

From Kurdish Sultan to Pan-Arab Champion and Muslim Hero: The Evolution of the Saladin Myth in Popular Arab Culture

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Introduction

SALAH AL-DIN YUSUF IBN AYYUB (c. 1138–MARCH 4, 1193), known as Saladin in the western world, was a talented politician and gifted warlord. His contemporary biographers and also historians agree that he was born in Tikrit, into a Sunni Muslim Kurdish family which made him an ethnic outsider in the lands he later ruled (Ehrenkreuz 63; Humphreys 29). His father was in the service of Emad al-Din Zangi, the Turkish Governor of northern Syria. Growing up, Saladin joined the forces of his uncle who was the military commander of Zangi's successor. Due to his talents, at the age of thirty-one he was appointed both commander of the Syrian troops in Egypt and vizier of Egypt. As his power grew, in 1171, Saladin abolished the weakening Shia Fatimid caliphate of Egypt, and established the Ayyubid ruling house (1169–1260) proclaiming a return to Sunni Islam. Under his personal leadership, Muslim forces defeated European Crusaders at the iconic Battle of Hattin (July 4, 1187), opening the door for the Muslim reconquest of Palestine. Later on, he united Egypt, Syria, Mesopotamia, Hejaz, and Yemen under one sultanate. However, the way Saladin is remembered in twentieth-century Arab political and popular discourse seems to conflict with the historical facts. Under the influence of Arab nationalist

thought, colonialist experiences, the establishment of Israel, the goal of liberating Palestine, and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, the image of Kurdish Saladin as presented in theater, cinema, and television transformed him into a pan-Arab and, later, a pan-Muslim hero, and was given an entirely new meaning through his metamorphosis into a symbol and idol. On the political level, Arab leaders such as Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, Saddam Hussein of Iraq, Hafez al-Assad of Syria, and Palestinian Yasser Arafat have often attempted to associate themselves with this reworked image of Saladin. Even Islamist leaders like the Lebanese Shia Muslim Hezbollah's leader Hassan Nasrallah and radical Sunni Muslim al-Qaeda founder Osama Bin Laden were occasionally associated with Saladin by their followers.

Although some scholars such as Emmanuel Sivan, Carole Hillenbrand, and Anne-Marie Eddé have discussed in detail Saladin's significance in twentieth-century Arab political thought, the evolution of his image in Arab popular culture has been largely neglected in scholarly works. This article aims to fill this gap by analyzing Saladin's journey in Arabic popular culture, explaining how the political climate and production background affected the evolution of the Saladin myth in three major genres of Arabic cultural production: early Egyptian theater, Egyptian cinema, and Syrian television. It was the narratives presented by theater, cinema, and television, rather than historical works that inspired Arab political leaders to use Saladin's memory to further their own ambitions.

Saladin in Popular Arab Memory and the Creation of a Myth

Arabic literature, theater, and films about Saladin participate in what Michel Foucault defined as the "manipulation of popular memory": awakening and developing nostalgia for an idealized past that never really existed. Foucault suggested that cinema and television are able to reprogram popular memory, noting that "[p]eople are shown not what they were, but what they must remember having been" ("Film and Popular Memory" 25). Memory is a highly important tool in political struggles. Since popular media shapes popular memory, and thus knowledge of past struggles, popular film and television are useful in the dynamics of history making. According to Foucault, it

is important to be critical not only of how the total story of history is narrated, but also of how the media construct “history” as a category of popular memory.

During the past few decades, films have not only played an increasingly important role in reshaping representations of history but have become a main source of learning about particular historical events (Landy 5–7). Foucault warned that institutional mechanisms work tirelessly to influence the content and transmission of popular memory, arguing that there are apparatuses set up in order to obstruct the flow of popular memory. According to his theory, television and cinema are effective means in reprogramming popular memory. This is certainly the case in countries like Egypt and Syria where official censors often leave their fingerprints on art.

This article suggests that Saladin’s popular images in the Arab world were created by popular works, and then mobilized by what Robert Rosenstone defines as “postmodern history,” and that they are “full of small fictions used, at best, to create larger historical ‘truths,’ truths that can be judged only by examining the extent to which they engage the arguments and ‘truths’ of our existing historical knowledge on any given topic” (209). Postmodernist historians like Hayden White have argued that historiography is much more about telling stories inspired by contemporary perspectives than about recapturing and conveying any kind of objective truth about the past (1–43).

As the canonical understanding of history are often at variance with the narratives provided by Arabic plays, movies, and television series about Saladin, they are often put into the category of “historical fiction.” This is because they choose to locate themselves in the “past,” known or otherwise, providing contextual details of that “past” as an authenticating strategy. Receivers “believe in” or yield to the events partly because the background details are (or seem to be) accurately drawn (Sanders 138).

