



BRILL

DIE WELT DES ISLAMIS 62 (2022) 53-77

DIE
WELT DES
ISLAMIS
brill.com/wdi

A Celebrity from the Sky: ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad’s Journey to National and International Fame in ‘Abd al-Nāṣir’s and al-Sādāt’s Egypt

Omar Sayfo

Institute for Cultural Inquiry, Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands

Avicenna Institute of Middle Eastern Studies, Piliscsaba, Hungary

o.a.sayfo@uu.nl

Abstract

‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad (1927–88) is one of the most renowned Egyptian Qur’ān reciters of the *mujawwad* and *murattal* styles, admired nationally and internationally for his remarkable voice and improvisatory style. Starting from the 1950s, his national and international career was entwined with the emergence of Egyptian mass media, which contributed not only to the spread of his voice on the radio, followed by the distribution of cassettes, but also to the formation of his image through a variety of media texts. While avoiding explicit political engagement, he largely contributed to the religious legitimation of ‘Abd al-Nāṣir’s and al-Sādāt’s policies by his presence at iconic events, as well as to the growth of Egyptian soft power. This article sets ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad’s career within the media and political landscape of his time, exploring his journey from his Upper Egyptian home village to transnational celebrity.

Keywords

‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad – Egypt – al-Azhar – *qārī* – Qur’ān – ‘Abd al-Nāṣir – *mujawwad* – *murattal*

‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad, hailed as “The Golden Throat”, “The Ambassador of the Qur’ān”, “The Voice from the Sky”, and “The Voice of Mecca” by the Egyptian and Arab press, as well as by his admirers, was one of the most popular

Egyptian Qurʾān reciters (*qārīʿ*, pl. *qurrāʿ*)¹ of the late twentieth century, whose international popularity has barely faded even today.

This article explores his career, tracking his journey from a small Upper Egyptian village to national and transnational fame, and his status as a central figure of Nasserist and post-Nasserist Egypt. Drawing on Egyptian press archives, together with written and oral testimonies, I argue that ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad’s rise to celebrity was fundamentally connected to his early adoption of technological advances (mainly, the radio) and his careful navigation of an institutional and media framework set by the politics of ‘Abd al-Nāṣir’s and al-Sādāt’s Egypt. His renown evolved within a mediascape in which the boundary between the “popular” and the “religious” was still blurred. al-Azhar, as the main religious institution, and the domains in which the *qurrāʿ* in general operated – like specific public and political events (both in Egypt and abroad) and the media (the press, radio, and records) – were overseen by a government seeking religious legitimacy. ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad consciously inhabited the space in-between the secular and sacred to craft the image of a modern *qārīʿ*, championing traditional Egyptian Qurʾān recitation – apolitical, yet loyal to the government; world-savvy, yet deeply patriotic.

The aim of this article is to investigate ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad’s symbolic position as a celebrity *qārīʿ* and his connections with the state. Although his actual political position is difficult to verify from available press archives and testimonies, ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad played a political role that was strongly connected to al-Azhar’s subordination to the state, the centrality of nationalized mass media in the development of Egyptian nationhood under ‘Abd al-Nāṣir, and Egypt’s position in the pan-Arab and Muslim transnational spheres.

This research has certain limits. First, exploring the entire network of patronage behind ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad proved to be challenging. While his early career was clearly promoted by a loose network of Upper Egyptian affiliates of Azhari institutions, tracks fade from the point he signed a contract with Egyptian Radio. Instead, sources and testimonies purport a narrative that attributes his career’s advancement to his personal charisma and remarkable voice. Therefore, this research will focus on the institutions that facilitated his emergence as a celebrity.

1 “Reciters of the Qurʾān”, in *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, ed. by Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Brill: Leiden, 2004), IV/386–93.

A Virtuous Voice

To understand ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad’s position among the *qurrā*’ of his time, we should take a closer look at his background, as well as at the state of Egyptian recitation of the Qur’ān when his career started.

‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad was born in 1927 in the then village of Armant, Upper Egypt. Although he was the first reciter in his family, his grandfather, ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ Salīm, an al-Azhar-trained scholar, was a respected informal local authority.² According to his family’s accounts, young ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad was keen on attending *mawlid* ceremonies of medieval *shaykhs* like Sīdī ‘Abd al-Ḥajjāj in Luxor and Sīdī ‘Abd al-Farḡhalī in Sohag, where he was inspired by locally renowned reciters like Shaykh ‘Abd al-Rāḏī, Shaykh ‘Awad al-Qawsī, and Shaykh Ṣiddīq al-Minshāwī (1895–1984). They were part of the vivid scene of Qur’ān reciters in Upper Egypt and contributed to the popularity of recitation and other forms of musical entertainment among the peasant population.³

Both Egyptians and religious authorities view the recitation of the Qur’ān (*tilāwa*)⁴ as a unique art form, separate from music, both sacred and secular, despite the many shared traits in techniques, melody system, aesthetic expectations, and other aspects.⁵ Nevertheless, scholars largely agree that these categories overlap and draw from each other.⁶ One case in point is Umm Kulthūm, who was keen to integrate musical elements of Qur’ānic recitation into her singing style.⁷

2 For a detailed account of ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad’s background and childhood, see Zakariyā Ḥamīmī, *Ṣawt min al-samā’* (Cairo: Hibat al-Nīl al-‘Arabīyya li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzī’, 2009).

3 Elizabeth Wickett, “Archaeological Memory, the Leitmotifs of Ancient Egyptian Festival Tradition, and Cultural Legacy in the Festival Tradition of Luxor: the Mulid of Sidi Abu’l Hajjaj al-Uq̄sori and the Ancient Egyptian ‘Feast of Opet’”, *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 45 (2009), 403–26. See also Afaf Marsot, *Egypt’s Liberal Experiment, 1922–1936* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 20–21.

4 “Recitation of the Qur’ān”, in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, ed. by Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2004), IV/367–85.

5 Kristina Nelson, “Reciter and Listener: Some Factors Shaping the Mujawwad Style of Qur’ānic Reciting”, *Ethnomusicology* 26:1 (1982), 41–47.

6 Ali Jihad Racy, “Music in Contemporary Cairo: a Comparative Overview”, *Asian Music* 13:1 (1981), 4–26.

7 Danielson, “The Qur’an and the Qasidah”.

The Egyptian *mujawwad* style is musical, features *tarab* aesthetic and behavior,⁸ and is highly expressive; it includes an artistic elaboration of text and is connected to traditional Egyptian Islam.⁹ *Mujawwad* was traditionally performed in public with the participation of listeners, performances that ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Šamad also witnessed as a child in Upper Egypt. Later on, the listeners’ musical expectations were further reinforced by the policies of the National Radio and Television union, the Reciters’ Committee (*Lajnat al-Qurrā’*). The supervisory committee for hiring and overseeing reciters followed a recognized standard of recitation that sanctions musicality, making a certain level of musical skill essential for broadcast.¹⁰

Radio-aired Qur’ānic recitation was among ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Šamad’s primary inspirations. Qur’ānic recitation was first broadcast on Egyptian radio (*al-idhā’a al-miṣriyya*) in 1934; eventually, the Egyptian *mujawwad* style of reciting became a regular feature of radio programming.¹¹ With the spread of radio devices, a culture of listening to Qur’ānic broadcasts emerged in rural Egypt. Every day, people across the country would gather around radios, listening to the reciting of the holy text.¹² As radios were not widespread at the time, according to his later interviews, young ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Šamad walked many miles to a café equipped with a radio to listen to broadcasts of Shaykh Muḥammad Rif’at (1882–1950) and Shaykh ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ al-Sha’shā’ī (1880–1962).

Like many other boys of his age, ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Šamad was educated by a local *shaykh* and memorized the entire Qur’ān by the age of ten. His father planned to send him to the al-Aḥmadī Azhar Institute in the city of Tanta to learn Qur’ān sciences. A more convenient alternative arose when an al-Azhar trained *shaykh*, Muḥammad Salīm Ḥamāda al-Minshāwī, arrived in the nearby village

8 *Tarab* as a concept refers to the merger between music and emotional transformation, which may not have an exact equivalent in Western languages. See Ali Jihad Racy, *Making Music in the Arab World: The Culture and Artistry of Tarab* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 5.

