sect that excommunicated Muslims for committing sins and fought against seventh-century Muslim Caliph Ali ibn Abi Taleb. Many contemporary religious authorities compare ISIS militants to the khawarij and urge Muslims to fight them (Al-Hudhud, 2016; Al-Yaqoubi, 2015). Whereas the term isn’t part of the show’s name, al-Siham al-Marika is how Prophet Muhammad allegedly labeled the khawarij who will emerge after his lifetime. In a hadith (prophetic saying), he describes them as people who are good with words and call to the book of God, yet don’t follow it. They, according to the hadith, are the worst of creation, and they leave the religion “like an arrow goes out of the game” (Al-Ja’fai, 2009, p. 1541). He thus praises those who stand up to and fight the khawarij.

Emirati and Egyptian companies Abu Dhabi Media, Film Clinic, and Acamedia Pictures coproduced al-Siham al-Marika in the years following ISIS’s expansion in the region. Given Abu Dhabi Media’s involvement in the production, the show first aired on Abu Dhabi TV in Ramadan of 2018 (May 15–June 14), before running on Egypt’s al-Nahar TV in the subsequent Ramadan (May 5–June 3, 2019). Airing in the largest Arab market, al-Siham al-Marika’s
second run in Egypt reached a broader audience. Al-Nahar TV further posted the episodes on its 6.5+ million-subscriber YouTube page, thus offering full access to online audiences and more exposure to the show.

Unlike numerous Arab dramas that have tackled extremism in the past decades, al-Siham al-Marika marks a shift in contemporary Muslim televangelism in the region. By the turn of the twenty-first century, a televangelism wave had materialized in the Arab world when Egyptian accountant-turned-televangelist Amr Khaled first appeared on Iqraa TV, a pan-Arab satellite station established by a Saudi businessman to feature religious programming, with shows discussing Islamic principles and figures. His conversational (often humorous) delivery in slang language with English subtitles earned him popularity in the region and the diaspora during Mubarak’s era, while drawing criticisms from Salafi preachers for promoting an “Islam-lite” that suits the rich (Moll, 2018, p. 241). Through his trendy shows, Khaled introduced a new pathway for young televangelists, including al-Siham al-Marika’s Egyptian creator and co-producer Moez Masoud. Like Khaled, American University in Cairo graduate Masoud targeted middle-class Muslim youth, rose to stardom with his rhetoric emphasizing coexistence between faith and modern life, and became an influential Muslim figure (Kazim, 2012).

Masoud took controversial steps that no Muslim televangelist had risked before him. In the lead up to and following the Arab Spring uprisings, he composed, sang, and produced songs about marriage and free thinking, which drew criticism by those who deemed his music impermissible within Islam. After the 2013 ouster of former Egyptian President Morsi and Egypt’s designation of the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization, Masoud broke into the cinema industry to co-produce a movie on political polarization in the country, featuring in the 2016 Cannes Film Festival. As ISIS grew powerful, Masoud decided to use TV drama as another vehicle to shed light on extremism. His brainchild, al-Siham al-Marika, portrays everyday life in the “land of the Caliphate” under ISIS’s rule and how locals resist the group’s tyranny, while veering away from depictions of Arab states’ security efforts that are common in other anti-extremism dramas. The show embodies a new televangelist movement that embraces, rather than resists, popular culture narrative as a mode of religious expression.

Religious-Political Conversation Narratives

Conversion narratives go back thousands of years, but they’ve taken different forms over time. These stories are powerful, persuasive public messages
that serve as “a means of moving audiences toward certain beliefs or actions” (Anderson, 2007, p. 4). Religious conversion narratives calling for “radical reorganization of identity, meaning, and life” (Travisano, 1970, p. 600) have been the traditional form. Researchers examine such narratives in testimonials, church confessions, autobiographies, essays, speeches, and films (e.g., Caldwell, 1983; Gooren, 2007; Griffin, 1990; McGee, 1998; Spencer, 1995). Despite the focus on religious transformation, the narratives sometimes reveal elements of political alteration, too. Far-right politician David Duke, for example, stressed his evangelical conversion was integral to his move from the Democratic to the Republican party (McGee, 1998). The political component of conversion narratives has gained more prominence in the Western public sphere over the years.