How a society publicly remembers its past and notable personalities is a political struggle, and how institutional leaders remember the past is neither innocuous nor preordained. The line between history and memory is often blurry, as groups attempt to appropriate history (objective events from the past) to create memories (subjective stories of the past) that validate partisan interpretations of the present. According to Marcia Landy, versions of history play a

powerful role in determining how individuals and groups inherit and understand their social and cultural milieu (2). It is no surprise, then, that Arabic plays, films, and television series about Saladin focused on the salient political issues of their times, and therefore they cannot be discussed in isolation from their historical milieu. Furthermore, as texts, they are produced by history. Films, the cinema industry, and political events all form part of a reality characterized by power/knowledge relations. As Foucault argues, “[a]ny discourse, whatever it be, is constituted by a set of utterances which are produced each in its place and time” (*Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology* 405). In the case of films, their relationship with history is subjective, dependent on the aims and/or views of the directors, scriptwriters, and sponsors.

Popular versions of an Arab Saladin reflect the political struggles within particular countries and the Arab world. Some of the representations are clearly mythological, if we understand mythology as an essentializing narrative, as defined by Roland Barthes. Most of the twentieth-century adapters of Saladin intended to create a myth of an ideal political leader in order to reflect on the actual political events of their present. Barthes argues that myths are discourses that serve to “suppress” history in order to build a national identity (100–02). The myth of Saladin definitely served the purpose of shaping nationalist ideologies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and later of nation-building in postcolonial Middle Eastern countries such as Nasser’s Egypt, Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, and Hafez al-Assad’s Syria, where leaders often declared themselves or were labeled by their followers a “second Saladin,” seeking legitimacy for their actions by evoking analogies from the past. According to David Boje, myths are narratives or extended metaphors, which incorporate organizational meanings derived from past activities: they not only create, sustain, and legitimate historical, current, and future actions but also shape and cover political interests (17–28).

For Foucault, popular memory functions as a crucial site of resistance for oppressed groups. For the most part, “Arabizers” of Saladin were either Middle Eastern Christians or secularist Muslims opposing political Islam. In this regard, the myth of a pan-Arab anticolonialist Saladin could be viewed as the product of peoples struggling against both western influence and the Islamist political ambitions. Such struggles fit into the framework of cultural movements such as Al-Nahda and political ideologies and movements such as Nasserism

and Baathism, following nonsectarian notions of an Arab nation. Obviously, a myth is never transported wholesale into its new context; it undergoes its own metamorphosis in the process. As Julie Sanders observed, a myth is continuously evoked, altered, and reworked, across cultures, and across generations (64). Each adaptation of Saladin was created in a particular political moment and served a specific political goal.

The early evolution of the Saladin myth

The legend of Saladin begins with the portrait painted by his chroniclers. Despite the controversies surrounding Saladin's politics during his lifetime, his successful propaganda of *jihad* earned him popularity among many of his contemporaries: his fellow military commanders, personal advisers, and the religious classes (Hillenbrand 189). As Bernard Lewis noted, the literal meaning of *jihad* is "effort" and while some interpretations of the term are related to an individual's personal struggle, it has been principally used as a religious obligation in a military sense (71–73). However, Malcolm Lyons and David Jackson argue that in contrast to his domestic rivals, Saladin used *jihad* as a tool for self-justification and as a means for mobilization rather than as a purely religious struggle (156, 370–71).

Although literary life under the Ayyubids was relatively poor compared to previous dynasties, Saladin's deeds and character inspired many poets in his own time (Hillenbrand 53). After Saladin died, his empire fell apart. The period after his death dwelt much more on interfamily Ayyubid strife than on Saladin's war against the Franks. After the fall of the Ayyubids, both Arab literature and the memory of Saladin faded, as the Mameluk rulers, mostly of non-Arab background, had no intention of nurturing either literature in Arabic, or the memory of a once great sultan. Saladin was virtually forgotten for most of the period from c.1300 to c.1850, at least in the Middle East.

While Saladin fell into oblivion in the East, western literature continued to preserve his memory. Saladin's first appearance in a major European literary work was in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, where Saladin appeared in Limbo, the First Circle of Hell, where virtuous non-Christians dwell. However, Dante does not condemn the Sultan,

but rather expresses ambivalence toward Saladin, referring to him as “a noble Kurdish sultan” (Schildgen 60). As the epic poem was written over a hundred years after the Sultan’s death, when European translations of his Arabic biographies were not available, it is obvious that Dante was following the tradition created by the Latin chroniclers of the Crusades in describing Saladin. Dante was not alone with his mixed feelings toward Saladin: the same ambivalence can be observed in Giovanni Boccaccio’s *The Decameron* (Castro 13–36).