9 Michael Frishkopf, “Mediated Qur’anic Recitation and the Contestation of Islam in Contemporary Egypt”, in: *Music and the Play of Power in the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia*, ed. Laudan Nooshin (Ashgate Farnham, 2009), 90.

10 Nelson, “Reciter and Listener”, 45.

11 *Mujawwad* is a melodic style of Qur’ān recitation. In contrast to *murattal* (a slower recitation style, with pronounce, reverence and avoiding high voices) multiple types of sectioning are used regarding its phrase lengths.

12 Kamal El Menoufi, “Occupational Status and Mass Media in Rural Egypt”, *IJMES* 13:3 (1981), 262–63; Kristina Nelson, *The Art of Reciting the Qur’an* (Cairo: University in Cairo Press, 2001), 142; Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, “The Mass Media and Egyptian Village Life”, *Social Forces* 42:1 (1963), 97–104.

of 'Asfūn al-Maṭā'ina to teach the seven recitations of the Qur'ān at the al-Jam'iyya al-Azhariyya (established in 1926). As his disciple, young 'Abd al-Bāsiṭ 'Abd al-Ṣamad mastered the recitations in three years. Recommended by his teacher, he was occasionally hired to recite the Qur'ān at funerals, at private and public events, and also during the high season in the holy month of Ramadan, when he earned 25 piasters every night.¹³ Soon, 'Abd al-Bāsiṭ 'Abd al-Ṣamad's local reputation grew into regional fame, and he was invited to recite the Qur'ān at major religious events across the governorate, for example on the night of Isrā' and Mi'rāj, Mid-Sha'bān, Laylat al-Qadr, and the *mawlid*s of Muslim saints.¹⁴ Thus, despite his young age, 'Abd al-Bāsiṭ 'Abd al-Ṣamad became a regionally famous *qārī'* along with other reciters from Upper Egypt like Shaykh Muṣṭafā Ismā'īl (1905–78), Shaykh Muḥammad Siddīq al-Minshāwī (1920–69),¹⁵ and Shaykh 'Abduh 'Abd al-Rāḍī (1922–78). Still, he was not yet employed by al-Azhar, accepting these invitations to recite the Qur'ān on a personal, freelance basis.

'Abd al-Bāsiṭ 'Abd al-Ṣamad's journey to national fame began in 1950, when he traveled to Cairo to participate in the yearly *mawlid* celebration at the mosque of Sayyida Zaynab. The *imām* of the mosque, 'Alī Subay', who hailed from the Upper Egyptian city of Qena and was familiar with 'Abd al-Bāsiṭ 'Abd al-Ṣamad's performance, invited him to read the Qur'ān in the presence of Shaykh 'Alī b. Muḥammad Ḥasan Ibrāhīm 'Abdallāh Nūr al-Dīn, who was a member of the Egyptian Radio's board at that time.¹⁶ With his help, 'Abd al-Bāsiṭ 'Abd al-Ṣamad made a recording that was presented to Radio Egypt in 1951, after which the board invited him to recite live every Saturday from 8:00 to 8:30 p.m.¹⁷ Together with his wife and children, he moved to Cairo, and in 1952 the office of Qur'ānic Affairs (*al-Shu'ūn al-Qur'āniyya*) appointed him as the official reciter of the Imām al-Shāfi'ī Mosque, which meant not only prestige but also financial security. Moreover, as mosques, especially at Friday prayers, are attended in greater numbers and have therefore been a traditional platform for a *qārī'* to build his reputation,¹⁸ he was able to grow a base of loyal listeners.

13 Ḥamīmī, *Ṣawt min al-samā'*, 55.

14 Ibid., 78.

15 He was a son of the renowned *qārī'* Ṣiddīq al-Minshāwī (1895–1984) and the protégé of Muḥammad Rif'at.

16 Ḥamīmī, *Ṣawt min al-samā'*, 85.

17 The committee was made up of senior scholars, Shaykh 'Alī b. Muḥammad al-Ḍabbā' (d. 1961), president of the League of Reciters of Egypt, and Shaykh Maḥmūd Shaltūt (1893–1963), the later *shaykh* of al-Azhar, and included popular *qārī'* Shaykh Maḥmūd 'Alī al-Bannā (1926–1985). On 'Alī b. Muḥammad al-Ḍabbā' see Gotthelf Bergsträsser, "Koranlesung in Kairo", *Der Islam* 20 (1932), 1–42, on 23–36.

18 Nelson, *The Art of Reciting*, 140.

Soon, ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad became widely popular for his high, clear voice and improvisatory style.¹⁹ As typical for the Egyptian style of Qur’ānic recitation, his readings were musical and often explained in terms of the art of music.²⁰ Still, unlike many *qurrā’* of his time, he exhibited a high degree of virtuosity. In line with Egyptian traditions of recitation, he embraced an improvisatory style and used breath control and high register. By his distinctive style, ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad claimed an aesthetic agency focused on the shaping of a musical voice.²¹ He saw no harm in doing so – when interviewed for an article investigating the melodization (*talhīn*) of the Qur’ān by artists (*ahl al-fann*) and men of religion (*rijāl al-dīn*), ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad stated that the Qur’ān is melodized by its nature (*al-Qur’ān mulaḥḥan min ṭabī‘atihi*), a notion the other *shaykhs* refused to entertain.²² Such musical style earned him wide admiration and popularity on the one hand, but also a flood of criticism on the other – conservative voices accused him of pandering to the taste of his listeners and of showing off.²³ Eventually, as ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad’s recitation was widely mediated, his approach contributed to the alteration of public taste toward a preference for more melodic styles.

Sailing on the Waves of ‘Abd al-Nāṣir and the Tapes of Sādāt

Qur’ānic recitation went on air as soon as Radio Egypt was launched in 1934.²⁴ In the early years, prominent *qurrā’* like Shaykh Muḥammad Rif‘at were asked to recite; later, a committee was formed to seek out less well-known *qurrā’* with a potential for broadcasting, leading the way to ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad’s first radio broadcast in 1950. Since only two local stations transmitted programs, one for eleven, the other for four hours daily, between 1934 and 1953,

19 Ibid., 192.

20 For a detailed account of the characteristics of Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad’s recitation style see Józef Marcin Pacholczyk. *Regulative Principles in the Koran Chant of Shaikh ‘Abdu’l-Bāsiṭ ‘Abdu’s-Samad*. Dissertation. University of California, 1970.

21 By “aesthetic agency”, I follow Monson’s definition, and mean “the choices musicians make in crafting their musical voice—choices made necessarily against the backdrop of living in particular places at particular moments in time and from the vantage point of occupying a specific configuration of social positions”; see Ingrid Monson, *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call out to Jazz and Africa*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 318.

22 Ḍiyā’ al-Dīn Baybars, “al-Qur’ān. Naḥwa ru’ya ‘aṣriyya”, *al-Hilāl*, December 1970, 118–27, on 124.

23 Nelson, “Reciter and Listener”, 45.

24 Frishkopf, “Mediated Qur’anic Recitation”, 83.

the audience's attention on radio programs was focused. Still, the reach was limited, as radio was modestly staffed and equipped – in 1952, it had no short-wave capability and only 72 kilowatts of medium-wave power.²⁵

The importance of radio as a political platform increased dramatically when the Free Officers overthrew King Fārūq in 1952, and 'Abd al-Nāṣir became president in 1954. Under 'Abd al-Nāṣir, media was “nationalized and considered an extension of the ruling party and state, ‘mobilization’ media whose role was to support top-down revolution.”²⁶ On the national level, radio was repeatedly used to mobilize the tradition-bound, village-based masses, to gain popular support for the leaders, institutions, and policies of the new regime, and to strengthen the rural population's national identity.²⁷ Broadcasting contributed to the creation of a sense of national identity among the people.²⁸ Licensed receivers in Egypt rose from 238,000 to 405,000 between 1950 and 1956.²⁹ By the mid-1950s, nine in ten villagers were frequent listeners to the radio, with Qur'ān recitations being the first choice of many.³⁰

The rapid development of radio had begun to influence Egyptian daily life, as, for the first time, people were able to listen to famous musicians, singers, and Qur'ān reciters from the comfort of their homes.³¹ This wide range of radio made 'Abd al-Bāsiṭ 'Abd al-Ṣamad's voice known.

