The Geopolitics of Television Drama and the "Global War on Terror": *Gharabeeb Soud* Against Islamic State

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This article examines the television program *Gharabeeb Soud* (*GS*), which aired on the Saudi-owned media channel MBC in May and June 2017. Described by MBC as part of a global campaign to counter the group that calls itself Islamic State (IS), *GS* focuses on the lives of women IS recruits. Analyzing *GS*'s funding, production, intertextuality, genre, and reception, this article articulates the show as a form of entertainment-education at the intersection of Saudi domestic policy, U.S. foreign policy, and MBC's transnational market considerations. We find that *GS* is a new type of "edutainment" that exploits the affordances of television drama to make a geopolitical and multifaceted intervention: The intervention is geopolitical because it targets a transnational nonstate actor like IS. It is multifaceted because it operates strategically to counter the IS narrative, rhetorically to suture Saudi and U.S. agendas, and discursively and affectively in its focus on women. Further, *GS* highlights the limitation of intentionality in constructing strategic popular communication as the program crosses a red line through its melodramatic portrayal of traumatic, real-world events. The series contributes to communication theory by emphasizing (1) the shifting nature of entertainment-education in the transnational media landscape and (2) the analytical significance of affect in the analysis of popular culture and strategic communication.

Keywords: entertainment-education, melodrama, musalsal, geopolitics of the popular, affect

In spring 2017, the Saudi-owned, Dubai-based media conglomerate MBC Group began promoting a television drama series about "the women of Islamic State" that would air starting May 27, 2017, on the group's flagship channel MBC during the holy month of Ramadan. MBC started in 1991 as a London-based Arabic-language satellite channel and evolved into a powerful media group focused on entertainment. MBC had in the past commissioned and aired many television drama series (*musalsalat*; singular, *musalsal*), including several *musalsalat* that focused on Islamism and jihadism. But this *musalsal* was different: Titled

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Gharabeeb Soud (Black crows; *GS*), the series' $10-million budget, English subtitles, focus on the lives of women, and deliberate self-definition as part of a global campaign to counter the group that calls itself Islamic State (IS) made it an unprecedented media project in the Arab world. Therefore, when the series was abruptly taken off the air on June 15, after only 20 episodes of 30 had been aired, questions arose in the pan-Arab media sphere about *GS*'s funding, objectives, content, and impact.

GS presents an auspicious opportunity to explore the intersection of geopolitics and popular culture in the so-called global war on terror. By articulating the peculiar context of the series' production, satellite broadcasting, and suspension and with the narrative themes that it advanced and the public contention that it elicited, this article makes several contributions to global media studies. First, we revisit the literature on entertainment-education, placing *GS* in that tradition while highlighting how it constitutes a new strand of "edutainment" television. Second, we build on the literature on the "geopolitics of the popular," an important yet underresearched field (Burkart & Christensen, 2013; Downing, 2013). Third, by pairing the genre of melodrama with geopolitics, we identify a depoliticization and individualization of violent radical Islamism emblematic of the neoliberal turn in global media industries.

Our methodological approach is a variation of critical discourse analysis that combines four domains: First, we conduct a close reading of the 20 episodes of *GS* that MBC aired on the 20 consecutive days between May 27 and June 15, 2017.[1] This reading entails identifying how characters, plot, and dialogue construct the show's main themes and the ways in which these stylistic and dramatic elements orient viewers toward specific interpretations and preferred meanings. Second, we analyze the context of the *musalsal*'s production, distribution, and consumption, including Saudi funding within a national policy inaugurated by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, which considers entertainment a key asset in countering groups like IS and restoring "moderate" Islam to Saudi Arabia; U.S. involvement in and support of the program; pan-Arab distribution of the show at a time when Saudi Arabia leads a politico-economic boycott (with Bahrain, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates) of its smaller neighbor Qatar; and Arab viewers preoccupied with IS. Third, we locate *GS* in a dual history of Arab developmentalist television and controversial pan-Arab entertainment programs. Fourth and finally, we analyze an Arabic and English textual data corpus, obtained via keyword searches in November 2017 and May 2018 for "غرابيب سود" and "Gharabeeb Soud," that covers claims and counterclaims about *GS* proffered by MBC itself, supporters, and detractors of the show (*N* = 68; 38 in English, 30 in Arabic). These included searches through Google (Arabic and English) as well as focused searches in the archives of leading pan-Arab news outlets Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya.

This article first explains the regional politico-economic and media context. Second, we review the literature on entertainment-education (EE) media. Third, we explain *GS* as a new kind of EE television by deciphering the moral universe the series constructs. Fourth, we discuss how the *musalsal* pits consumerism against extremism. Fifth, we explain how *GS* stemmed from a national project but ended up a controversial transnational commodity. Finally, we articulate melodrama with geopolitics through a discussion of the show's suspension. Our central argument is that *GS* is a new type of strategic popular communication that exploits affordances of television drama to make a geopolitical and multifaceted intervention. It is

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[1] As of February 2019, all 30 episodes of Gharabeeb Soud are available on Netflix, but in differently edited versions. Our analysis is based on the 20 episodes aired by MBC in 2017.

geopolitical because it targets a transnational nonstate actor like IS. It is multifaceted in that it operates strategically to counter the IS narrative, rhetorically to suture Saudi and U.S. agendas, and discursively and affectively in its focus on women. The focus on women enacts a kind of colonial feminism that justifies intervention in the name of improving women's lives by actors who themselves oppress women under their own control (Ahmed, 1993) to contrast the evil of IS to a "moderate" Islam represented by Saudi rulers.