The first Arabic source on Saladin’s life that was translated into a European language dates to the eighteenth century (Holt 235–39). These translations were undoubtedly a major source of inspiration to European writers of the age of Romanticism. In his 1779 play *Nathan der Weise*, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, probably drawing from Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, praised Saladin as an enlightened ruler and used him as a tool for preaching religious tolerance (Springer 222–27). More important was Sir Walter Scott’s *The Talisman* (1825), which highlights Saladin’s oft-documented nobility and generosity for a ruler of his time (Reizov 165–75). Scott pioneered historical fiction, using historical events only as a frame for his novels and taking liberties in relating these events to achieve his novelistic ends (Lane-Poole 359). Scott accentuates Saladin’s Muslim identity; however, through the character of the Marquis of Montserat, the Sultan is defined as a “Turk” (Saracen), denoting an adherent of Islam.

The Rediscovery of Saladin during the Arab Renaissance

The history of modern Arabic literature starts with the so-called Arab Renaissance, Al-Nahda, that began in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century in Egypt, then later spread to the Ottoman-ruled Arabic-speaking regions, including the Middle East. Although it was an age of the rediscovery and revival of the great classical heritage of Arabic language and literature, many of its pioneers found their inspiration in the poetry of European Romanticism. The outpour in the creation and reception of Arabic narratives during the nineteenth century was precipitated by a combination of factors, including translation activity, itself a natural outcome of intensified contacts with the West (Allen 178). During Al-Nahda, European

literary genres such as the novel and the drama appeared on the Arab scene. As neither had a tradition in local literature, the very first Arabic works were pieces translated from English and French (Moosa 91–121).

Al-Nahda was also a time of building the foundations of national identity—which, according to Barthes, includes the creation of myths and a search for heroes. Therefore, the interest in Arab historical topics grew significantly. During Al-Nahda, a selective mobilization of the past acted to overcome the tensions of the present created by Turkish and western imperialism, and this mobilization was also reflected in the cultural productions of their time.

Foucault argued that popular memory functions as a crucial site of resistance for oppressed groups. Many of the pioneers of Al-Nahda literature were members of renowned Christian families of Syria and Lebanon. Since most of them attended missionary schools, they enjoyed the benefits of a western education and knowledge of foreign languages such as French and English. The idea of a secular Arab nationalism offered Christian intellectuals a chance to rid themselves of the religious stigma they carried during the centuries of Ottoman rule (Khalidi 6–11). It is striking to see that Saladin was actually rediscovered by Christian writers who were impressed by the chivalry and religious tolerance of the Muslim ruler as presented in the works of western authors. At the same time, Saladin continued to be ignored by the Muslim reformers of the time who were generally less involved in literary life than secular nationalists. As a consequence, Saladin's popular image was "Arabized" with a secular twist, in the sense that his original Kurdish ethnicity was neglected, as was his propaganda of *jihad*, while his fight against the Crusaders was transformed into a nationalistic fight rather than a religious struggle.

Scott's *Talisman*, probably the most influential western work on Saladin, was first translated into Arabic in 1886 by Yaqub Sarruf (d. 1927), a prosecularist Christian translator, writer, and journalist, and was published a year later in Sarruf's periodical, *al-Muqtataf*. Sarruf was motivated in presenting the English romance to Arab readers by both its historical theme and the figure of Saladin, taking extensive liberties with the original text, including changing the title to *Qalb al-Asad wa Salab al-Din* (*The Lionheart and Saladin*). Sarruf also admitted that he had omitted, added, and changed parts of the

romance in order to suit what he believed to be the Arab audience's taste (Moosa 100–06).

Najib Sulayman al-Haddad (1867–1899) can be credited with introducing Saladin to Arab theater with his 1898 play, *Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi* (The Ayyubid Saladin). Haddad, a Beirut-born Christian, moved to Alexandria with his family in 1873 and familiarized himself with western literature while studying at the school of Les Frères and later at the American school. Even though his play about Saladin was not an original piece, but one heavily inspired by Walter Scott's *The Talisman*, it offered the fledgling Arab theatrical scene one of its first great successes. In the same year, Kaiser Wilhelm II made a visit to the Sultan's tomb in Damascus and publicly praised Saladin's heroism, describing him as "a knight without fear or blame, who often had to teach his opponents the right way to practice chivalry" (Hillenbrand 16).