The spread of secular nation-states helped foreground political conversions. Moving beyond religious form, twentieth-century conversion narratives involved political issues like women’s suffrage and civil rights, about which a convert would assert their argument “for changing from one political ideology to another” (Waisanen, 2011, p. 230). Similar to the study of religious form, scholars mainly analyze political conversions through autobiographies, oral histories, letters, memoirs, and public addresses (Anderson, 2007; Branham, 1991; Fabj, 1998; Hammerback & Jensen, 1988; Waisanen, 2018; Walsh, 1985). Although the narratives center on ideological transformations from communism to democracy, liberalism to conservatism, and far-right to the left, some involve near simultaneous religious conversions. In modern industrial societies where the role of religion has relatively diminished, political conversions are thus better thought of as “civil-religious strategies” that navigate the relationship between the state and religion (Waisanen, 2018, p. 3).

In Islamist militant groups promoting the establishment of theocratic rule, however, conversions rarely fall within political or religious lines. Instead, conversions are religious-political in the sense that a firm believer in ISIS’s cause who converts would likely undergo a concurrent transformation of religious identity and political ideology. Given the role of dramatized narratives on Arab stations in the imagination of national identity (Al-Ghazi, 2013), promotion of cultural exchange (Buccianti, 2010), reinforcement of gender stereotypes (Kharroub & Weaver, 2014), and transformation in perceptions of Ottomans (Kraidy & Al-Ghazi, 2013), this study expands beyond nonfictional, autobiographical presentations in Western conversion narratives by exploring fictional portrayals of religious-political transformations on pan-Arab TV.

RQ1: How did the al-Siham al-Marika TV series feature religious-political conversions in the Arab context?
Characters in Entertainment-Education

Stories of transformation are a staple of entertainment-education that seeks to use media messages for pro-social, educational purposes. Entertainment-education hinges upon the use of characters rewarded in the storyline for supporting/adopter depicted educational values (i.e., positive role models) and others who are punished for rejecting them (i.e., negative role models). Closely linked to conversion narratives, transitional characters begin as negative role models, change their attitudes and/or beliefs, and eventually adopt socially desirable behaviors (Singhal & Rogers, 2001). They serve as powerful persuasive agents because viewers “are especially prone to draw inspiration from, and identify with, transforming models by seeing them surmount similar adverse life circumstances” (Bandura, 2004, p. 83).

The study of role models and transitional characters has mainly taken place in relation to health issues and gender equality. Their portrayals can increase family planning approval (Vaughan & Rogers, 2000), signal affective interactions with women’s advocates (Sood & Rogers, 2000), generate positive attitudes toward healthier lifestyles (Bouman, 2004), and grow the acceptance of cancer preventative strategies (Hether et al., 2008). This study aims to extend understandings of entertainment-education’s potential benefits by examining its application in anti-extremism.

RQ2: How did the al-Siham al-Marika tv series portray positive and negative role models in the context of extremism?

Anti-extremism Campaigns

The importance of anti-extremism programming, or what many refer to as countering violent extremism (CVE), has grown over the years as more nations came to grapple with the issue. Researchers and counter-terrorism experts use different terminologies, such as government strategic communications, counter-narratives, and alternative narratives, to describe strategies in CVE campaigns (Briggs & Feve, 2013; Ferguson, 2016). While dissecting the history of and myriad approaches to CVE is beyond the scope of this study (see Nasser-Eddine et al., 2011; Selim 2016), the use of popular culture narrative persuasion techniques in anti-extremism messaging is a touching point where conversion narratives, entertainment-education, and CVE can meet.

Despite criticisms for propagating security agendas and stigmatizing Muslim communities (Stephens et al., 2021), numerous anti-extremism projects in the West tend to incorporate entertainment-education elements. The
UK government’s Prevent campaign, for example, utilized theater to educate children about extremism and its negative consequences (Vidino & Brandon, 2012). The French-funded campaign Toujours Le Choix encompassed online interactive videos allowing viewers to make decisions on behalf of Muslim characters to pull them away from extremism (Payne, 2017). In Italy, the EU-sponsored #heartofdarkness campaign incorporated songs and videos depicting the lives of immigrants and second-generation Italian role models who refused to resort to violence and embraced who they are (Mazza et al., 2017). Other initiatives produced online content targeting Albanians (Speckhard et al., 2018), Australians (Davies et al., 2016), and Canadians (Macnair & Frank, 2017), prompting analyses of audience engagement through metrics like shares, comments, likes, and dislikes. Existing literature assessing Western media interventions focuses on social media as primary means to counter extremists’ exploitation of the internet.