On the transnational level, the Free Officers and officials at the Ministry of National Guidance decided to install powerful medium-wave transmitters as well as short-wave facilities, to make Egypt the dominant broadcaster in Arabic both in the Middle East and internationally.³² In 1953, the *Voice of the Arabs*

25 William Rugh, *Arab Mass Media: Newspapers, Radio, and Television in Arab Politics* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2004), 184.

26 Edward Webb, *Media in Egypt and Tunisia: From Control to Transition?* (New York: Palgrave, 2014), 23.

27 Gordon K. Hirabayashi and M. Fathalla El Khatib, “Communication and Political Awareness in the Villages of Egypt”, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 22:3 (1958), 357–63.

28 *Ittiḥād al-idhā'a wa-l-tilfīzyūn al-kitāb al-sanawī 1982–1983* (Cairo: Ittiḥād al-idhā'a wa-l-Tilfīzyūn, 1983), 175.

29 Daniel Lerner, *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East* (New York: Free Press, 1958), 254.

30 Hirabayashi and El Khatib, “Communication and Political Awareness”, 359.

31 Zein Nassar, “A History of Music and Singing on Egyptian Radio and Television”, in *Music and Media in the Arab World*, ed. Michael Frishkopf (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2010), 68.

32 Douglas A. Boyd, “Development of Egypt's Radio: ‘Voice of the Arabs’ under Nasser”, *Journalism Quarterly* 52:4 (1975), 645–53.

(*Ṣawt al-ʿArab*) station was launched with the declared mission of carrying the Nasserite pan-Arab message to the entire Arab world.

This concentrated, state-controlled output tended to unify Arab listeners around a common media experience, consolidating taste and projecting Egyptian music as an important collective basis for pan-Arabism.³³ Such observation is valid for Egypt's leading Islamic and media role in the Arab world, which was consolidated and empowered regionally by 'Abd al-Nāṣir's pan-Arabism and internally by socialist policies of centralization, particularly state monopolization of religious institutions and media.³⁴ The *Voice of the Arabs*, as a new transnational station, combined entertainment programming with news and opinions inserted in certain parts, and it also broadcast recitations of selected Egyptian *qurrā'*, including 'Abd al-Bāsiṭ 'Abd al-Ṣamad.³⁵

Despite the launch of Egypt's first television broadcasts in 1960, radio continued to hold its position as the number one medium of the Qur'ān, particularly after March 1964, when the Ministry of Religious Endowments launched The Holy Qur'ān Station (*Idhā'at al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*), a Cairo-based service on short- and medium-wave that began broadcasting Qur'ān chanting not only nationally but also well beyond the borders of Egypt and the Middle East.³⁶ The station's programming was designed as a mixture of studio and live recordings of specific occasions such as memorial services, Friday prayers, and various religious or governmental celebrations, commemorations, and inaugurations. All recordings of eligible quality, whether studio or live, were archived and became a major source of programming.³⁷ Eventually, The Holy Qur'ān Station became a platform that helped not only 'Abd al-Bāsiṭ 'Abd al-Ṣamad's voice to be heard more frequently, but also the Egyptian *mujawwad* and *murattal* styles to emerge as the internationally dominant styles of recitation.

'Abd al-Nāṣir's death in 1970 did not mean a setback for Islamic programming; succeeding president Anwar al-Sādāt also realized the potential of radio broadcasts in general, and Islamic programming in particular, especially as he increasingly sought Islamic legitimacy in the face of an emerging Islamist opposition in the 1970s, and following his peace treaty with Israel in 1979.

33 Michael Frishkopf, *Music and Media in the Arab World* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2010), 13.

34 Frishkopf, "Mediated Qur'anic Recitation", 93.

35 Anas Alahmed, "Voice of the Arabs Radio: Its Effects and Political Power during the Nasser Era (1953–1967)", 2011, <https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2047212> (accessed 21 December 2020).

36 Mahmoud I. Shalabieh, *A Comparison of Political Persuasion on Radio Cairo in the Eras of Nasser and Sadat*, Dissertation, The Ohio State University, 1985.

37 Nelson, *The Art of Reciting*, 142.

Therefore, Egyptian radio, including religious programming, continued to receive governmental support, helping ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Şamad to maintain his already established reputation for the decades to come.

Additionally, ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Şamad increased his transnational fame by selling recordings. Although *tilāwa* was first recorded on phonogram discs in the early twentieth century, Qur’anic recordings did not reach a wider audience for many decades.³⁸ In the early 1950s, as part of ‘Abd al-Nāşir’s nationalization process, the state seized the primary audio media producer, Misrphon, known from 1962 as SonoCairo (*Şawt al-Qāhira*), leading to the unprecedented amplification of Egyptian media stars – actors, singers and reciters – throughout the Arab and Muslim world.³⁹ In the early 1960s, Shaykh Maḥmūd ‘Alī al-Ḥuṣrī (1917–80) became the first to record the complete Qur’ān on LP in *murattal* style.⁴⁰ Soon, with direct access to radio archives, the state-owned recording company emerged as Egypt’s largest phonodisc producer, offering a wide range of popular music and most of the great *qurrā*’s recitations for world-wide export.

President Anwar al-Sādāt’s “opening-the-door” (*infitāh*) policy, initiated after the 1973 October War, lifted many restrictions on foreign imports and encouraged private investment, allowing the import of equipment necessary for cassette production, as well as the proliferation of private cassette companies. In the mid-1970s, radio’s hegemony was challenged by the swiftly rising cassette industry, which provided an alternative medium for music and also for Qur’ān recitations.⁴¹ As part of the mass cassette culture, the distribution of both musical and religious content increased. With Egyptian tape covers featuring a printed image of the *qurrā*, ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Şamad continued to maintain a focus not only on his recitation but also his own image.⁴² Issuing cassettes of parts of, or even the entire Qur’ān read by famous reciters guaranteed commercial success for newly established companies.⁴³ ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Şamad was the first *qārī*’ to make commercial recordings of his

38 Ali Jihad Racy, “Record Industry and Egyptian Traditional Music: 1904–1932”, *Ethnomusicology* 20:1 (1976), 33–34.

39 Frishkopf, “Mediated Qur’anic Recitation”, 93.

40 Labib as-Said, *The Recited Koran; A History of the First Recorded Version*. Translated and Adapted by Bernard Weiss, M.A. Rauf and Morroe Berger (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1975).

41 Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape. Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Salwa Shawan Castelo Branco, “Some Aspects of the Cassette Industry in Egypt”, *The World of Music* 29:2 (1987), 34.

42 Frishkopf, “Mediated Qur’anic Recitation”, 108–10.

43 Shawan, “Some Aspects”, 39.

reciting, including the complete text of the Qurʾān in both the *murattal* and the *mujawwad* style. His early encounter with commercial recording underlines Frishkopf's observation on the overlap between the religious and secular in mass media. ʿAbd al-Bāsiṭ ʿAbd al-Ṣamad signed a contract with *Ṣawt al-Qāhira* in early 1976 containing an exclusivity clause forbidding him from recording the Qurʾān with his own voice for third parties either in Egypt or abroad, or even from working with other phonographic producers. However, later in the same year, ʿAbd al-Bāsiṭ ʿAbd al-Ṣamad broke the deal by making a record with another commercial company, Murifoun. This resulted in a precedent trial between the companies revolving around the question of whether recitations of the Qurʾān, regarded as a sacred text, are eligible for protection under copyright as an intellectual product, and should therefore be considered “artistic work” as set down in Law 430 of 1955.⁴⁴ The fact that *Ṣawt al-Qāhira* did not sue ʿAbd al-Bāsiṭ ʿAbd al-Ṣamad can be explained by his popularity and the company's concern that it would backfire and trigger a general outrage.