A Peculiar Product of the U.S.-Saudi Alliance

The rise of IS is a devastating development in a decade chockful of war, natural disasters, terrorism, and geopolitical turbulence worldwide. *Gharabeeb Soud* was created at a time of turmoil in Saudi Arabia, with Prince Muhammad upending long-standing political traditions, activating an aggressive foreign policy, declaring entertainment a national priority, and ending the ban on women driving. In that context, as a highly resourced, Saudi-led, U.S.-supported, women-focused, entertainment-with-a-sociopolitical-purpose production, *GS* is a revealing text that manifests interactions and contradictions among geopolitical, social, and commercial concerns.

MBC started in London in 1991 as a commercial Saudi-owned, pro–royal family entertainment-focused channel. Since then, MBC Group has grown into a leading media conglomerate, supporting Saudi domestic and foreign policies in news and providing entertainment that qualifies as liberal in the Saudi context but that may better defined as "pacificatory," in exchange for relative autonomy from the Saudi royal family (see Kraidy & Khalil, 2009). This arrangement ended in 2017, when Prince Mohammed ordered Saudi businessmen—including Sheikh Al-Waleed Al-Ibrahim, founder and majority owner of MBC Group—incarcerated and apparently brought the group under his direct control (Kraidy, 2017c).

MBC explicitly framed *GS* as "countering IS" through compelling storytelling targeting young Arabs and Muslims ("New Show," 2017), responding to widespread calls for instilling "moderation" through the production of "high-visibility soap operas" ("The Comprehensive Arab," 2018). The term *moderation*, often used to describe pro-U.S. and Saudi government, is a dubious rhetoric. Developed to boost the Saudi campaign to draw viewers into moderation, *GS* can be understood as edutainment, or "a communication strategy to bring about behavioral and social change" (Singhal & Rogers, 2004, p. 5). But while entertainment-education once aimed to foment local or national socioeconomic development, *GS* is a global commodity embedded in a transnational (pan-Arab) media system dominated by Saudi Arabia. The case examined here, then, articulates EE to geopolitical and commercial imperatives.

Before production on *Gharabeeb Soud* began, Arab and U.S. content producers met in California and Dubai to discuss ways to counter IS.[2] Ultimately, the senior content manager of O3 Productions, the company that produced *GS*, was involved in the production of Amazon's *The Last Tycoon*, learning from

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[2] The meetings were first held at the Annenberg Foundation Trust at Sunnylands and were led by Geoffrey Cowan. They later moved to Dubai and were funded by MBC Group director Ali Jaber, who also gave the keynote for the Ministerial Plenary for the Global Coalition Working to Defeat ISIS at the U.S. State Department in March 2017 (Schneider, 2017).

showrunner Christopher Keyser.[3] Of the meetings, MBC Group director Ali Jaber said: "For the first time, we sensed that the heart of Hollywood was opening up to the Arab world; for the first time, Arabs and the U.S. have an enemy in common in ISIS" (Schneider, 2017, para. 8). This sentiment was echoed at a congressional hearing ("Countering the Virtual Caliphate," 2016) in July 2016 by Richard Stengel, Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. Stengel spoke of supporting like-minded actors in the media war against IS: "Ultimately we win this information war through credible voices, through third parties, through Hollywood, through the kind of content that people who reject ISIL's dark ideology and that is happening" (p. 14). Stengel praised MBC for tackling IS in popular media, noting that the meetings between Hollywood and "credible" actors in the Arab region would "win this war of narratives" (p. 24). Ami Bera, a congressman on the Committee of Foreign Affairs, highlighted the importance of television in the process:

> We are certainly talking about countering the message online, but in our prior hearing we also had a discussion about using traditional media tools, right, using Hollywood, using movies to counter a narrative. Again . . . in the Middle East as well as in certain ethnic communities they will consume television, they will consume movies. (p. 24)

Entertainment television, then, becomes the narrative battleground for the fight against IS. MBC executive Ali Jaber also noted the need to construct strategic narratives, saying, "ISIS is not just a terrorist organization. There is a narrative and an ideology behind it. The only way to counter this was by putting out our own narrative and exposing ISIS for the evil it represents" (Kadi, 2017, para. 11). Through its construction of a moral universe that pits IS against the ideals of individualism, consumption, and religious moderation, *GS* becomes a contemporary form of EE that uses melodrama to articulate nationalist projects with transnational audiences.

Entertainment-Education and Arab Television Drama

With roots in development communication, EE began in the global South with health-related campaigns often spearheaded by U.S. and other Western funding bodies (Singhal, Cody, Rogers, Sabido, 2004). Television drama entered the fray when the Peruvian telenovela *Simplemente María* (1969–1971) proved highly successful in conveying an educational message (Singhal & Rogers, 2004). It depicted the story of María, a poor single mother from the Andean region who achieved social mobility by putting herself through night school, working as a seamstress, and becoming a successful fashion designer. The series was credited with increased sales of the Singer brand sewing machine, rural-to-urban migration, and enrollment in night school classes in Peru (Singhal & Rogers, 2012). Recognizing the format's success, Miguel Sabido, a creative writer-producer-director at the privately owned Mexican network Televisa, applied the formula to other series on the network. For decades, such programs were adapted or emulated in India, Pakistan, Kenya, and Egypt (Poindexter, 2004; Singhal & Rogers, 2004).