Studies on Arab anti-extremism interventions convey a different picture. Arabic-language movies produced in Egypt (the region’s cinema powerhouse) have served as a key platform for anti-extremism messaging. As far back as the 1940s, when the Muslim Brotherhood was engaging in armed activity, the Egyptian monarchy supported anti-extremism messages in movie plots occurring in historical eras, a technique later used by prominent Egyptian directors to draw analogies between extremism in the past and present (Birnbaum, 2013). As Mubarak’s regime was fighting a deadly wave of militant extremism in the 1990s, numerous films engaged in othering extremist ideology and characters, while adopting the Egyptian state’s view of national identity (Armbrust, 2002; Bettwy, 2014; Khatib, 2006). The 1994 al-Irhabi (The Terrorist) is a prime example that portrays a conversion narrative of a Muslim extremist who repents after living with an Egyptian Christian family and eventually loses his life at the hands of his former group.

Television in the Arab world emerged as another primary medium for state-backed anti-extremism messaging. Shortly after the US invasion of Iraq and the rise of militant activity in the country, Iraqi TV channels aired Terror Has No Religion campaign videos, which set a precedent for media interventions on Saudi, Bahraini, and Syrian-funded stations (Al-Rawi, 2013). Following the rise of ISIS, Arab TV stations aired satirical shows and series that ridiculed and discredited the group attacking Arab armies and law enforcement. Researchers examine such content from the lens of social marketing (Aly et al., 2014), advertising (Al-Rawi, 2013), and humor for cultural resistance (Al-Rawi, 2016; Stephan, 2015). Similar to assessments of Western campaigns, the studies often employ audience engagement metrics to gauge online engagement. Using the
same approach, this study assesses online audience engagement with *al-Siham al-Marika*.

**RQ3: What was the level of engagement of the YouTube audience with the al-Siham al-Marika TV series?**

A shift in anti-extremism programming took place when pan-Arab TV stations moved beyond satirical dismissals of ISIS and invested more in dramas depicting life under the group’s rule. The Saudi-owned, pan-Arab broadcaster MBC Group aired the controversial drama *Gharabeeb Soud* (Black Crows) during Ramadan in 2017. The network’s stated mission was to educate Arab audiences and advocate for moderation against extremism. Multiple studies critically examine the show, exploring its plot and characters (Jaber & Kraidy, 2020), representation of women (Jaber, 2018), spectacular affective tropes (Khader, 2017), and value as a recruitment and counter-messaging tool (Navarro, 2019). Another study examines audience response to al-Siham al-Marika through YouTube comments (Damanhoury, 2020). Yet, they all don’t investigate the religious discourse in the narrative and its linkages to scholarly opinion per se. To add a more nuanced understanding of anti-extremist messaging, this study explores the theological underpinnings of *al-Siham al-Marika*.

**RQ4: How did al-Siham al-Marika’s plot incorporate religion?**

**Methodology**

The study analyzes the content of all 30 episodes of *al-Siham al-Marika* TV series and the level of preliminary audience engagement with the show after al-Nahar TV posted it on YouTube. The decision to analyze the *al-Siham al-Marika* TV series relates to its focus on extremism, its unique nature as a project created by a Muslim televangelist, and its relatively high viewership after airing in two consecutive Ramadan seasons. Targeting Arabic-language speakers adds to the significance of the project since groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda operate in many Arab countries and predominantly attract Arab youth.

A mixed-methods approach helped answer the study’s research questions. Borrowing from existing entertainment-education research (Bouman, 2004; Hether et al., 2008), the study conducted a textual analysis of the plot and key characters to highlight how the show features fictional, religious-political conversions (RQ1) and adopts an entertainment-education approach (RQ2). To gauge audience engagement with the episodes (RQ3), the study employed a quantitative content analysis of online metrics used in previous studies, such as views, likes, dislikes, and comments (Al-Rawi, 2016; Al-Rawi, 2013). To understand how *al-Siham al-Marika* narrativized theological arguments to discredit
ISIS (RQ4), the study utilized a contextual and historiographic analysis of the show’s labeling of extremists, flag depictions, and cross-gender interactions.

Findings

**Audience Engagement**
Based on the aforementioned preliminary metrics (i.e., views, likes, dislikes, and number of comments), *al-Siham al-Marika* succeeded in drawing audience attention online. Six months after al-Nahar TV uploaded the episodes, the show garnered an average of about 340,000 views, 1,700 likes, 200 dislikes, and 280 comments per episode. The level of engagement fluctuated, with the first episode receiving the largest number of views, likes, dislikes, and comments (see Table 1). Each view doesn’t translate into one unique viewer per se, nor does it suggest viewers watched the episodes in full. But, at least, they indicate the show reached a broad audience and spurred online discussions at a rate higher than many anti-extremism messaging campaigns. With the series airing on TV, the episodes likely engaged even more people, yet the lack of publicly available audience rating data, along with the ties between research companies and government and corporate actors in the region, undermines the ability to verify such outcomes (Jaber & Kraidy, 2020). In short, disseminating highly produced anti-extremism dramas on open video sharing platforms seems to catalyze engagement.