A Celebrity *qāriʿ* between the Realms of the Sacred and the Secular

Celebrities are generally defined and investigated by scholarly works in secular terms. Can a *qāriʿ*, a mediator of what is believed to be the words of God, be a celebrity, though? I contend that ʿAbd al-Bāsiṭ ʿAbd al-Ṣamad's career and times hold many qualities that transgress the separation of sacred and secular, making him eventually fit the category of “celebrity”.

Celebrity studies has evolved in a Western context, and with a few exceptions focuses mostly on secular personalities. Indeed, despite their importance in organized religions, the marginalization of religious personalities in celebrity studies is striking.⁴⁵ Amongst a number of Western and Christian-specific explanations, like theology's untenable “monopoly” of religion, and the fact that celebrity scholars only occasionally venture into the domain of theology, Alpion suggests two important reasons – a reluctance to look at religious personalities “as socially constructed celebrities”;⁴⁶ and a presumption that religious personalities have only a public self.

44 Yasser Omar Amine, “‘Tilāwīt le Coran’ en Égypte, entre droit d’auteur et droits voisins (à propos de l’affaire du Cheikh Abdel Basit Abdel Samad)”, *Revue internationale de droit comparé* 66 (2014), 1043–68.

45 Gëzim Alpion, “Why Are Modern Spiritual Icons Absent in Celebrity Studies? The Role of Intermediaries in Enhancing Mother Teresa's Advocacy in India and Australia Prior to the 1979 Nobel Peace Prize”, *Celebrity Studies* 11:2 (2020), 221–36.

46 Andrea Graus, “A Visit to Remember: Stigmata and Celebrity at the Turn of the Twentieth Century”, *Cultural and Social History* 14:1 (2017), 55–72.

Such concerns do not pose a barrier to investigating *qurrā'* in a twentieth-century Egyptian context. Before the advent of mass media, and well after its spread, the religious/secular boundary hardly existed in the Egyptian context, as the ambiguous zone joining the two musical domains was broad. Similar to singing performers, *qurrā'* traditionally have a loyal following, based on their personal as well as professional capabilities. A boundary between "popular" and "religious" only emerged when the latter category could not follow the former's path to the new media-based music economy.⁴⁷

Around the time when 'Abd al-Bāsiṭ 'Abd al-Ṣamad began to become nationally and transnationally famous, the two domains were not separate in the Egyptian public, a fact which – intentionally or not – he used to his advantage.⁴⁸ The Egyptian media have also celebrated a few Qur'ānic reciters with magazine spreads, interviews and photo displays, thus contributing to establishing a personality cult with fierce loyalties and fan clubs.⁴⁹ However, 'Abd al-Bāsiṭ 'Abd al-Ṣamad's share of the spotlight was unprecedented in his time.

Such publicity has helped to erase the distinction between reciter and singer in terms of the reciter's professional identity and the listeners' expectations.⁵⁰ The lack of distinction was also visually striking, as a variety of Egyptian magazines and newspapers released photos of renowned *qurrā'*, like 'Abd al-Bāsiṭ 'Abd al-Ṣamad or Abū l-'Aynayn al-Shu'aysha' (1922–2011) playing *'ūd* at family gatherings, or Shaykh Muṣṭafā Ismā'īl enjoying his wife's piano performance.

In a Western context, celebrity culture evolved with mass media.⁵¹ Celebrity is "closely aligned with public culture and public awareness of the individual's work, which also means that celebrity culture is rooted in everyday mass culture where the reception of icons enables further and greater circulation."⁵² According to this approach, celebrity is partly the consequence of an individual's qualities and continuous representation in the media. Similarly in the

47 Michael Aaron Frishkopf, *Music and Media in the Arab World* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2010), 10.

48 One case in point is the first edition of Maḥmūd al-Sa'dānī's book on Egyptian reciters, *Alḥān al-samā'* (Cairo: Kitāb al-Yawm 1959), 80, that consequently refers to another *qārī'*, Muḥammad Rif'at, as performer (*muṭrib*) and artist (*fannān*).

49 Nelson, *The Art of Reciting*, 162.

50 Kristina Nelson, "Reciter and Listener: Some Factors Shaping the Mujawwad Style of Qur'anic Reciting", *Ethnomusicology* 26:1 (1982), 46.

51 Amy Henderson, "Media and the Rise of Celebrity Culture", *OAH Magazine of History* 6:4 (1992), 49–54.

52 Pramod Nayar, *Seeing Stars: Spectacle, Society and Celebrity Culture* (New Delhi: Sage Publications India, 2009), 4.

Egyptian context, ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad’s celebrity rose parallel to the emergence of national and transnational mass media, which, besides religious mass events, also contributed to his fame, and eventually to his status as a celebrity.

As was the case with singers and performers, the public developed a keen interest in ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad’s personal life.⁵³ While Egyptian radio undoubtedly contributed to the growth of his fame in the mid-1950s, other Egyptian and Arab media spared no effort in making Shaykh ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ’s person and personal life public knowledge, a feature that is common for stars.⁵⁴ Unlike other celebrities of the time, like Umm Kulthūm (1898–1975),⁵⁵ ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad did not take an active role in shaping promotional texts, or disseminate information on his activities and personal life. Instead, state-controlled media covered him favorably and maintained an interest in his character as a *qārī’*, who eagerly contributed to the production of media texts across which “a star’s image is constructed”.⁵⁶ In return, they demanded his support of the state.

Religion and Qur’ānic schooling, seen as the foundation of personal piety, are often invoked in cases of renowned public figures.⁵⁷ Egyptian celebrities like Umm Kulthūm typically maintained both a modern and religious image in interviews and media representations.⁵⁸ By his very capacity as a *qārī’*, ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad was undoubtedly a religious figure. Unlike the majority of *qurrā’*, who maintained – at least in public – a modest image, ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad did not shy from telling reporters about finding personal joy in foreign travels, living in a large house in Cairo, and driving the latest model of Chevrolet.⁵⁹ Doing so, consciously or not, he positioned himself between the secular and religious.

Like other celebrities, ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad advanced the formation of a cultural identity. His celebrity status was inseparable from Egyptian politics, as it was politics that set the frames for the media. Moreover, his frequent participation in local events of political significance and foreign delegations,

53 Chris Rojek, *Celebrity* (London: Reaktion, 2001).

54 Nayar, *Seeing Stars*, 10.

55 Laura Lohman, *Umm Kulthum: Artistic Agency and the Shaping of an Arab Legend, 1967–2007* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011).

56 Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: BFI Publishing, 1998), 60–63.

57 Walter Armbrust, *Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 66.

58 Virginia Danielson, “The Qur’an and the Qasidah: Aspects of the Popularity of the Repertory Sung by Umm Kulthūm”, *Asian Music* 19:1 (1987), 26–45.

59 Maḥmūd al-Sa’dānī, *Alḥān al-samā’* (Cairo: Kitāb al-Yawm 1997), 79.

where he symbolized Egyptian political and religious authority, made him a political person. Therefore, like Umm Kulthūm and other Egyptian celebrities whose careers were permeated by politics, ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad also served political and ideological purposes, as he, in line with Nayar’s observation on Western celebrities, inspired emotions of national and religious pride, generating images of a national triumph.⁶⁰ Thanks to transnational Egyptian radio, his voice and fame soon transcended Egypt’s borders.

‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad’s first visit to Syria, in 1955, became a milestone in his international career, and the Egyptian media and public was also surprised by his stardom abroad. With his voice already well known from the radio, he was received in Damascus as a star and appeared on the front pages of local newspapers and magazines.⁶¹ His arrival in Aleppo the following year, on May 31, 1956, was accompanied by an even greater exhilaration among the locals. As one article in *Ṣawt al-Sha‘b* noted, the Aleppo mosque had not seen such a crowd “even in the times of the emir Sayf al-Dawla al-Ḥamdānī”, referring to the legendary founder of the Emirate of Aleppo in the tenth century. According to the article, over two thousand women attended ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad’s recitation – an uncommon feature for a religious occasion – which was also broadcast by Syrian Radio (Dār al-Idhā‘a al-Sūriyya).⁶² The positive reception in Syria further increased his prestige back in Cairo and fostered a collective national pride in Egypt.