The first original Arabic literary work on Saladin is *al-Sultan Salah al-Din wa Mamlakat Urshalim* (Sultan Saladin and the Kingdom of Jerusalem) by Farah Anton, published in 1914. Anton (1874–1922), a Lebanese Christian writer and philosopher born in Tripoli, had settled in Egypt in 1897. Two years later, he founded the magazine *al-Jami'a al-Uthmaniyya* (Pan-Ottomanism) in which he disseminated his ideas for seven years (Reid 5–20). Sharing the enthusiasm of many Arab intellectuals for the French Revolution and the European Enlightenment, Anton was profoundly influenced by French social thinkers such as Rousseau, Voltaire, and Montesquieu. Being an advocate of religious, social, and political leniency, especially between Muslims and Christians, he had a high regard for Islamic medieval philosophers such as Ibn Rushd, Ibn Tufail, and Omar Khayyam, and he also engaged in fierce debates with Muhammad 'Abduh and the reformist Muslims of his time (Deheuvels 189–90). Despite the wide-ranging polemics, the freshly constructed nationalist image of Saladin remained unchallenged by Muslim thinkers.

Not surprisingly, Anton's Saladin has the same qualities of honor and chivalry as the character portrayed by Scott. Anton presents Saladin as the champion of a nationalistic struggle against the Crusaders and as a faithful upholder of the virtues of wisdom, determination, and frankness. The story completely neglects Saladin's Kurdish origins and there is no mention of his assaults against his Arab and Muslim rivals either. These omissions served a wider purpose, as

Anton's goal was to call on the peoples of all Arab countries to unite in order to overcome the western imperialists (Badawi 72). *Sultan Saladin and the Kingdom of Jerusalem* was staged by a widely popular theater company led by a Sunni Muslim, the actor/director Sheikh Salama Hijazi, and the title role was played by Paris-educated Lebanese Christian actor George Abyad (al-Tuma 69). In the play, Anton's Saladin was opposed to the western powers and made indirect references to colonial conflicts, leading to the play being censored by the British authorities in Egypt.

A less political image of Saladin was presented in the novel of another Lebanese Christian author, Jurji Zaydan (1861–1914), a pioneer of Arab historical fiction. In the last years of his life, Zaidan became interested in the life of Saladin. His main focus was the Sultan's relations with the Hashashin, a mystic Ismaili Shia group that was hostile to the Sunni rule. He published a novel entitled *Salah al-Din wa-al-maka'id Hasbhashin* (Saladin and the Conspiracies of the Assassins) in 1913. The novel, which presents Saladin more as an adventure hero than a symbol of Arab nationalism, does not say a word about the victorious Battle of Hattin or the taking of Jerusalem.

Despite the numerous Saladin adaptations, it was Anton's drama that remained the most influential work for later twentieth-century adaptations of the story and character of Saladin.

Saladin the Pan-Arab Hero

Egypt was the only Arab country that developed a national film industry before gaining independence. The fact that the Egyptian film industry remained relatively undisturbed by colonial authorities, encouraged not only locals but also a large number of foreign investors and professionals to settle down in multicultural centers of Alexandria and Cairo, and become engaged with cinema production (Shafik, *Arab Cinema* 10). Still, early features of Egyptian film were part of a nationalist movement that was opposed to the West, yet at the same time admired it and accepted its supremacy. From the very beginning, some of the Egyptian directors favored historical topics and they often used analogies from the past as tools for anti-imperialist struggle. Later on, Egypt arose as a geographical centre of Arab

cinema production, and, given the shared language, Egyptian films became popular in the Arab world as a geocultural region.

The first adaptation of Saladin's story for the Egyptian screen was by the Lama brothers in 1941. Director Ibrahim Lama and his brother Badr (who played the role of Saladin) were the sons of Palestinian Christian immigrants to Chile. Since the Lama brothers were art oriented, and British authorities maintained control of cinema censorship, the character of Saladin was reduced to a mere action hero in a nonpolitical adventure, without any references to Saladin's ethnicity and politics.

The 1952 revolution by the Free Officers Movement and Gemal Abdel-Nasser's seizure of the presidency in 1956 gave Egyptian media and film industry a new direction. State agents were sent to all spheres of Egyptian cultural production and entrusted with the dissemination of the Nasserist pan-Arab ideology. Cinema was also one of the principal arenas of the declared cultural revolution. Therefore, from the early days of the revolution onward, the film industry enjoyed huge government subsidies and production support, although, of course, only as long as it served the aims of the state (Schochat 22–32). From the early 1960s, the number of history-themed films gradually declined in comparison to total production (Leaman 67). Still, some stories of heroes of the Arab past were brought to the screen. Youssef Chahine's portrayal of Saladin in *Al-Nasir Salah al-Din* (1963) was definitely one of the most significant works in this line.