**Religious Underpinnings**
The episodes of *al-Siham al-Marika* exhibited religious grounding in various ways. The plot narratively linked the religious label of *khawarij* to ISIS members, while depicting local resistance against them as a Muslim duty to reclaim Islam. Numerous scenes portray Muslim characters secretly spraying “Down the *Khawarij*” graffiti on the walls, which repeatedly angers ISIS leaders in the story. The faith-based TV series also displayed members of the resistance spoiling public screenings of ISIS videos, rescuing hostages, saving art from destruction, and fighting the group in multiple ways. *Al-Siham al-Marika* presented an attractive audiovisual story that simplifies a complex concept in religious discourse in order to discredit ISIS as modern-day *khawarij*.

The creators made other decisions to present the show as compliant with Islam. Take, for example, the name that the show used to identify ISIS. Rather than using the group’s self-declared name, “The Islamic State,” the characters referred to it as either the *khawarij* or the Caliphate. Another example involved the modified ISIS flag in the show. Although it shared the black color as the
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real ISIS banner, it omitted religious identifiers altogether. In ISIS media, the flag bears the phrase “No God but Allah” at the top and “Muhammad is a Messenger of Allah” inside a centered white circle in reference to the Prophet’s seal. Instead, al-Siham al-Marika replaced the text with “The Land of the Caliphate” and reshaped the seal into a globe with two diagonal arrows piercing it (see Figure 1). By highlighting material, territorial aspirations in the group’s emblem, the show preserved the sanctity of religious text and stripped ISIS from their association with Islam. Meanwhile, the arrows in the flag reflected the show’s religious rhetoric, emphasizing the group’s labeling as khawarij and their dissociation from Islam.

Moreover, the show creators veered away from the use of profanity, physical expressions of affection, and revealing clothes. Even female characters at home wore long-sleeved cloaks for the most part. The conservative approach appeared in stark contrast to typical competition programming during Ramadan, including the prominent anti-ISIS show Gharabeeb Soud, which displayed ISIS’s real flag and featured belly dancing scenes. Online audience apparently appreciated al-Siham al-Marika’s approach, calling it “polite” and “respectful” in online posted commentary. After episode 22, for example, one of many YouTube viewers praised the show for portraying emotions “without touches or hugs,” before he goes on to describe it as a “very respectful drama.” Adherence to religious norms and values in the storyline may arguably enhance the show’s credibility among conservative viewers and facilitate the show’s role as a faith-based project debunking ISIS’s extremism.

Character Portrayals
Adopting an entertainment-education approach, al-Siham al-Marika portrayed three character types in the context of extremism (see Table 2). In a plot centering on everyday life under ISIS, positive role models mainly held on to their Muslim or even Christian beliefs and rejected the group’s toxic ideology. The most prominent positive role model is Sherif, a TV reporter-turned-militant
who pretends to embrace ISIS’s ideology upon his abduction to avoid execution. Yet, he internally despises ISIS, secretly fights against it, and holds on to his Muslim beliefs. In episode 10, when his superior pressures him to buy a sex slave, Sherif brings her home but refuses to sleep with her. Getting a separate room for herself, the young lady asks him why he isn’t acting like other masters with their slaves. Sherif responds, “it’s because I am Muslim and I know my religion quite well,” before he sets her free—a stark contrast from ISIS’s enslavement and raping of Yazidi women. In episode 28, Sherif successfully escapes with his family, but realizing his 12-year-old step-son—from an ISIS female leader he was forced to marry—is facing the death penalty for possessing “blasphemous” Mickey drawings, he returns to save him. Kneeling in an orange jumpsuit with hands tied behind his back and bruises all over his face, Sherif chants “long live the resistance” in front of a crowd coming to witness his beheading, whispers to a friend that he finally feels like a winner, and then declares shahada, while facing death with a peaceful smile. The show thus encourages viewers to conquer their fears and perceive extremists as the losers.