However, not all press coverage was as enthusiastic. Shortly after the Syrian visit, Cairo-based *al-Jil* magazine published an anonymous article with the title “Shaykh ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ Brändū is vying for the title of the idol of Eastern women”.⁶³ The comparison with the Hollywood star Marlon Brando was allegedly inspired by the street vendors of Cairo selling small gypsum statues while calling out: “*Shaykh ‘Abd al-Ṣamad Brändū for one qirsh .. idol of the ladies for one qirsh.*” According to the article, the statues sold so fast that the *shaykh* was unable to get one for himself. The article also mentioned ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad’s journey to Syria, where he was “received as a movie star” and was “chased by veiled women”. In another article, *al-Jil* interviewed four young popular Egyptian actresses, Zūzū Nabīl (1920–96), Hadī Shams al-Dīn (1925–2002),

60 Nayar, *Seeing Stars*, 23–24.

61 “al-Shaykh ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ṣawt min al-samā”, *al-Jundī*, 15 May 1955, 2–3; “al-Shaykh al-Shabb alladhī shaghal al-nās”, *al-Niqād*, 15 May 1955, 7.

62 Ḥamīmī, *Ṣawt min al-Samā*, 121–22.

63 “al-Shaykh ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ Brändū..yukāfiḥ min ajli laqab mā‘būd nisā’ al-sharq”, *al-Jil*, 11 April 1955 12.

Magda al-Subḥī (1931-), and Amīna Nūr al-Dīn (1910–2003), asking for their views on the sex appeal of “‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ Brāndū”. “He is all sex” (*Kulluhu seks*), Zūzū Nabīl summarized.⁶⁴

In September 1955, *al-Jīl* picked up the story again, claiming that the *shaykh* was tempting wives to divorce their husbands. The article focused on the alleged story of a Syrian lady called Hidāya who had left her husband and three children in Aleppo to move to the Cairo home of ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad and his family. The anonymous article was accompanied by a close-up image of the *shaykh*’s lips and a cartoon showing women pulling back his robe while he is trying to escape. The article also included an interview replete with scorching remarks, confronting the *shaykh* with uncomfortable questions.⁶⁵

In its next issue, Cairo weekly *Ahl al-Fann* offered ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ the opportunity to respond to the allegations regarding the Syrian lady. In the interview, he read out a previously written statement in which he explained that her husband, whom he knew, had asked him to help his wife build a radio career in Egypt. He had provided accommodation for the lady in his family’s home and had been most surprised when she informed him that she had divorced her husband and wished to marry the *shaykh*. He had refused and contacted officials to facilitate the woman’s return to Syria, but she had turned to some of the *shaykh*’s “haters” (*ḥāqīdūn*), who used this opportunity to besmirch his honor. ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad also explained that he had met with ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Tāj, the Shaykh al-Azhar, who agreed that the scandal had most likely been instigated by his rivals’ jealousy.

The article reported that he had decided to change his public phone number to a secret one after receiving “hundreds of calls” a day, and that he was still dedicating two hours a day to respond to his admirers’ letters asking for a photo or autograph. In an attached interview, *Ahl al-Fann* profiled ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad in his capacity as a religious *qārī*’ but treated him as celebrity by asking his opinion about secular performers and art forms. Responding to the questions, he again toed the line between the sacred and the secular,

64 Aḥmad Rajab, “Fātināt al-Shāsha Yuḡhāzilna al-Shaykh Brāndū”, *al-Jīl*, 19 May 1955, 40.

65 “al-Shaykh ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ Brāndū”, *al-Jīl*, 5 September 1955, 18.

The scornful tone of the article is best illustrated by this quote:

– Shaykh ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ, what is in you that puts woman in temptation?

With a virginal smile on his bright brown face, he said: I stand here in front of you, examine me as you please.

– Do you think the magic is in your eyes?

– Oh man, what a shame this is.

(...)

– But is the admiration developing, Shaykh Brāndū?

– Do not say I’m Brando, do not couple my name with a godless (*mulḥid*) actor’s.”

declaring that his favorite actor was Yūsuf Wahbī, his performer of choice was ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Ḥāfiẓ, his favorite song was *al-Ḥilwa Ḥayātī*, and the best film he had ever seen was *al-Ṭarīq al-Mustaqīm* (1943). ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad’s answers were unproblematic for both clerics and politicians: the mentioned celebrities were popular, and ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Ḥāfiẓ was a personal friend of ‘Abd al-Nāṣir. Meanwhile, he used the opportunity to distance himself from art forms that were “immoral”. When asked about his favorite dancer, he said that he had heard about *Taḥiyya Karioka’s* excellence. Still, he insisted that he had never seen her performing, as both belly dancing and Western ball dance corrupt the people.⁶⁶

To put *al-Jīl’s* coverage in context, it should be noted that the nationalization process of the *awqāf* by the Nasserist regime and the destruction of the religious judicial system in the 1950s was accompanied by press campaigns against the ‘*ulamā’*, challenging their status as men of religion. One notable example is the 1955 summer accusation leveled against two religious judges, Shaykh al-Fill and Shaykh al-Ṣayf, of having had affairs with female clients.⁶⁷ In this climate, ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad, a young and handsome *qārī’*, who liked to indulge in luxury and was popular among women, may have seemed like a safe and rewarding target for the tabloid press.

This, however, changed after ‘Abd al-Nāṣir nationalized the press in 1956. The Press Law of that year transferred management of the leading print publishing houses, including Dār Akhbār al-Yawm, publisher of *al-Jīl*, to the government.⁶⁸ The same law abolished private ownership of newspapers, required any new publication to obtain a license from the government, and strengthened the ruling party’s control over the media. In ‘Abd al-Nāṣir’s centralized mediascape ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad’s image was no longer contested, and this remained the case during the presidencies of Anwar al-Sādāt (r. 1970–81) and Ḥusnī Mubārak (r. 1981–2011). While the Egyptian media continued to cover his participation in national events and his frequent travels abroad, there was a continued interest in his personal life. This led to the publication of staged photos of him talking on the phone, driving a car, or spending intimate time with his family, further blurring the line between his capacity as a *qārī’* and a celebrity.

Popular singers like Umm Kulthūm, Laylā Murād, Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, and others starred in cinematic productions earlier in their careers,

66 Jalīl al-Bindārī, “al-Tilfūn lā yakuff ‘an al-ranīn wa-l-shaykh lā yakuff ‘an al-kalām fihī”, *Ahl al-Fann*, no. 78, September 1955, 2–3.

67 Malika Zeghal, “Religion and Politics in Egypt: The Ulema of al-Azhar, Radical Islam, and the State (1952–94)”, *IJMES* 31:3 (1999), 375.

68 Adnan Almaney, “Government Control of the Press in the United Arab Republic, 1952–70”, *Journalism Quarterly* 49:2 (1972), 344.

and, after the 1960s launch of Egyptian television, became household names. Television and cinema ultimately drew a clear line between the popular and religious realms. Nevertheless, ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad went far for a *qārī*’ without risking a scandal. In 1976, director Muṣṭafā ‘Aqqād requested the shaykh lend his voice for the call for prayer of the first muezzin of Islam, Bilāl, in the ambitious film production of *al-Risāla* (The Message),⁶⁹ to which he agreed, on condition that he would have the opportunity to preview the film in London.⁷⁰

Even though his recitations were often broadcast after the introduction of television in 1960, and although he was interviewed on television both in Egypt and the Arab world, ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad did not feel comfortable on television. As a consequence, he did not expand his celebrity status in a changing mediascape.⁷¹ After the spread of commercial tapes in the 1970s, religious and government authorities, and even reciters themselves, strove to keep the *qārī*’s profession separate from show business, avoiding association with secular music. Still, the debate around the overlap of melodic recitation with the business of entertainment remained largely unsettled in ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad’s lifetime.⁷²

An Apolitical *qārī*’ in the Turbulent World of Politics

Similar to many other *qurrā*’, ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad gained recognition primarily for his vocal talents and had no official Azhari education as a religious scholar that would have given him the authority to take a stand on public issues. Therefore, he maintained a neutral image in the fierce debates over religious and political affairs and studiously avoided commenting on Egypt’s controversial topics and the foreign countries he visited. Instead, he consistently positioned himself as a mere *qārī*’, with no other interest than reciting the Qur’ān for the grace of God and the service of the people. Still, as an employee of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and at the request of the

69 A number of al-Azhar affiliated individuals contributed to the preparation of the film, although later on al-Azhar withdrew its support and the film was not screened in Egypt. See Werner Ende, “Muṣṭafā ‘Aqqāds Muḥammad-Film und seine Kritiker”, in *Studien zur Geschichte und Kultur des Vorderen Orients: Festschrift für Bertold Spuler zum siebzigsten Geburtstag*, ed. Hans R. Roemer (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 32–52.