In the Arab region, *musalsalat* are popular during the holy month of Ramadan. Developmental themes have since the 1960s infused series focused on educating Egyptian citizens (Abu-Lughod, 2005; Boyd 1999),

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[3] Christopher Keyser also oversaw the production of the last season of *Tyrant*, one of the first U.S. TV shows based in the Middle East (Schneider, 2017).

and TV sets were even subsidized to reach people in rural areas (Abu-Lughod, 2005, p. 10). In 1973, after a period of state socialism orientation, Egypt renewed relations with the United States and adopted *infitah* (open-door) economic policies, increasing the number of American and European programs, goods, and investments (Boyd, 1999; Kraidy, 2016). Since then, Egyptian EE productions have focused on development, health, and the economy (Abdulla, 2004). Egyptian drama dominated Arab airwaves until the 1990s (Kraidy & Khalil, 2009), when Syrian drama displaced Egypt's dominance (Della Ratta, 2014; Salamandra, 2008). Turkish series became dominant in the late 2000s (Kraidy & Al-Ghazzi, 2013).

The United States has long been involved in Arab drama production. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) funded Egypt's *Secret Life of the Land* (1989), which targeted farmers with agricultural information.[4] A coalition of U.S. bodies underwrote *The Family House* (1992), a series about "drug addiction, HIV/AIDS prevention, child spacing, home accidents, and general hygiene and sanitation" (Abdulla, 2004, p. 304). In 2002, USAID funded the implementation of an Arabic-language version of *Sesame Street* called *Alam Simsim*, coproduced by Sesame Workshop and AlKarma Edutainment (AlKarma Edutainment, n.d.). Creative personnel from AlKarma who helped launch *Alam Simsim* would later work with MBC and help produce *GS*. In 2016, after several leadership positions in media industries, Shereen El-Meligi became senior content manager at O3 Productions, the MBC subsidiary that produced *GS* (El-Meligi, 2018; "Shereen El Meligi," n.d.).

We reiterate that *Gharabeeb Soud* was not the first *musalsal* to tackle terrorism. Years ago, Singhal and Rogers (2004) predicted: "In the future . . . entertainment-education will also go beyond the boundaries of . . . reproductive health, family planning, and HIV prevention—to include . . . peace, conflict mediation, terrorism" (p. 18). Arab television producers were industry leaders worldwide in addressing terrorism. In 2004, Qatar TV commissioned *The Road to Kabul* from the Jordanian Arab Telemedia Services (ATS). Airing on MBC, Orbit, and Jordan TV, the program followed the story of an Afghan woman and a Palestinian man during the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan. It was taken off the air for muddled political reasons. Some media reports suggested that Qatar TV was reacting to online threats by supporters of the Taliban toward channels airing the program. Others cited U.S. pressure on Qatar, suggesting that the show was canceled to stem anti-American sentiment in the region before U.S. presidential elections (Sakr, 2007). Only eight of a planned 30 episodes were aired, and MBC sued ATS for compensation (Sakr, 2007). In contrast, one year later, the controversial Syrian *musalsal Al-Hoor al-Ein* (Maidens of paradise), about the 2003 bombing of a Saudi apartment complex by Al Qaeda and aired on MBC, survived fierce attacks for its alleged negative portrayal of Islam, staying on air because of official Saudi approval (Lindsey, 2005).

Discourses about terrorism in 1990s Egyptian television drama and 2010s MBC productions resonate with prevailing political and economic circumstances. Like *Al-Hoor al-Ein*, which targeted "those who have not made up their minds about terrorism yet" (Butcher, 2005, para. 17), *GS* was intended to shift viewers' attitudes and behaviors, continuing a trend in Arabic EE drama, aired mostly on MBC, aimed at preventing extremist recruitment. MBC acknowledged it needed "to be more proactive and give our opinion to change the narrative" (Luck, 2017, para. 24). Targeting viewers who are "neutral" toward terrorism as well as potential recruits

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[4] The program, produced by the Egyptian Center for Development Communication, featured storylines of farmers consulting with government-appointed agricultural experts (Abdulla, 2004).

(Luck, 2017), *GS* self-identifies as EE television, which intends to shift beliefs, attitudes, and behavior (Singhal & Rogers, 2004). Its predecessors include Egyptian series *Al-'Aileh* (The family), produced at a time when Egyptian authorities were fighting the extremist group Gamaa Islamiya (Lindsey, 2005), and Syrian productions in the 2010s, such as *al-Wilada min al-Khasira (Birth from the flank)*, which operated as an "educational and disciplinary project" (Della Ratta, 2014, p. 8).