Sherif’s ending was a recurring trope for positive role models in the show. Take, for example, Habiba, the schoolteacher who is sentenced to death for

\[1\] Shahada is the Muslim declaration that there is no God but Allah and that Prophet Muhammad is a Messenger of God. According to a hadith, one who declares shahada prior to death ends up in paradise.
### TABLE 2  Key character portrayals in *al-Siham Al-Marika*

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<tr>
<td>Sherif</td>
<td>An Egyptian TV reporter whom ISIS abducts. He pretends to be a militant and does media work for them in hopes of escaping to find his family. The group forces him to marry a female ISIS leader, Om Obai. He secretly joins the resistance movement. After escaping with his first wife and daughter, he returns to save his step-son from death and gets beheaded with a smile on his face.</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>93.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mariam</td>
<td>A Christian Egyptian mother whom ISIS abducts after they kill her husband. Refusing to change her religion, she becomes a sex slave. But to ensure her son a better living, she pretends to convert to Islam. Secretly holding on to Christianity, she teaches her son at home to avoid the influence of ISIS schools. Upon saving money, she successfully flees to Egypt and reunites with her family.</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Habiba</td>
<td>A Lebanese teacher who is the wife of Ammar, an ISIS leader. Defying ISIS’s ban on art, she permits her daughter and students to secretly draw and sing. She joins the resistance movement and tries to dissuade her husband from extremism. After finding out her ties to the resistance with Ammar’s help, ISIS sentences her to death, and she declares shahada right before her beheading.</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>46.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Type</td>
<td>Presence (% of episodes)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dr. Salem</td>
<td>A Palestinian psychiatrist who insists on practicing psychiatry to help people. Upon arrest, he meets Ammar, the leader of the ISIS military wing, and helps him navigate his psychological crisis. Ready for execution, Salem smiles, expresses content for sticking to his principles, and declares <em>shahada</em>.</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abu Anas</td>
<td>A brutal Iraqi ISIS leader who lives in a fancy house, owns many sex slaves, plans attacks against civilians, tortures prisoners, and eventually beheads the head of the resistance.</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>93.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talha</td>
<td>An Egyptian man who joins ISIS in search of women. He marries four women whom he mistreats. After losing his leg and sexual functionality in an explosion, he is forced to divorce all four. He severs heads/limbs and betrays his best friend. Failing to find wives due to his disability, he commits suicide.</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>93.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Emir</td>
<td>The Iraqi Emir of the group, who rarely makes appearances. But when he does, he shows his extreme interpretation of the religion, excommunication of others, and approval of evil doings. To capture the head of the resistance, he manipulates religious text to justify the beheading of his opponent’s younger brother.</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>26.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
joining the resistance. Talking to her husband, Ammar, the ISIS leader who contributed to her arrest, Habiba lovingly asks him to reconsider his path, shares with him the Qur’anic verses “Shall we tell you about the greatest losers in deeds? Those whose striving in this life has gone astray while thinking they are doing good deeds,” stresses how those words had changed her life, and wishes they would alter his, too. As Habiba kneels with hands tied behind her

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Presence (% of episodes)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Om Obai</td>
<td>A Tunisian widow who oversees the house of female recruits. A firm believer in ISIS’s ideology, she bans her son from art, excommunicates her new husband Sherif, and influences non-Muslim abductees to convert to Islam. She falls in love with her husband, who challenges her beliefs. After Sherif sacrifices his life for her son, she denounces extremism and joins the resistance.</td>
<td>Transitional</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ammar</td>
<td>An Egyptian ISIS leader who heads the military wing. A diehard ISIS believer, he wages raids against villages, kills innocent people, and helps in arresting his wife Habiba. He suffers psychological trauma that a prisoner psychiatrist helps him with. Eventually, Ammar denounces extremism, heads the resistance movement, sacrifices his life for his younger brother, and dies smiling.</td>
<td>Transitional</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
back, she utters *shahada* before the executioner severs her head, thus emerging as a powerful female Muslim figure who stands up to tyranny until the last breath. Similarly, Dr. Salem, a psychiatrist who sacrifices his life to help those suffering from depression and trauma, challenges *ISIS* and expresses his satisfaction for saving lives despite those acts leading to his execution. When Dr. Salem’s family learn of his death, his wife is most concerned about whether he declared *shahada*. Realizing he did, the family prides itself on his martyrdom. In essence, *al-Siham al-Marika* turned around *ISIS*’s own narrative about sacrifice not only by presenting heroic, Muslim martyrs who stood up against extremism but also by challenging *ISIS*’s stereotypical depictions of martyrs as male warriors on the battlefield. Deviating from typical entertainment-education projects that tend to highlight short-term, tangible rewards for positive role models, the Arabic-language drama emphasized heavenly prizes that await the faithful who follow their religious teachings and denounce extremism.