Youssef Chahine (1926–2008) was born in Alexandria into a Coptic Christian family. He attended the prestigious Victoria College, then the Pasadena Film School in California. Living abroad in his early life, Chahine was not a member of any Egyptian political movement. Nevertheless, he was not ignorant of the political changes in his homeland in the early 1950s. Although his first three films were shot when Egypt was still under British colonial rule, his career really took off during Nasser's presidency. A number of Chahine's films celebrate the cosmopolitan character of his birthplace, Alexandria, praise tolerant Islam, and also engage in politics (Shafik, "Youssef Chahine" 112–15).

In 1963, Chahine released *al-Nasir Salah al-Din* (The Victorious Saladin), an epic, three-hour historical movie. It was coproduced by private producer Assia Daghir and the National Film Center due to

its immense budget (Shafik, *Popular Egyptian Cinema* 105). The governmental support gave Chahine the opportunity to access modern technology used by western cinema. The film's plot was based on a screenplay by three novelists and scriptwriters, Naguib Mahfouz, Yusuf Siba'i, and Galal Sharqawi, three Muslims known for their opposition to political Islam in general, and to the organization of the Muslim Brotherhood in particular. The role of Saladin was played by a renowned Sunni Muslim actor, Ahmad Mansur.

Although Farah Anton's *Sultan Saladin and the Kingdom of Jerusalem* may have been one source of inspiration for Chahine, *The Victorious Saladin* cannot be considered as a mere adaptation of Anton's drama. Chahine's film follows a fundamentally different storyline and carries its very own political agenda, although the Arabized Saladin image created by Anton is adapted and further elaborated in line with the Nasserist discourse of its time. In addition, intertextuality with Anton's play can be observed in some details, such as the use of Urshalim for Jerusalem rather than of its Arabic name (al-Quds).

The importance of *The Victorious Saladin* can be understood by putting its date of release in a wider historical context: it came after the humiliating events of 1948 and 1956, as well as after the 1958 union between Egypt and Syria and its dissolution in 1961. As Landy observed, every historical film is an indicator of a country's basic historical culture, its historical capital. Even if historical films are more or less based on historical facts, they have to reconstruct in a purely imaginary way the greater part of what they show (38–44). *The Victorious Saladin* was a treatment of history which did not question its subject, as Chahine was interested in making a propagandistic historical epic film. He made clear statements about a powerful Arab political leader who, by uniting the forces of the Arabs (as Saladin had united Egypt and Syria specifically), scores a glorious victory over the foreign occupying forces of Palestine. By including Nasser's family name (which in Arabic means "victorious") in the title, the parallel between Saladin and President Nasser became more than obvious. Saladin's accomplishment in engineering Richard the Lionheart's withdrawal clearly draws a parallel with Nasser's success in persuading the British to withdraw in 1955. Saladin's conquest and defense of Jerusalem was intended as a parallel to Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal during the crisis of 1956 (Halim 78–94).

The film unequivocally places Arab identity above religious affiliations, indicated by the fact that throughout the film, the word “Arab” is uttered about seventy-five times, while the word “Muslim” is pronounced no more than seven times, mainly by the Crusaders. Chahine’s Saladin is portrayed as an educated ruler, a paragon of peace and religious tolerance. He is celebrated as the leader of the Arabs against the European Crusaders, who nevertheless respects Christian values and welcomes Arab Christians equally opposed to the Crusaders to join his fight. According to Viola Shafik, a number of Chahine’s works draws a sense of national unity experienced in the 1919 unrest, when hitherto politically marginalized segments of society such as women and Copts were among the protesters against British occupation (*Popular Egyptian Cinema* 173). At one point in the film, Saladin declares that he will guarantee all Christians in Jerusalem the same rights that are enjoyed by Muslims. The slogan of Nasserist Egypt, “Religion is for God, the Nation for all!” is recited at least twice in the film, once uttered by Saladin himself. On several other occasions, Saladin repeats the Nasserist pan-Arab slogan, “There can be no victory without unity!”