What makes television drama amenable to such interventions? One reason is that *musalsalat* are highly popular; they are the most widely watched and extensively discussed programs during Ramadan, the peak television viewing season (Kraidy & Khalil, 2009). They have been considered transgressive (Al-Mahadin, 2011, 2014; Joubin, 2014; Salamandra, 2012), conservative (Della Ratta, 2015), or in between (Abu-Lughod, 2005; Salamandra, 2015), but melodramatic conventions—such as a focus on human relationships, themes of justice and injustice and individualized suffering and longing, and distinct emotionality around virtuous victims (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Anker, 2014)—are crucial to their impact. As "technologies of modern self-making" (Abu-Lughod, 2005, p. 113), *musalsalat* help shape and maintain particular subjectivities—including realms of citizenship, consumption, and intimacy.

Melodrama elicits affective responses and positions viewers toward particular models of citizenship. In U.S. public discourse after the 9/11 attacks, melodrama articulated "the nation-state's realignment against terrorism" (Anker, 2014, p. 4) because it "confers virtue upon innocent people who unjustly suffer from dominating power, and this is part of the genre's cultural work" (p. 5). Due to its affective impact, the genre is articulated in political discourse, conjuring notions of good and evil, a suffering nation, and the redemptive power of virtue, and displacing accountability by "blaming terrorism rather than the broader structures of power and norms too complex and enigmatic to be easily overcome" (p. 152) for contemporary U.S. anxieties. Similar deployment of melodrama explains how discourses of moderation and political obedience disseminated by *GS* acquired resonance at the intersection of the U.S.-Saudi relationship. But melodrama's impact is not all-encompassing, because it enacts "different appeals for different sites of power and subjectivity" (p. 7). This helps explain why *GS*'s message was not uniformly received as intended.

As a rich and polysemic text with a complex production archeology, *Gharabeeb Soud* allows us to consider synergies and disjunctures between various political agendas and discursive practices. These are what Foucault (1969) called "discursive formations," because they sometimes bolster and other times undermine each other. With this in mind, we ask: How does *GS* work, or fail to work, as both melodrama and EE? How do *GS*'s new contextual determinants (a commercial media environment, transnational audiences, anti-IS imperative) reflect the way that transnational media evoke a neoliberal consumer through the depoliticization of political, economic, and social issues by deploying melodramatic tropes of suffering, innocence, and virtue in texts designed to "edutain"?

A New Kind of Edutainment in the Transnational Media Sphere

GS premiered on May 27, 2017, on MBC, with multinational actors and shooting locales. The story takes place in IS's capital, Raqqa, Syria, and focuses on new recruits while depicting internal power struggles within the group's leadership. As they adapt to life on the base, the recruits are portrayed as victims of larger extremist forces, often dealing with the hypocrisy of IS leaders who claim to follow Islam. Men join IS for

ideological reasons; women as a form of escape. Using a combination of aesthetic and sonic elements, production techniques, narrative arc, and intertextuality, *GS* presents multiple transnational vignettes and nostalgic narratives. The plot is laced with warnings against extremism through the bodies of children, women, and disenchanted and dead recruits. Abu Talha, the prince or emir of an IS cell, is a cold, bloodthirsty man, commanding fear and terrorizing the town with his deputies—an operations coordinator, a military leader, a mufti. Throughout episodes, men obsess over the leaders' power and jostle for position. Their mendacity is in full view: They preach religious doctrine but act against the teachings of Islam; their hypocrisy and violence are emphasized in the melancholic narratives of children and women.

The women of *GS* hail from Lebanon, Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait—a multinational cast for a transnational audience. Flashbacks show the women escaping spinsterhood, criminal persecution, war, and family trauma, seeking refuge or vengeance in the caliphate. Three characters stand out as victims of extremism. Madiha is an Egyptian dancer who joined IS to see her son Khalid, a recruit who rejects her sinful lifestyle. Malika is the wife of Abu Talha, who she hid after he executed a terror attack in France. Ghadeer, who joined IS to find a husband, ends up in an abusive marriage and confined to the home. All three die by the 20th episode, victims of extremism. Madiha sacrifices herself by stepping on an unexploded landmine, Malika shoots herself to allow Abu Talha to escape, and Ghadeer escapes the house without wearing an abaya. Their deaths fuel melodrama's affective pulse through the "manifest suffering of an oppressed innocence" (L. Williams, 2014, p. 114).

Gharabeeb Soud establishes a moral-religious universe framed by the polar opposites of moderation and extremism. Moderate Islam is promoted as desirable, and it is embodied by the character of Abu Omar, a professor of Islamic studies and the story's narrator. He joins the group to find his daughter Amal, who was forcibly snatched by her husband from their honeymoon straight to IS. Brainwashed, she resists her father's attempt to save her, and their conversations are the moral pulse of *GS*. Abu Omar implores his daughter to see IS's hypocrisy, while Amal clings to her belief in IS. The show often switches to slow-motion as Abu Omar breaks the fourth wall and stares into the camera as his voice-over plays. In one scene, a new recruit and digital specialist named Khalid is asked to manipulate photos of dead suicide bombers by adding smiles to their faces. Meanwhile, Abu Omar is heard in voice-over: "Nobody can kill a concept except the one who believes in it. He kills it when he loses faith in it. This happens slowly but surely" (E15). IS is depicted as an immoral and deceitful cult.