Negative role models, on the other hand, believed in *ISIS*’s ideology and manipulated the religion for their own gains without ever repenting. Talha is a prime example, as he joins *ISIS* to find women. He marries four women in addition to a sex slave. When one of his wives goes out without permission, Talha lashes her in the street. To force her to have sex with him, Talha blackmails her and justifies his actions, saying, “it’s my religious right.” In cold blood, he beheads numerous people who break *ISIS*’s laws that he deems sacred. After losing one of his legs, his sexual ability, his source of income, four wives, and the sex slave, Talha still searches for women. But, when rejected for his disability, he goes to the sex slave market, evaluates the caged women on sale, sits on the ground, looks up to the sky in despair, and shoots himself in the head. Through the portrayal of Talha’s life events, the TV show foregrounds misery and death as potential punishments for negative role models who diverge from Islam and follow the path of the extremists. Additionally, the show uses Talha as a symbol of *ISIS* followers who join the group purely for worldly gains.

Nonetheless, punishments for other negative role models are less clear. The *ISIS* Emir, who serves as the Baghdadi-like figure with the black cloak and long beard, embodies the group’s ideology. In his few appearances, he shows his approval of atrocious actions in the city, offers one of his men four women to marry, and manipulates religious texts to serve his desires. In one scene, he orders the beheading of a loyal militant so that his brother would come out of hiding. When the militant challenges the order, the Emir reads a Qur’anic verse about the reward for martyrs and comforts him by simply saying, “we’ll count it to you as martyrdom.” Another *ISIS* top leader, Abu Anas, represents savagery as he prides himself on the ability to extract confessions by torture. In episode 29, a young man from the resistance movement refuses to provide names of
other members. In response, Abu Anas orders the raping of the man’s mother and daughter to make him speak. The two negative role models eventually succeed in beheading leaders of the resistance movement. Yet, the very last scene suggests a popular resistance is underway with shots of sprayed anti-ISIS graffiti and slogans inside an ISIS camp, followed by the sun rising on the horizon. Al-Siham al-Marika gives the viewer a chance to fill in the gaps by imagining the rise of a powerful Muslim resistance and envisioning afterlife punishments for ISIS leaders. It further suggests the villains’ manipulation of religion will soon end and truth will prevail.

Religious-Political Conversions

Al-Siham al-Marika featured religious-political conversions through transitional characters who embrace ISIS’s ideology but eventually repent and turn against it. Ammar, the show’s main character, underwent such a conversion. The first time the viewer meets Ammar, he is leading a raid on a refugee camp, killing innocent people, and snatching a necklace from a dead woman to give to his wife as a gift. A firm believer in ISIS’s extreme interpretations of Islam, he excommunicates Muslims for committing sins, bans art, and urges his younger brother to join. Ammar tortures prisoners and even points a gun to a young girl’s head to force her father to speak (episode 10). Most notably, he helps arrest and behead a network of local resistance members, including his wife Habiba. Afterwards, the ISIS Emir promotes him to become the head of the military wing.

Throughout the episodes, three people challenge Ammar’s beliefs and catalyze his conversion: his father, his wife, and a prisoner. In a Skype call, Ammar’s father labels him a terrorist and derides him for abandoning his parents for years. When Ammar softly tries to explain he is implementing shari’a, his father firmly responds, “What you and your people are doing has nothing to do with shari’a nor religion.” Ammar’s father tells him they consider him dead and ends the call, after which Ammar cries in anguish, “I am not dead.”

In another romantic scene, Ammar’s loving wife Habiba assures him he isn’t dead, but goes on to describe him as two conflicting persons. Ammar delicately asks which one she loves. Habiba responds that she loves him the way he is right then when he is “the best father and husband in the world,” and that his group’s wrong ideas are changing him to a worse person. Once again justifying his actions, Ammar proclaims he is pursuing justice and support for the religion; Habiba disagrees and urges him to look at the crimes around them to realize this isn’t Islam. Upon Habiba’s death, Ammar suffers psychological trauma, yet tries to hold on to his justifications.
In episode 20, Dr. Salem, an imprisoned psychiatrist whom ISIS sentences to death, pushes a sleepless Ammar further:

Dr. Salem: You cannot sleep because your conscience is trying to tell you things but you are shutting your ears. You have to listen to what it is trying to tell you. Because if you don’t, it will keep calling and you won’t sleep.

Ammar: No, my conscience is awake. I don’t regret anything I have done.

Dr. Salem: You know that your wife is right and you are wrong. Do you know what else your conscience is trying to tell you? That you must leave those criminals.

Ammar: Who?

Dr. Salem: The group you are a part of. The fighters, the khawarij. Listen to your conscience. Internally, you know your wife is right and you are wrong.

Ammar: (yelling) No!

Dr. Salem: Yes, and you have to admit. You won’t rest until you admit it.