Chahine did not claim that *The Victorious Saladin* was historically authentic. He employed the historical epic style as a lens on the present (Khouri 51). This was hardly a unique phenomenon. Shafik asserts that “[i]n Egyptian cinema the appropriation and interpretation of history became far more politically purposeful during the post-colonial era than it was during the 1930s and 1940s” (“Arab Cinema” 169). *The Victorious Saladin* is historically inaccurate, as neither the Kurdish origins of Saladin are mentioned, nor his predisposition to violence. On the contrary, he is cast in a purely positive light, in line with the Nasserist portrayal of the eponymous leader, and as such, Saladin was a pan-Arab national hero who defeated the Crusaders not only by his military prowess, but also by his wisdom, righteousness, and dignity.

At the time of its release, Chahine’s film was the first powerful adaptation of the story of Saladin to reach a wider Arabic audience. It was a great success, playing to full houses in almost every large theater in Alexandria and Cairo when it was released, and it still attracts audiences and engages Arab political discourse (Khouri 49). *The Victorious Saladin*’s impact spread beyond the borders of Egypt, as it was also presented in cinemas of Beirut, Damascus, and Baghdad.

Chahine's Saladin was probably the main inspiration for later Arab leaders who intended to carry on Nasser's legacy and sought legitimacy in pan-Arab rhetoric, for example, Saddam Hussein, a great fan of cinema, and Hafez al-Assad, both of whom cast themselves in the role of a "second Nasser," or, better said, a second Saladin. Even Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat was portrayed as a Saladin-like savior of his people in some posters (Khalili 94). The most explicit reflection of the influence of Chahine's film was definitely a Palestinian one. The Popular Resistance Committees (PRC), a coalition of various armed Palestinian factions that oppose the conciliatory approach adopted by the Fatah authority toward Israel, established a military wing called al-Nasser Salah al-Din Brigades in 2000.

Saladin the Arab Muslim Hero

Similar to Nasserism, Baathism is an Arab nationalist political ideology, developed in the late 1930s by Michel Aflaq, an Orthodox Christian, and Salah al-Din al-Bitar, a Sunni Muslim Syrian, promoting the idea of a unified socialist Arab state, seeking a renaissance of Arab culture, values, and society. By viewing Islam as part of Arab culture and proof of the "Arab genius," Aflaq advocated a secular state and equal rights for citizens regardless of their religious affiliation (Hannah and Gardner 296–98). In the early 1970s, the Iraqi and Syrian branches of the Baath Party split. Baathist ideology was adapted to local social and political realities, and very soon became a legitimizing ideology for local elites. By the 1980s, a rivalry—at least on the propaganda level—arose between Hafez al-Assad and Saddam Hussein, the presidents of Syria and Iraq, which led to a split in the party. Not surprisingly, both made use of the legend of Saladin in their fight for legitimacy both on the national and pan-Arab level.

Ofra Bengio has explored how Iraqi propaganda evoked the character of Saladin and the battle of Hattin in order to support Saddam Hussein's legitimacy (82–84). In accordance with both the popular image established by *The Victorious Saladin* and his own pan-Arab agenda, Hussein ignored Saladin's Kurdish background. The Syrian governmental and Baathist press too constructed a similar image of Hafez al-Assad as a second Saladin. As a member of the minority Alavite sect, an offshoot of Shia Islam, al-Assad's vision was to build a

state whose political agenda treated the nation as homogeneously Arab, avoiding sectarian divisions. Baathist press, schoolbooks, and propaganda drew historical parallels with Saladin and how his image was promoted by statues, stamps, and banknotes (Kadar 137–41; Wedeen 3–10; Freitag 1–16). After the death of Hafez al-Assad in 2000, his son Bashar succeeded him.

Syrian television dramas were integral platforms in support of the state's political agenda in general, and of the state-propagated Saladin-cult in particular. Gary Richard Edgerton and Peter Rollins note that in the age of media, "television must be understood

... as the primary way that children and adults form their understanding of the past. Just as television has profoundly affected and altered every aspect of contemporary life—from the family to education, government, business, and religion—the medium's nonfictional and fictional portrayals have similarly transformed the way tens of millions of viewers think about historical figures and events" (1).

The beginning of the Syrian drama industry dates back to 1986, when the Syrian authorities began to encourage private producers to film their own shows. In 1991, a move toward economic liberalization opened the door to private production companies. The most successful tended to be owned by individuals with strong links to the regime regardless of their sectarian background. During the 1990s, satellite television access increased dramatically, and this gave a boost to the drama industry. Home-grown Syrian series (*musalsal*) quickly dethroned Egyptian soap operas both on the national and regional level. Furthermore, Syrian television became an increasingly significant symbol of national culture, transforming both the way Syrians see themselves in relation to other Arabs, and their image in the Middle East and beyond (Salamandra 4–18). In the 1990s, investors from the Gulf entered the drama industry, which allowed for new creativity to spur the pan-Arab or Arabic-language industry. The Gulf impact led to the replacement of recent and sometimes sensitive topics of the local Syrian present and past with stories of the heroic figures of the wider Arab past.