GS preaches religious moderation in the manner of EE programs, which deliver an educational message in entertaining fashion. Indeed, EE refers to "the process of purposely designing and implementing a media message to both entertain and educate, in order to increase audience members' knowledge about an educational issue, create favorable attitudes, shift social norms, and change overt behavior" (Singhal & Rogers, 2004, p. 5). In the past, EE programs primarily targeted national audiences, but an increasingly global media sphere—and in particular Saudi influence over the Arab-speaking pan-Arab media sphere—has enabled transnational reach. Unlike its predecessors, *GS* features English-language subtitles, muddling its intended audiences beyond Arabic-speaking Muslims. A pundit writing in the Qatari (and therefore, in light of the ongoing diplomatic crisis between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, anti-Saudi) Al Jazeera argued that *GS* was produced "for the pleasure of international liberal audiences" (Khader, 2017, para. 13) who buy its message

that IS is the antithesis of Saudi official moderation and U.S. liberal notions of individual choice. *GS*'s intended audience is theoretically global.

Consumerism Against Extremism: *Gharabeeb Soud*'s Geopolitics of the Popular

In the pilot episode (E1), Abu Omar, the narrator, walks amid town vendors as they frantically hide contraband—DVDs, magazines, and cigarettes—from IS. The "magazines are disguised by religious books. The piano is disguised as a clothes stand. Ads on the street are disguised as threat messages," he says. In episode 5, IS's women vice police (Khansaa Brigade) command young students in a bus to turn over their backpacks. As the girls obey the order, we see colorful backpacks adorned with Disney princesses and other animated characters. The brigade destroys these "faithless foreign characters," ordering the girls to cover the pictures with black markers. Pitting Disney characters as symbols of the infidel world, IS's enforcers inform the girls that the characters represent "wanton women" who would go to hell. A young girl is dubious.

> Girl: Do you want to cover the drawing on my backpack?
> Woman: Don't you want that?
> Girl: This is Dory.
> Woman: Yes, it's a faithless character created by faithless people to ruin your minds. Do
> you want to be in Hell with her Leila?
> Girl: But this is a fish in the sea! Have you ever seen a faithless fish? Should the fish wear
> a cloak and a veil under the sea?

Ultimately, black ink covers the characters' hair and bodies, leaving Disney princesses featureless—a symbolic microcosm of IS's iconoclastic destruction of statues and monuments in Iraq and Syria. In a later episode, girls are ordered to cut the hair off unveiled women and to smash their televisions. A Khansaa Brigade leader instructs elementary schoolgirls: "If you see a television, you must break it, as it is the window of the devil. And if your friends' or mothers' hair was exposed, cut it. Don't hesitate to enforce God's laws" (E13).

GS constructs the conflict with IS as a duel between religious extremism and Western consumerism. IS as radical Islam threatens neoliberal individualism. In typical EE fashion, fictional characters orient viewers toward particular conclusions, presenting "an emotional authority figure [that] offers positive and negative reinforcements to the target audience and adds the necessary information on how to use the infrastructure" (Sabido, 2004, p. 74). Abu Omar acts as the professorial voice of reason; in contrast, the Khansaa Brigade embodies the melodramatic trope of the villain. But while melodrama can be identified through a quest to uncover the "moral occult" (Brooks, 1976), a moral legibility inherent but hidden from the surface of daily reality (L. Williams, 1998), *GS* enacts a rhetoric of good and evil that "obscures the ambiguities inherent in life itself" (Oliver, 2007, p. 16). This is notable in the series' portrayal of the conflict in religious terms. In the Middle East and elsewhere, "religious determinism—analyzing events exclusively through the prism of 'Islam'— obscures political agendas and economic interests" (Kraidy, 2017b, p. 541). This idea becomes more salient when we recall dominant Western discourses about terrorism. Portrayals of IS in *Gharabeeb Soud* echo U.S. discourses about the Taliban after 9/11, as "a perfectly inverted version of America's idealized neoliberal self-image" (Sienkiewicz, 2016, p. 105). *GS* indeed puts forth a kind of colonial feminism (Ahmed, 1993), suggesting that the conflict is about women who need saving.

Our analysis of *GS* identifies a strategy of using EE to depoliticize terrorism. Through melodramatic stylistic and narrative devices, viewers encounter a "moral economy of good and evil" (Anker, 2014, p. 25), where both poles are defined and legitimated through their antithetical relationship to moderate Islam and a socially liberal individualism. Systemic issues such as corruption and terrorism are individualized, echoing neoliberal values of personal responsibility and individual choice. This is apparent when *GS* posits consumerism as the antidote to extremism, ignoring issues, as identified by critics, of Saudi domestic and foreign policy and other ambient geopolitical, institutional, and social forces, to which we turn next.

Global Commodities, National Projects

As a Saudi-financed, U.S.-supported, transnationally cast, and bilingual television drama, *GS* is shaped by forces that sometimes consolidate and at other times oppose one another: Saudi policy, U.S. intervention, and MBC's performance of corporate responsibility and financial motivation in producing a Ramadan TV drama. These forces overlap with a global popular turn in countering IS, including Peter Kosminsky's drama *The State* in the United Kingdom; Ahmad Al-Basheer's *The Al-Basheer* satire show in Iraq; and parodies of IS on Egyptian, Iraqi, Kurdish, Lebanese, and Palestinian television (Kraidy, 2018a). Entangled in international and local politics, in global media industries and therefore global capitalism, and in the global war on terrorism, *GS* is a transnational text par excellence.