70 “‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad yu’adhhdhnu fi film ‘Muḥammad Rasūl Allāh’”, *al-Ahrām*, 20 January 1976, 12.

71 “‘Qurrā’ al-Qur’ān al-karīm wa-mushkilatuhum ma’a al-tilifiziyyūn”, *al-Ahrām*, 9 January 1981, 9.

72 Lois Ibsen al Faruqi, “The Cantillation of the Qur’an”, *Asian Music* 19:1 (1987), 2–25.

ministry and al-Azhar, he participated in various high-profile political events. As such, he gave a seal of approval to the politics and policies of his time and even gave them an Islamic seal by reciting the holy text.

Maintaining an apolitical public image served him throughout his career. ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad was appointed *qārī*’ of the Imām al-Shāfi‘ī Mosque when King Fārūq I (r. 1936–52) was still on the throne, and in 1952 he read the Qur’ān at the opening ceremony of the Port Said Mosque in the presence of the sovereign. His employment remained solid after the Nasserist regime nationalized the *awqāf* in 1952, and then excluded the *‘ulamā*’ from the judicial courts in 1955, eventually creating a state-controlled religious monopoly.⁷³ Under ‘Abd al-Nāṣir, al-Azhar became instrumental in formulating a public Islam maintained by the *‘ulamā*’ in order to articulate a strong sense of national identity. This, however, caused tensions and even scandals. In 1953 another young and popular *qārī*’, Muḥammad Ṣiddīq al-Minshāwī – who, unlike ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad, had a clearly visible protégé network – refused to perform on the radio and also to read the Qur’ān at a political event of ‘Abd al-Nāṣir. The political edge of his act was immediately downplayed in the Egyptian press, as the *shaykh* blamed the improper approach of the inviting bureaucrat, who allegedly had said, “You will have the great honor to be present at a celebration where ‘Abd al-Nāṣir will also be there.” To that, he had replied, “Why not be this an honor to ‘Abd al-Nāṣir himself listening to the Qur’ān on the voice of Muḥammad Ṣiddīq al-Minshāwī.” Even though Muḥammad Ṣiddīq al-Minshāwī would later participate in several events at which ‘Abd al-Nāṣir was also present, in such a context it is fair to assume that ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad’s politically neutral image, and his willingness to participate in any event to which he was invited, increased his cachet amongst state bureaucrats and resulted in a number of invitations.

Later, the 1961 administrative reform reorganized al-Azhar’s administration and completely subordinated it to the Egyptian state, turning the *‘ulamā*’ teaching at al-Azhar into civil servants and making the appointment of the Shaykh al-Azhar the president of the Republic’s decision. al-Azhar and the *‘ulamā*’ were forced into complete political submission through financial dependency and political favoritism, and were mobilized to provide the Free Officers the backing they needed in their internal quest for legitimacy.⁷⁴

Through his frequent participation in the symbolic events of the ‘Abd al-Nāṣir regime, ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad contributed to its religious legitimization: He participated in the opening of the annual celebrations of the

73 Gabriel R Warburg, “Islam and Politics in Egypt: 1952–80”, *MES* 18:2 (1982), 134.

74 Malika Zeghal, “Religion and Politics in Egypt”, 374.

July Revolution and of the United Arab Republic, he performed at the opening ceremony of the Aswan Dam and several socialist-style factories, and he recited the Qurʾān at the funeral of President ʿAbd al-Nāṣir’s father in 1965. In turn, they took care of his image in the press.⁷⁵ While refraining from making direct political statements himself, at one point he publicly acknowledged that his favorite publicist was Muḥammad Ḥasanayn Haykal (1923–2016), a vocal advocate of ʿAbd al-Nāṣir.⁷⁶ This was the closest ʿAbd al-Bāsiṭ ʿAbd al-Ṣamad came to publicly stating his political views, and perhaps is an indication of his personal and professional network.

His image as a *qārīʾ* who was also a “son of the country” (*ibn al-balad*) fitted neatly into ʿAbd al-Nāṣir’s and, later, al-Sādāt’s agenda of claiming the mass support of the Egyptian villages.⁷⁷ The late 1950s and early 1960s also brought a wave of reforms, one goal of which was to exploit *mawlid* celebrations for propaganda purposes, hence the mobilization of popular *qurrāʾ* to gain support for the government.⁷⁸

After ʿAbd al-Nāṣir’s death on September 28, 1970, his successor, Anwar al-Sādāt, did not change the orientation of al-Azhar and the *awqāf*. He did, however, instrumentalize al-Azhar to help him overcome the leftist and Nasserist opposition, as well as the emerging political Islamist movements. This also ensured Muslim blessings for his controversial regional policies, especially his détente with Israel.⁷⁹ Anwar al-Sādāt picked Shaykh Muṣṭafā Ismāʿīl as his official *qārīʾ*; therefore, ʿAbd al-Bāsiṭ ʿAbd al-Ṣamad was not pushed to accompany the president on his 1977 trip to Jerusalem. Following the 1979 peace treaty with Israel, the Mufti of Egypt and the Imam of al-Azhar reassured radio listeners both in Egypt and in the Arab world that Islam approved such peace settlements.

Although ʿAbd al-Bāsiṭ ʿAbd al-Ṣamad did not publicly comment on the treaty, an earlier recording of his recitation of the Qurʾān’s *Sūrat al-Anfāl* was repeatedly played on Egyptian radio: “But if they incline towards peace, you [Prophet] must also incline towards it, and put your trust in God: He is the All

75 Ḥamīmī, *Ṣawt min al-samāʾ*, 185.

76 Maḥmūd al-Saʿdānī, *Alḥān al-Samāʾ* (Cairo: Kitāb al-Yawm, 1997), 78.

77 Warburg, “Islam and Politics”, 134–35; Leonard Binder, *In a Moment of Enthusiasm: Political Power and the Second Stratum in Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 376.

78 Michael Gilson, *Saint and Sufi in Modern Egypt* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 48–50; Frederick De Jong, “Opposition to Sufism in Twentieth-Century Egypt (1900–1970): A Preliminary Survey”, in *Islamic Mysticism Contested: Thirteen Centuries of Controversies & Polemics*, ed. Frederick de Jong and Bernd Radtke (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 319–21.

79 Warburg, “Islam and Politics”, 135.

Hearing, the All Knowing.”⁸⁰ The particular focus on verse 61 effectively made him an advocate of peace both nationally and internationally.⁸¹

Shaykh Muṣṭafā Ismā‘īl’s position as the president’s official *qāri’* did not have a significant impact on ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad’s reputation.⁸² As al-Sādāt promoted Islamic programs in the state-controlled media from the early 1970s, leading to an increase in the air time of Qur’ānic recitations, ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad’s voice was heard more often than before. He became a champion of traditional Egyptian Islam in the face of increasingly popular Saudi *qurrā’*, who were often associated with Islamist ideas. ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad went as far as to declare his admiration for the president when purchasing a piece of land in his hometown in the mid-1970s to build a school named after Anwar al-Sādāt.⁸³ He was also present on the stage on which al-Sādāt was assassinated in October 1981.⁸⁴

By the time Ḥusnī Mubārak came into power in 1981, ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad was among the most popular *qurrā’* of Egypt and the Arab world. In 1984, his recitation style was endorsed and officially accepted by religious authorities, as he was appointed the first president of the newly formed Reciters’ Union (*Niqābat al-Qurrā’*). After the death of Maḥmūd ‘Alī al-Bannā, in 1985, in recognition of his achievements, he was appointed *qāri’* of one of Cairo’s most prestigious mosques, the al-Ḥusayn Mosque. He continued to recite the Qur’ān at official events until his diabetes started to affect his voice in 1987.⁸⁵

An Ambassador of Egypt and the Qur’ān

The Egyptian press widely covered ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad’s foreign journeys, publishing his photos in the company of high-profile politicians, and extolling the honorary awards he received at home (1984, 1987) and in Syria

80 M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur’an* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 114.