The events that took place in the world in general, and the Middle East in particular, at the beginning of the new millennium clearly found their echo in the *musalsal* industry. After the al-Aqsa Intifada, the attacks of September 11, 2001, and the US-led invasion of Iraq, Syrian television series reflected the Arab world's tension. The

number of historical *musalsals* grew, which drew parallels between past and present worlds. The common denominators of historical series include the need to overcome Arab and/or Muslim disunity in the face of foreign threats (Dick 5–7). No wonder that Saladin's character, as defined by Anton and canonized by Chahine, became popular among directors and producers of *musalsals*. During Ramadan 2001, not one but two Syrian series about Saladin were aired. Adaptations of the story and life of the famous "liberator" of Jerusalem could be viewed as part of the Syrian Baathist pro-Palestinian discourse as well as a response to the al-Aqsa Intifada that started in September 2000. As Ramadan of 2001 took place in November, neither series could reflect on the September 11 attacks and what consequences they might have.

One of the series was *al-Babth an Salah ad-Din (Searching for Saladin)*, directed by Najdat Isma'il Anzour and scripted by Mahmood 'Adbel-Karim, with the lead role taken by Syrian Orthodox Christian actor Rasheed Isaaf. Anzour, a Syrian television director of Circassian origin, grew up in the once cosmopolitan city of Aleppo, and is known for his opposition to radical Islam ("Veteran Syrian Director"). The historical advisor for the series (30 episodes, 45 minutes each) was Suheil Zakar, a self-declared secularist Syrian historian and head of the government-supported Writing Arab History Committee with strong ties to the regime. The stance of the series on current political events was made quite clear. The series was a propagandistic work advocating the struggle of Palestinians and pointing out the importance of dialogue between cultures and religions ("Interview with Najdat Isma'il Anzour"). The producers of the film went even further by offering the profits from the film to the orphans of Intifada victims through the Emirati Red Cross.

The other series about Saladin was *Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi (The Ayyubid Saladin)*. The production company of the series was Syrian International for Art Production (Suriyya al-Duwaliyya lil-Intaj al-Fann), owned by a Sunni Damascene, Mohammad Hamsho, a Sunni Damascene, member of the People's Assembly, and prominent businessman with strong ties to the regime through common business interests with his brother-in-law Maher al-Assad, brother of President Bashar.

Saladin was played by Jamal Suleiman, a Syrian producer, director, and actor of Alavite background, son-in-law of a former minister of information. The script writer of the series (30 episodes, 40 minutes

each) was Walid Sayf, a Jordanian-Palestinian author and a declared secularist. In an interview, Sayf recounted that in his early childhood he was deeply touched by the plight of Palestinian refugees and dedicated his art to the struggle for Arab and Palestinian causes. During his university years in London, Sayf was amazed by English historical dramas and planned to develop that genre for Arab screens. Regarding *The Ayyubid Saladin*, Sayf denied writing a propagandistic work, but admitted that his goal was to present values for his people, and acknowledged that as a writer he could not free himself from the impact of current politics (“Interview with Walid Sayf”). Despite his claims to the contrary, *The Ayyubid Saladin* can be seen as a propagandistic work. As director Hatem Ali remarked, “[h]istory will surely repeat itself. The region is facing similar attacks as in the past. . . and through the series Saladin, we point out that the same fate will befall the new conquerors as befell the earlier ones” (“Interview with Hatem Ali”). He also added that *The Ayyubid Saladin* is “not only a historical biography, but an interpretation that suits the political situation of the present.” This goal is clear from the very last scene of the last episode, where old footages of British soldiers and Jewish settlers are shown, while Saladin speaks about foreign invasion and occupation.

The Ayyubid Saladin can be considered an important milestone in the evolution of the myth, in the sense that its goal was to transform the popular image of Saladin from a secularist Arab hero to a Muslim Arab hero. Just like in the earlier works, Saladin and the other characters serial speak literary (*fusha*) Arabic, indicating a pan-Arab identity, and there is no mention of Saladin’s Kurdish origin either. However, unlike in the case of Anton’s and Chahine’s Saladin, his struggle against the Crusaders is given a religious dimension by consistently labeling it a *ji-had*. During battle scenes in general, and the scene of capturing Jerusalem in particular, religious chants can be heard, and Saladin regularly quotes passages from the Quran. Saladin and his companions refer to their own as both “Arab” and “Muslim,” while the enemy is cautiously labeled as “Crusaders” and “Franks” in order to avoid referring to them as “Christians.” The Middle Eastern Christians of the film are presented as part of the “own,” as victims of foreign oppression and as loyal supporters of their Muslim compatriots. In episode 4, the character of Murad, a sympathetic guardian of religious morals and justice appears, whose Shia Muslim identity is cautiously indicated by his rhetoric and also by the clothing of his men. A number of episodes depict how