Institutional context contributed to *GS*'s transformation into a transnational commodity. Headquartered in Dubai with regional offices throughout the Arab world, a multinational workforce, a "liberal" or "modernizing" Saudi ownership (AlSaied, 2015; Kraidy, 2010), and a pan-Arab audience, MBC has long been a transnational media entity (Kraidy & Khalil, 2009; Sakr, 2007). During the reality television controversies of the early 2000s, MBC walked a tightrope between various Saudi forces, including rivalries among elites that pit royals and businessmen against clerics. The former were attempting to reach a "global Islamic audience" (Kraidy, 2010, p. 70) through entertainment, and the latter feared marginalization. The controversy fueled transnational culture wars around reality television and music videos. For example, MBC's version of *Survivor* was produced on the island nation of Bahrain by a largely Lebanese crew, but conservative Saudis got the show canceled on moral grounds, showing "reality TV's propensity to stir the volatile mix of gender, religion, business, and politics that animates Arab public life" (Kraidy, 2010, p. 47). As a popular genre that broaches the real, *GS* is subject to similar pressures.

Soon after *GS* first aired in May 2017, journalists debated the program's representative value, focusing on its portrayal of women, sex slavery, *jihad al-nikah* (intercourse jihad), and Islam, set against geopolitical tensions such as the Syria and Israel/Palestine conflicts. Quickly, difference pitted Qatar-based media against Saudi-affiliated outlets, echoing the Saudi-led sea and land embargo on Qatar. Whereas the Saudi newspaper *Okaz* celebrated "*Gharabeeb Soud* . . . a beginning overflowing with courage," suggesting the series broke a taboo around extremism (Al-Okaimy, 2017), the Qatari-financed, London-based newspaper *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed* criticized *GS* for depicting the conflict with IS in monolithic terms, suggesting that its focus on women was a marketing ploy (Fran, 2017a). Qatar's Al Jazeera saw in *GS* "stereotypical images of Islam . . . link[ed] . . . to violence and terrorism" ("TV Series Enrages," 2017) and argued that the program "toe[d] the line of Western counterterrorism ideas" (Khader, 2017, para. 4). In response, Saudi outlets defended MBC and attacked Qatar (ElKohly, 2017). In the Saudi *Arab News*, MBC executive Ali Jaber asked

why . . . the Qatari-owned *al-Jazeera*, which understands very well the risks of inciting radicals against media practitioners, would want to put the lives of their colleagues at MBC at risk when they are supposed to be with us in the same anti-terrorism camp. (Flanagan, 2017, para. 8)

GS also triggered a debate about moderation. Journalists identified a link between *GS*'s discourse of moderation and Mohammed bin Salman's effort to rebrand Saudi Arabia as a moderate Islamic nation accepting entertainment, women driving, and a diverse economy (Hawi, 2017). In the Abu Dhabi English-language daily *The National*, Ahmed Al Khatib, chairman of Saudi General Entertainment Authority, suggested Saudi Arabia was on the way to develop an entertainment sector like New York's or London's, adding that, in Saudi Arabia, "the majority are moderate" ("Saudi Arabia Will," 2017).

The theme of moderation in *Gharabeeb Soud* is reinforced through Abu Omar's interventions during climactic points in the plot, such as when characters witness or participate in violent IS activities. *GS*'s rhetoric of moderation reflects a Saudi policy centerpiece—etched in the reform blueprint Saudi Vision 2030—aimed at both domestic and foreign constituencies. *GS*'s overall nostalgic pathos reflects this aim, with its wistful tone evoked in clothing, flashbacks, and music echoing Mohammed bin Salman's desire to return to pre-1979 "moderate Islam." In an interview with the CBS show *60 Minutes*, the crown prince echoed the message of *GS*, claiming he was "taking Saudi Arabia back to what we were, a moderate Islam" (O'Donnell, 2018, para. 25). *GS* is a component of Mohammed bin Salman's focus on entertainment as a bulwark against extremism.

The Saudi moderation strategy ostensibly focused on women's rights. Prince Mohammed said that "Saudi women . . . have been given new rights, making it easier for them to start a business, join the military, and attend concerts and sporting events . . . they will be able to get behind the wheel and drive" (O'Donnell, 2018, para. 21). Western media have celebrated Saudi reforms around women and business: The BBC asked, "Is Saudi Arabia on the cusp of change?" (Doucet, 2017); CNN stated that "Saudi Arabia is giving women more freedom as it looks beyond oil" (Alkhalisi, 2017, para. 1); *The Telegraph* headlined: "Saudi Reform Continues as Women Given Freedom to Open Businesses" (S. Williams, 2018, para. 1). Meanwhile, Saudi authorities in May 2018 arrested leading women activists for driving (El Sirgany & Clarke 2018). Saudi media linked the women to foreign bodies and institutions ("Saudi Arabia Women," 2018), signaling that only the crown prince was allowed to bestow rights.

GS echoes recurring discourses on women and consumption central to an ongoing Saudi modernization strategy (Kraidy, 2018b) and resonant with dominant U.S. media and policy narratives on the Middle East that even the grisly murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi on October 2, 2018, was able to disrupt only temporarily. Hence, the focus on women and consumption helps make *GS* a global commodity for a national project. MBC noted a hope to "produce *Gharabeeb Soud* in different languages and with better production to deliver the message more widely" ("MBC Reveals," 2017, para. 7). Beyond seeking a pan-Arab audience, *GS* reaches out to a global neoliberal audience via an articulation of EE and melodrama, which, as we discuss next, ultimately fails.