81 Shalabieh, *A Comparison of Political Persuasion*, 260.

82 Nelson, *The Art of Reciting*, 194.

83 “al-Bawwāba Nyūwz fi masqaṭ ra’s al-Shaykh ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad fi l-Uqṣur”, *al-Bawwāba Nyūz*, 3 December 2014, URL: <<https://www.albawabhnews.com/943416>> (accessed 10 December 2020).

84 Mehwar TV, *90 daqīqa*, “Interview with ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad’s son, Ṭāriq ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad”, 15 June 2019, URL: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DpGtiEkNCdA>> (accessed 10 December 2020).

85 al-Sa’dānī, “Alḥān al-Samā”, 80.

(1956, 1959), Lebanon (1956), Iraq (1956), Malaysia (1975), Pakistan (1980, 1984), and Senegal (1975).

‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad’s first journey abroad was in 1951, when he accompanied his father on his Mecca pilgrimage. Given his fame as an Egyptian *qāri*, the administration of the Ḥaram of Mecca invited him to recite the Qur’ān. After completing the pilgrimage, he continued to Jeddah on the invitation of Ibrāhīm al-Shūra, director of the Radio of Jeddah, to record a recitation for the radio, and then visited the royal court to read the Qur’ān in front of King ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Ibn Sa’ūd (d. 1953). This honor earned him the title of “The Voice of Mecca” (*Ṣawt Makka*) in the Egyptian press.⁸⁶

Numerous official trips would follow this first, private journey. Although there is neither a verified nor a complete list of places ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad visited, press reports mention more than thirty countries.⁸⁷ During some of these visits, he was also invited to record recitations at local radio stations, including BBC Arabic in London, in 1971.⁸⁸ Throughout his career, ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad was eager to please local expectations by reciting in locally popular styles, like the Ḥafs ‘an ‘Āṣim in Saudi Arabia (1951)⁸⁹ and the Warsh ‘an Nāfi’ in Morocco (1985). This communicated respect and admiration to local audiences.⁹⁰

While these visits earned ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad the title “Ambassador of the Qur’ān” (*Safīr al-Qur’ān*), his activity transcends the spheres of the secular and of the sacred. In his 1953 book, *The Philosophy of the Revolution*, ‘Abd al-Nāṣir wrote about Egypt’s triple vocation as “Arab, African and Muslim”. While explicitly stating that religion and politics should not be mixed, he nevertheless advocated a more prominent role for Islam in Egyptian foreign relations with the “Islamic Circle”, encompassing hundreds of millions of Muslims

86 Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Ghanī, *Alḥān min al-samā’ – al-juz’ al-awwal* (Cairo: Wakālat al-Ṣaḥāfa al-‘Arabiyya, 2007), 1896.

87 There are reports on ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad’s visits to Arab countries such as Syria, Iraq, Sudan, Libya, Lebanon, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Emirates, Qatar, Yemen, Oman, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco; to various African countries, including Uganda, Senegal, Somalia, Nigeria, Benin, and South Africa; Asian countries such as Turkey, the Maldives, India, Pakistan, Burma, Malaysia, and Indonesia; and Western countries including the United States, Canada, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Spain, and also Russia.

88 Interview with Hishām ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ, son of ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad, 11 May 2003, <<http://www.islamophile.org/spip/article792,792.html>> (accessed 10 December 2020).

89 Ibid.

90 The Warsh ‘an Nāfi’ redaction became widespread in North Africa, in large part because it was the preferred version of Imam Mālik b. Anas, whose Maliki school of jurisprudence predominated in that region of the world. In medieval times, it was the main Qur’ānic redaction in Islamic Spain.

from China to Morocco, all bound by the same faith.⁹¹ During the 1950s, under the president's office's supervision, al-Azhar rose to become a major channel of communication between Cairo and the Arab and Muslim world and the leading Muslim interpreter of 'Abd al-Nāṣir's revolution. Reconciling ideas of Arabism and socialism with Islam, al-Azhar helped the new ideology gain respectability in other Muslim countries, especially the Arab states.⁹²

In many cases, al-Azhar's links to other countries also preceded economic and political projects.⁹³ Therefore, under 'Abd al-Nāṣir, it became increasingly common for Egyptian *qurrā'* to travel abroad as members of delegations of al-Azhar and the Ministry of Religious Affairs, contributing to Egypt's projection of soft power in the Muslim world and beyond. Because of his personal eagerness to travel, 'Abd al-Bāsiṭ 'Abd al-Ṣamad undoubtedly visited more countries than other *qurrā'*, accompanying countless official delegations between 1952 and 1987.

In doing so, he contributed not only to affirming Egypt's transnational Islamic authority, but also to cementing Nasserist Egypt's image as a patron of anti-imperialist movements and governments. One case in point is his 1963 visit to post-liberation Algeria. He was received by President Ahmed Ben Bella at Algiers's iconic Martyrs' Square and recited the Qur'ān at the Ketchaoua Mosque, following the building's rededication from its use as a cathedral after the country gained its independence.⁹⁴ Similarly, his 1956 visit to Malaysia should be set within the framework of the contribution of 'Abd al-Nāṣir's Egypt to the nation-building of an ethnically and culturally diverse country where Islamic identity emerged as the core of national identity.⁹⁵

'Abd al-Bāsiṭ 'Abd al-Ṣamad's travels to non-Muslim countries were highly valued by the Egyptian public, becoming a medium of high-level diplomacy as well as a source of national pride. In 1960, 'Abd al-Bāsiṭ 'Abd al-Ṣamad accompanied 'Abd al-Nāṣir on his visit to Moscow and, as the Egyptian press highlighted, became the first *qārī'* to recite the Qur'ān in the Kremlin. Similarly, his

91 Warburg, "Islam and Politics", 139–40.

92 Ibid., 135–36; Malika Zeghal, "The 'Recentering' of Religious Knowledge and Discourse: The Case of al-Azhar in Twentieth-Century Egypt", in *Schooling Islam: The Culture and Politics of Modern Muslim Education*, ed. Robert Hefner and Muhammad Qasim Zaman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 109.

93 Abdallah Chanfi Ahmed, "Islamic Mission in Sub-Saharan Africa. The Perspectives of some Ulama 'associated with the al-Azhar University (1960–1970)", *WI* 41:3 (2001), 348–78.

94 "'Abd al-Bāsiṭ 'Abd al-Ṣamad yurattilu al-Qur'ān 22 layla fi l-Jazā'ir", *al-Ahrām*, 24 February 1963, 15.

95 William R Roff, "Patterns of Islamization in Malaysia, 1890s–1990s: Exemplars, institutions, and vectors", *Journal of Islamic Studies* 9:2 (1998), 210–28.