The next day, Ammar calls Dr. Salem into his office minutes before his execution, finally admits he was wrong, and apologizes for not being able to help him. Dr. Salem reiterates Habiba’s description that there are indeed two people inside Ammar, one of which needs to die so that the better Ammar lives. With teary eyes, Ammar hugs Dr. Salem, signaling the completion of his religious-political transformation.

As Ammar denounces extremism, he secretly joins the resistance movement in repentance. On YouTube, many viewers clearly supported his conversion, commenting about how they were weeping as Ammar finally came to his senses. Switching to a positive role model, he becomes a moral person, leads the resistance, spreads its message, and continues to fight ISIS until death. Like other positive role models, Ammar feels peaceful during his execution. Publicly scorning the Emir in the final episode, he asserts that “death in fighting you [ISIS] is martyrdom” and chants for the resistance before his beheading. The very last appearance of Ammar is a close up shot of his severed head with a smile on his face, suggesting his reward in the hereafter.

Al-Siham al-Marika features an incremental, internal struggle to justify evil-doings in the name of Islam, which culminates in Ammar’s religious-political conversion to a faithful Muslim who challenges the khawarij’s manipulation of Islam.
The other key transitional character is Om Obai,² the ISIS-appointed head of the house of female recruits. In the first episode, she welcomes female abductees and influences those who are non-Muslims to convert to Islam to avoid enslavement and receive better treatment. In another scene, Om Obai taunts an American abductee by forcing her to wear a suicide vest. As the lady cries in fear, Om Obai laughs hysterically before allowing her to remove it. A firm believer in ISIS’s ideology, Om Obai follows the leadership’s command to marry a man she has never met, spoils attempts by some women to escape, and reports her own husband to ISIS leaders when she learns he was drawing cartoon characters. Moreover, she volunteers to conduct a suicide attack inside a Shia mosque, knowing it would kill dozens of worshippers.

Three people challenge Om Obai’s extremist beliefs and spark her transformation: two strangers and her husband. Sitting inside a Shia mosque ready to detonate her explosive vest, an innocent young girl approaches her and asks for help fixing her Muslim veil so she can pray. While helping her, Om Obai breaks down in tears. The girl’s mother then walks up to Om Obai, comforts her, and asks if she needs help. The touch of kindness by the girl and her mother prompts Om Obai to call off the attack and exit the mosque weeping. The scene promotes coexistence and suggests Sunni—Shia tensions in the region are merely political, a message absent in Gharabeeb Soud, which aired on the Saudi channel MBC, for instance.

Perhaps the most influential figure in Om Obai’s conversion is her husband, Sherif, who soon befriends her son and treats him kindly. Not convinced of the religious validity of their forced marriage, Sherif abstains from sexual intercourse, yet brings her gifts, takes her on a date, and urges her to express her emotions. Sherif’s most explicit confrontation with Om Obai comes when she finds his drawings:

Sherif: Drawing isn’t haram (forbidden).
Om Obai: It is haram in the land of the Caliphate.
Sherif: And do you care for the land of the Caliphate or Islam?
Om Obai: The two are the same.
Sherif: (yelling) No! They aren’t the same. But you don’t want to see. Islam is much broader than that. But you are blind, you don’t want to see.
Om Obai: So you are hiding a lot then.
Sherif: Oh yes, and the Islam I believe in is very different from the Islam you believe in.

² The character doesn’t reveal her actual name until later. Instead, she goes by the name Om Obai, which means the mother of Obai.
Om Obai doesn’t seem to waver as she excommunicates her husband and accuses him of treason. But when ISIS arrests her son for possessing drawings, Om Obai seeks Sherif’s help, and he confesses to ISIS leaders he drew them. Watching Sherif inside a cage prior to his public beheading, Om Obai walks up to him in tears, shares her real name for the first time, and expresses her love. The moment signals her personal conversion and transformation.

Minutes after her final conversation with Sherif, Om Obai engages with the popular resistance. She joins many who turn on their radios during the execution, using music as an expression of defiance. Touched by Sherif’s death, some YouTube viewers placed the blame on Om Obai, but many other comments express solidarity with her as she travels along her new path. Later, Om Obai helps the American lady she once taunted to successfully escape. When she finds her son drawing at home, she hangs his painting up on the wall and apologizes for the things she had taught him. She further calls Sherif’s first wife to notify her he was “martyred.” Describing the person she once accused of blasphemy as a martyr reveals the religious component of her transformation. Hence, *al-Siham al-Marika* features a gradual displacement of hatred by love, leading up to Om Obai’s conversion to a religious-political path that is compatible with her faith.