Failed Melodrama, Melodramatic Failure

As a mix of EE and melodrama, *GS* is a volatile transnational commodity. When MBC abruptly pulled *GS* off the air on June 15, 2017, it prompted widespread media speculation. Were production complications to blame ("Details Revealed," 2017)? Was the sectarian controversy *GS* stirred regionally behind the cancellation (Fran, 2017b)? MBC refuted these claims and said in an interview that while the network had the option to produce 32 episodes for the season, it stopped at 20 "to present the best artistic results without committing to a certain number of episodes" ("MBC Reveals," 2017, para. 2).

As we consider *GS*'s termination, it is important to compare it with earlier forms of EE. For some, EE must target a specific group and issue to be effective, because the "Sabido methodology cannot be grafted into a large diverse group . . . it is designed to be utilized by a production/research group that is going to mount an E-E drama in a specific place dealing with a specific social problem" (Poindexter, 2004, p. 29). *GS* does not meet these conditions. Rather than targeting a well-defined audience, *GS* catered to Arab viewers across 22 nation-states in addition to a nebulous global audience preoccupied with IS. It also reflected new patterns of EE funding and production. Bankrolled largely by organizations such as USAID and the Ford Foundation, older EE productions were often accompanied by focus groups, surveys, and impact evaluations (Bandura, 2004; Poindexter, 2004; Singhal et al., 2004). In Latin America, these practices have sometimes resulted in changes to storylines while a program was still on-air (La Pastina, Patel, & Schiavo, 2004). In contrast, *GS* was funded privately by MBC. Additionally, the perceived lack of transparency and reliability of audience research in the Arab region, where many research outfits are affiliated with media corporations or are close to the government, preempts a transparent investigation of *GS*'s impact. The industry's enthusiastic embrace of reality television was partly due to the voluminous but proprietary data that texting, nominating, and voting—through traceable and storable digital transactions—yields (Kraidy, 2010). A decade later, like many popular television programs in the region, *GS* relied mainly on social media to track its reception among viewers (El-Meligi, 2018). According to MBC senior content producer Shereen El-Meligi (2018), sentiment analysis around the program on Twitter revealed mixed reactions among audiences.[5]

Discourse analysis yields insights but tells an incomplete story about *GS*'s audience reception. This is all the more salient when we consider the fate of other terrorism-related programs on MBC. Both *The Road to Kabul* (2004) and *Al-Hoor al-Ein* (2005) spurred debate around their portrayals of religion, terrorism, and conflict. While *The Road to Kabul* was taken off the air early, it had been produced by the Jordan-based Arab Telemedia Services and was ordered off the air by Qatar TV, impacting broadcasting channels like MBC, which later sued ATS for losses (Sakr, 2007). Similarly*,* the next year's *Al-Hoor al-Ein* was also airing on MBC, but remained on the air despite controversy, thanks to Saudi ownership. In contrast *GS*, produced by O3 Productions, a subsidiary of the Saudi-owned MBC, was cut short. What can we make of *GS*'s fate? Why was Saudi channel ownership and government approval not enough to secure the success, or at least the survival, of the program for a full season?

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[5] More data on this issue are, unfortunately, not available.

        Though MBC claimed that it curtailed the number of episodes due to creative considerations,[6] there is an alternative explanation. *GS* portrayed the Jordanian pilot Muath Safi Yousef Al-Kasasbeh, whose immolation by IS was captured in an infamous and now iconic February 2015 video, *Healing the Believers' Chests* (Kraidy, 2017a). MBC seems to have learned the hard way that the pilot's brutal and affectively resonant assassination was a red line. The *GS* storyline begins when the pilot prepares to fly in order to attack an IS base, walking to his airplane with his helmet under his arm (E16). As he prepares for takeoff, the camera pans to his uniform, with the Jordanian flag emblazoned on his sleeves. In a later episode, after crashing into the base, the pilot is found by Adham, a Lebanese spy and series protagonist. Fearing Adham is from IS leadership, the pilot says, "I am Muslim, like you," before reciting the *shahada*.[7] Adham takes his arm and says, "Don't be afraid. I'm with you. I'm your friend" (E18).

        Although the pilot is not named, the arc points to real-life events around Al-Kasasbeh's capture. This scene, depicting an intimate moment in which a "real" person declares he is a Muslim before being captured by IS, marks a narrative break from the otherwise largely fictional characters in *GS*. In this scene, *GS* came too close to a deeply fraught reality, not only geopolitically but also affectively. Online discourse (Al-Najjar, 2017) pointed to a Facebook post by Al-Kasasbeh's brother that prompted the Jordanian government to take action:

> This is a Jordanian symbol clearly and openly. Will the government allow the continued abuse of a Jordanian symbol? Will our dignity be protected as a Jordanian people[?] Will the feelings of a Jordanian family be protected after three years of pain that will not heal[?] (paras. 5-6)