1971 visit to the United States, a country President al-Sādāt strove to strengthen ties with,⁹⁶ and his trip to the US West Coast in 1980, were extensively covered.⁹⁷ ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad’s visit to Paris in 1985 also garnered public interest, as he explained in interviews how he had purchased and worn a suit for the first time in his life, to move around the city without drawing attention to himself. In his one-hour event at the Palais de Congrès Theater, 4,000 people gathered, half of them non-Muslims, and the other half French Muslims, Moroccans, Tunisians and Egyptians residing in Paris.⁹⁸

Even his personal international travels were not without a political dimension. One case in point was his trip to South Africa, a country with strong links to imperialist powers, and a country Egypt severed relations with in 1961, as soon as momentum was gaining at the United Nations to isolate the apartheid regime.⁹⁹ Under these circumstances, the 1966 December arrival of ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad in South Africa was preceded by a year-long preparation by the South African Islamic community, and his arrival at Johannesburg airport was a top story on South African radio.¹⁰⁰ Striving to maintain an apolitical profile, ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad refrained from answering journalists’ questions concerning the apartheid regime throughout his one-month visit. On the other hand, the inclusion of the Qur’anic *Sūrat al-Ḥujūrāt* (The Dwellings, 49) in his repertoire during all his performances was a statement in itself, as it includes the following lines, which are open to political interpretation: “People, We created you all from a single man and a single woman, and made you into races and tribes so that you should recognize one another. In God’s eyes, the most honoured of you are the ones most mindful of Him: God is all-knowing, all aware.” (Q 49:13)¹⁰¹

His frequent visits to Morocco, including a full month during Ramadan in 1961, were the result of his friendship with the Moroccan ruler Muḥammad V

96 “30 Amrikiyyan min al-jinsayn asharū islāmahum ‘alā yad al-Shaykh ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad, *al-Akḥbār*, 4 July 1971, 3; “Karawān Misr – Liqā’ ma’a al-‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Ṣamad”, *al-Hadaf*, 11 September 1975, 7.

97 Personal letter from Mr. Omar al-Alfi, President of the Islamic Center in Los Angeles, quoted in: Ayman al-Ḥakīm, “Andalīb al-Muqri’in ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad yaktubu ‘an riḥlatihi ilā Amrikā: Zirt Diznī Lānd”, *al-Dustūr*, 8 November 2018. URL: <<https://www.dostor.org/2388888>> (accessed 15 December 2020).

98 Interview with ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad, Egyptian TV, 1985. URL: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DtUjFgsZLL4>> (accessed 20 December 2020).

99 Michael B. Bishku, “South Africa and the Middle East”, *Middle East Policy* 17:3 (2010), 153–74.

100 Abū al-Ḥajjāj Ḥāfiz, “al-Shaykh ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad wa-dhikrayāt ramaḍāniyya”, *al-Miṣri al-Yawm*, 26 October 1972, 15.

101 Abdel Haleem, *The Qur’an*, 339.

(r. 1957–61).¹⁰² The king even offered ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad Moroccan citizenship and a position as a reader at the Moroccan royal court, which he refused, highlighting his deep attachment to his homeland, which was celebrated by Egyptian media.¹⁰³ ‘Abd al-Nāṣir, too, benefited from this close relationship, for he asked ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad to invite Muḥammad V on his behalf to jointly lay the foundation stone of the High Dam in Aswan in 1960.¹⁰⁴

Private invitations also came with financial benefits. Bypassing the fixed wages set by the Egyptian Ministry of Religious Affairs,¹⁰⁵ he spent the Ramadans of 1970–77 in Kuwait on the invitation of Shaykha Badriya Su‘ūd al-Ṣabāḥ, the Ramadans of 1978–84 in Abu Dhabi and al-Shāriqa, and the Ramadans of 1985–87 in Qatar, reciting the Qur’an and earning significant amounts of money. To be sure, as an employee of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and an Egyptian icon, ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad had to request official permission for his trips even when invited privately. ‘Abd al-Nāṣir, for example, denied permission to ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad to visit Iran in the early 1960s, due to growing political tensions between the two regimes.¹⁰⁶

A Lost Golden Age

From the early 1950s on, ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad’s career developed in parallel with the national and transnational emergence of Egyptian mass media. As Cairo first became the broadcasting, then the recording capital of the Arab world, his voice spread far beyond Egypt and the Middle East. Simultaneously, with the formation of various media texts, the Egyptian state-controlled press

102 “al-Shaykh ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad. al-Ṣadiq al-Ḥamīm li-l-raḥil Muḥammad al-khāmis raḥimahu llāh”, *al-Tajdid*, 18 August 2003, <<http://www.attajdid.info/def.asp?codelangue=6&infoun=18552>> (accessed 15 December 2020); Aḥmad al-Sayyid al-Najjār, “‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad..«Sawt min al-Janna»”, *al-Ahrām*, 3 June 2016, URL: <<https://gate.ahram.org.eg/daily/NewsPrint/520107.aspx>> (accessed 15 December 2020).

103 Muḥammad Farah Ṭaha, “al-Malik Muḥammad al-khāmis yad‘ū al-shaykh ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ shahran”, *al-Ahrām*, 26 February 1960, 7.

104 Telephone interview with Ṭariq ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad, the son of ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad, 28 May 2019; *al-Hayāt*, 18 July 2013.

105 Lois Ibsen al-Faruqi, “The Cantillation of the Qur’an”, *Asian Music* 19:1 (1987), 17–18.

106 Telephone interview with Ṭariq ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad, 28 May 2019. On the tensions between Egypt and Iran at this period see Rainer Brunner, *Islamic Ecumenism. The Azhar and Shiism between Rapprochement and Restraint* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 313.

and media established his image as a celebrity *qāri'*, blurring the line between the “popular” and the “religious” by publicly placing a reader of the sacred text in secular contexts.

Largely because of the subordination of al-Azhar and the *awqāf* to the state in the 1950s and 1960s, ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad’s voice and his participation in official events contributed to bolstering the policies and politics of ‘Abd al-Nāṣir and al-Sādāt in Egypt, and also played a prominent part in the emergence of Egyptian soft power in the Arab and Muslim world. ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad maintained his reputation after Ḥuṣṇī Mubārak assumed office in 1981.¹⁰⁷

His position as one of the most renowned *qurrā'* was challenged during the Mubārak era. As the latter inherited the conflicting legacies of Sādāt’s “liberalism”, ‘Abd al-Nāṣir’s Arab “socialism”, and Islamic fundamentalism, he made the regime’s stability the main priority through a policy of accommodation and reconciliation with opponents.¹⁰⁸ During the 1980s, the Egyptian economy also declined, increasing the country’s dependence on foreign allies. Saudi influence grew noticeably, resulting not only in political interdependence but also in a cultural shift that challenged the leading position of Egyptian Qur’ān readers. With the emergence of Saudi broadcasting and the distribution of tapes, Saudi *tilāwa* started to transform the meaning of *mujawwad* itself.¹⁰⁹ After 1986, when the oil economies of the Gulf slumped, many returning Egyptian workers brought with them not only wealth but also new ideas.¹¹⁰ Therefore, the intense media attention that had covered ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad’s everyday life during the previous decades, granting him the status of a *qāri'* celebrity, started to fade.¹¹¹

Without doubt, ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad’s death in November 1988 signaled the end of the golden era of great reciters of the Egyptian *mujawwad* style. Still, immediately after his death, a young generation of imitators

107 “Li-jamāl ṣawtihi aslama kathīr min al-nās: al-Shaykh ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad”, *Ṣawt al-Azhar*, 3 October 2008, 2.

108 A.K. Banerji, “Egypt under Mubarak: The Quest for Stability at Home and Normalization Abroad”, *The Round Table* 80:317 (1991), 7–20.

109 Frishkopf, “Mediated Qur’anic Recitation”, 105.

110 James Toth, “Islamism in Southern Egypt: A Case Study of a Radical Religious Movement”, *IJMES* 35:4 (2003), 547–72.

111 On 01 December 1988, a day after the death of ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad, *al-Ahrām* featured a short notice on the front page with the title: “Wafāt al-Shaykh ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ ‘Abd al-Ṣamad shaykh al-maqāri’ wa-naqīb al-qurrā’” and a short memorial the day after in a back page dedicated as the “Fikr dīnī” section.

appeared, who regard him as the highest standard for recitation. Old recordings of his voice remain widely popular on CDs, mp3, and YouTube, together with televised imitation contests and Facebook fan pages evoking nostalgia for a bygone era in Egypt, and the Muslim world, especially in the many countries he visited.