Murad, together with a local Sunni sheikh, struggles to rally the people of Damascus in support of Imad ad-Din Zengi atabeg of Mosul and Aleppo in his *jihad* against the Crusaders. The character of Murad is presented as a moral inspiration for the child Saladin, indicating his struggle to champion an all-Muslim cause.

This image of Saladin led some critics to identify Walid Sayf as pro-Islamist. However, the portrayal of a “jihadist” Saladin could be interpreted as a reflection of the Syrian Baathist regime’s politics of its time. During the 1990s, President Hafez al-Assad became more open toward loyal Islamists and used clerics as tools in propaganda, a strategy that was adopted by his son Bashar (Pierret 70–84; Zisser 49–56). At the same time, both Assads maintained a strong alliance with Islamist groups such as Shia Lebanese Hezbollah and Sunni Palestinian Hamas to ensure their influence in regional politics and to bolster their legitimacy.

Hatem Ali’s *Saladin* gained wide popularity in the Arab world. In 2002, it won the Golden Award for best direction at the Cairo TV Festival and the award for best direction at the Tunisia film festival. The series was presented on several Arab satellite channels in countries like Lebanon, Jordan, the Palestinian Territories, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and the United Arab Emirates. The Arab and pan-Muslim image of Saladin was evoked by Lebanese Shia Hezbollah leader Hasan Nasrallah in the wake of the 2006 war with Israel as a tool for the justification of his politics (Matar 141–57). Most probably because of such rhetoric and also partly due to the visual similarities between Saladin as presented in the series and Nasrallah, for example, their plump face, black turban, and grayish beard, the comparison of the Hezbollah leader and the sultan became widespread in Syria. Of course, Saladin’s wars against the Shia Fatimids were largely neglected. After the outbreak of the Syrian uprising in 2011, however, one serious blow to the prestige of the Assad government and its myth of a unified Syria was Jamal Suleiman’s refusal to return from a trip abroad and his declaration of his antigovernment feelings (Kanaan).

Conclusion

Arabic works on Saladin follow neither a common storyline nor a canonic narrative. The most influential plays, films, and television

series that define Saladin's image focus on different, both true and fictional episodes of his life. Still, all Arab works tend to principally highlight his following three virtues: chivalry, intrepidity in the defense of Islamic/Arabic soil from foreign invaders, and religious tolerance. These characteristics became canonical over the decades and were therefore never challenged by Arab authors. Parallely, some historical facts (such as his Kurdish origin, Sufi beliefs, and wars against fellow Muslims) are largely ignored. It was this Saladin, as presented in twentieth-century Arabic novels, plays, and films that became part of popular memory in the Arab world.

Saladin's myth looks back on a long tradition, one begun by Arab and western chroniclers of the Crusades. During European Romanticism, authors such as Lessing and Scott used Saladin as an example of humanist values and religious tolerance. This European image was adapted by Arab—mainly Christian—intellectuals during the age of the Arab Renaissance in the late nineteenth century. While a number of early Arab nationalists found inspiration in this portrait of a charismatic leader, it was Farah Anton, a Lebanese Christian writer, who paved the way for Saladin's cult in the Arab world with his drama *al-Sultan Salab al-Din wa Mamlakat Ursbalim*. Anton's approach was further developed by Youssef Chahine, whose 1963 monumental film, *The Victorious Saladin*, fixed Saladin's later image as a chivalrous, tolerant "pan-Arab" leader. The film became highly popular due to Nasser's politics and the increasing popularity of cinema in the Arab world. Works like *The Victorious Saladin* were more instrumental than historical records in inspiring leaders like Saddam Hussein, Hafez al-Assad, and many others to maintain the cult of Saladin as portrayed in the film. Later on, the image promoted by *The Victorious Saladin* became the basis for adaptations made by Syrian Baathist drama producers. These opuses, used frequently for political and propaganda goals, contributed to the survival of the Saladin cult and its becoming part of collective memory in the Arab world. This biased portrayal made him an ultimate hero in popular Arab culture who was rarely examined objectively and hardly ever criticized, in order to facilitate political agendas, contribute to nation-building and also, to give hope to societies struggling with conflicts and fragmentation¹

Note

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