        This issue compels us to consider the existence of an affective register not fully amenable to mining from social media sentiment analysis and audience research. Past explorations of edutainment have also focused on cognitive and rational effects—what has been called the education component—at the expense of the affective role—the entertainment component (Singhal & Rogers, 2004). This highlights an important way of thinking about contemporary popular culture and, in particular, the "discursive formation" (Foucault, 1969) of education, entertainment, and melodrama. Anker (2014) explains that the intended effects of melodrama are only one part of the story. Recognizing that media discourses interact with audiences in unexpected ways, she notes that while state and elite actors are more easily able to wield and deploy particular political discourses, "these discourses often counteract or exceed what formal institutions or elite actors have intended" (p. 21). Noting instances of "resistance" to edutainment where audiences have identified with antagonists or villains of programs (p. 14), Singhal and Rogers (2004) draw on Stuart Hall's (1980) foundational work on encoding and decoding processes to recognize that texts may trigger varied interpretations and constructions of meaning. Recalling this intervention in communication theory, we offer that considering the affective pulse of *GS* lends important insight into the way that forces of production and funding may orient particular messages and the way they interact with lived realities.

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[6] Production has suggested that a decision was made to condense the footage down to 20 episodes rather than 30 (Jalad, 2017).

[7] The *shahada* is a phrase in which Muslims declare their belief in God and in Muhammad as God's Prophet.

In narrative battles, the affective elements of media messages are as important as their rhetorical components. Melodrama's capacity for varied interpretations and inconsistencies, writes Anker (2014), is part of its "affective charge" (p. 7). Hugo Benavides (2008) advocated Foucault's (1998) conception of transgression to think about melodrama in the telenovela, the Latin American serialized drama equivalent to the Arab world's *musalsalat*. Foucault offers that "transgression prescribes not only the sole manner of discovering the sacred in its unmediated substance, but also a way of recomposing its empty form, its absence, through which it becomes all the more scintillating" (p. 30). Melodrama "demands to be uncovered, registered, articulated" (Brooks, 1976, pp. 20–21), and it is in this process of renewal that boundary lines are drawn and redrawn, and are transgressed to generate points of productive tension and trigger viewers to imagine other worlds. *GS* crosses this boundary between the fantasy world of melodrama and the real world of a Middle East torn by war and violence. This is not to say that melodrama is divorced from reality but that it relies on realism to contrast the way things are with how they should be (L. Williams, 2014) through what Brooks (1976) called the melodramatic "imaginative mode." Rather than operating within this mode, *Gharabeeb Soud* moves from excessive theatricality to sociopolitical relevance by articulating collectively traumatic, real-world events. That is how sociopolitical affect blasts through the dual veneers of education and entertainment, exposing the geopolitical stakes in the war against IS and their affective consequences.

GS shows how geopolitical and affective forces combine to create a volatile form of public policy and its instantiation in popular culture. Geopolitically, *GS* blends elements from Saudi domestic policy, U.S. foreign policy, and IS content, weaving them into a rich, intertextual tapestry through the highly popular and transnational *musalsal* genre. Affectively, *GS* releases a steady stream of anti-IS warnings through individualized narratives of sacrifice and suffering. When combined, these forces reveal the capacities of transnational media networks to give form to dominant discourses of U.S. liberalism or Saudi moderation. Importantly, *GS* also reveals the disjunctures of these forces, highlighting the limitations of producers' intentions and commercial interest in producing affectively resonant and politically relevant material for regional and global audiences. Globally, the terrain is shifting for the kind of popular content that finds itself entangled in the wiring that makes *GS* possible.

Conclusion

Miller and Kraidy (2016) argued that "global media studies recognizes that the role of the state has changed in important ways under neoliberalism" (p. 33), foregrounding the role of the state as one broker among others of transnational flows that shape, reflect, or contradict strategic narratives constructed by states and that are implemented by nonstate, commercial institutions. As this article articulates, state funding of cultural producers mobilized on behalf of the state shapes the kinds of images and narratives that pervade public discourse. Like the pan-Arab reality television controversies of the 2010s (Kraidy, 2010), the debates around *GS* expose an ambivalence of Arab publics. They are situated between discourses of modernization grafted on a combination of authoritarian politics, Western agendas, and commercial considerations on one hand and, on the other, the lure of various identitarian forces often grounded in religious rhetoric, of which IS is the most visible at the moment. Arab viewers must reckon with a transnational media environment replete with images and ideas that are radically heterogeneous and sometimes antagonistic.

EE's trajectory from its origin in development communication to today's transnational, commercial productions like *Gharabeeb Soud* allows us to shift our focus from the national to the transnational realm, where national strategies and geopolitical agendas shape commercial cultural production and audience reactions and are, in turn, affected by these reactions. Identifying disjunctures between edutainment and melodrama enables a better understanding of how viewers may go along with, resist, or grow apathetic toward nationally driven narratives and conjure up contested imaginaries. While these narratives can be mined for their geopolitical implications, Deborah Gould (2009) reminds us that by considering affect, we understand "how hegemony is effected but also why it is never all-encompassing" (p. 27). Rather, we can understand not only how such narratives are deployed but also how they become resonant, and how that resonance exists along affectively charged boundary points that can both create and shatter popular imaginaries. Affect, then, should be explored as a central dimension in the study of media industries globally. More particularly, the rich and complex affective articulations that television drama forges among entertainment, geopolitics, and melodrama compel us to consider affect as a critical, and to date underresearched, dimension in global media studies.

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