**Conclusions**

This study demonstrates the role of TV drama in featuring religious-political conversions in today’s media landscape. Unlike autobiographies and other written texts, *al-Siham al-Marika* presents character transformations in an engaging, audiovisual narrative. With the plot revolving around key transitional characters, viewers can engage with extremists on the screen, see their wrongdoings, listen to their justifications, and witness their repentance as the 1994 *al-Irhabi* and the 2018 *al-Siham al-Marika* demonstrate. Dramatic scenes picture dialogue that challenges the transitional character’s beliefs, while addressing the audience’s questions. Select YouTube comments attest to the effectiveness of such scenes in influencing attitudes. Online criticisms and, at times, cursing prevail as characters walked down the ISIS path. An audience shift to expressions of support and welcoming accompany the moment they denounced extremism, repented to God, and expressed willingness to join an anti-ISIS movement. Fiction can thus dramatize internal struggle and bolster the persuasive power of religious-political conversion narratives.

*Al-Siham al-Marika* further emphasizes the comparative advantage of faith-based entertainment-education in countering extremism among conservative
viewers. By taking part in media production, Muslim televangelists and preachers can bridge the gap that often exists between popular culture and religious rhetoric in Arab societies. Rather than superficially dismissing extremists as evil maniacs in the media or featuring religious talking heads in low-quality videos, faith-based professional projects can narrativize complex theological arguments, historicize the conflict, and rationally dissect extremist beliefs in an entertaining, nuanced way. *Al-Siham al-Marika* does so by invoking a Prophetic hadith in the show’s overarching message, applying the religious label *khawarij* to ISIS, and using celebrities to tell an anti-extremism story about grassroots resistance. It also displays religious sensitivity by ridding ISIS of its own symbolic emblem and refraining from profanity and scenes that could offend conservative audiences. In short, faith-based entertainment-education projects can have more credibility when addressing extremism in the Sunni Muslim context compared to productions that clearly propagate the state’s views.

However, bringing in the religious component alters a key premise of entertainment-education. Rewards for positive role models in entertainment-education often include early detection of diseases, healthy lifestyles, successful careers, and happy marriages. In the context of extremism in the Arab world, *Al-Siham al-Marika* presents a much more spiritual and broader understanding of rewards. Although positive role models face brutal deaths, the story frames them as winners for courageously following their moral compass, holding on to their religious teachings, and happily achieving martyrdom—the very same construct ISIS uses to lure followers. By the same token, the show mostly avoids the portrayal of death and imprisonment as punishments for negative role models, unlike in typical entertainment-education programming. After all, Islamist extremist groups celebrate deaths in battles and communicatively transform their fallen and imprisoned militants into heroes. Instead, *Al-Siham al-Marika* strips ISIS militants from their so-called honor by either depicting members like Talha who desperately kills himself for failure to pursue sexual desires or prompting the audience to envision the fate of and afterlife punishments awaiting top ISIS leaders who remain alive. Hence, the focus on spiritual outcomes in this faith-based show illustrates cross-cultural differences in conceptualization of rewards and punishments in entertainment-education as well as an alternative approach to secular anti-extremism messaging.

The study also reveals the potential of video sharing websites as complementary platforms in the anti-extremism domain. Western counter-messaging campaigns often rely on the internet to target Muslim youth in an affordable manner, thus rarely engaging with mainstream audience. In the Arab world, Islamist extremism is a pressing issue that necessitates far-reaching programming in a region of over 400 million people. *Al-Siham al-Marika* was intended
for pan-Arab TV, with a budget of over three million dollars and a proper marketing campaign. When al-Nahar TV uploaded the episodes online, the show had already garnered publicity and profit after airing on Emirati and Egyptian stations. The show’s subsequent availability on YouTube boosted its publicity, reaching millions of online viewers and sparking discussions. Distributing such programming for TV only hampers its reach, while releasing it solely on YouTube is a commercial loss. Instead, *al-Siham al-Marika’s* TV—YouTube distribution plan succeeded in engaging a wide audience without compromising quality.

Finally, the study’s limitations can help direct future research. First, the quantitative analysis of audience engagement didn’t allow for in-depth examinations of the viewers’ comments, age, gender, and socioeconomic status across the Arab world. Future work can utilize qualitative analyses and experiments to better gauge audience response to anti-extremism narratives and determine how audience reception may differ from one Arab country to another. Second, the study addresses the context surrounding the show’s creation, yet without insights from the crew. Interviewing entertainment-education producers, scriptwriters, and directors can generate a comprehensive understanding of the projects’ development. Third, the study examines anti-extremism messaging only in TV drama. More research can expand to other modalities of anti-extremism entertainment-education, such as songs, podcasts, photo essays, and videogames.

References


