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To cite this version:

Amr Abdelrahim. The Media and the Islands Crisis: Understanding the Heteronomization of the Egyptian Media Field through a Comparative Discourse Analysis. Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication, 2023, 25 p. 10.1163/18739865-tat00009 . hal-04068152

HAL Id: hal-04068152

https://sciencespo.hal.science/hal-04068152v1

Submitted on 13 Apr 2023

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The Media and the Islands Crisis: Understanding the Heteronomization of the Egyptian Media Field through a Comparative Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

Drawing large audiences during the late Mubarak era and the revolutionary period that followed it, Egyptian political talk show hosts played a significant role in supporting the authoritarian rollback that was initiated in the summer of 2013, before seemingly losing much of their hard-won influence. To understand their marginalization, this article claims that the habits and practices these secular preachers acquired in a relatively autonomous configuration of their field did not match the post-2013 regime's vision of the media. This observation is supported by a discourse analysis of hosts´ coverage of the 2016 Islands crisis, which highlights how their discursive strategies, namely the "in-betweenness" of most pundits, were rooted in their career trajectories and how their failure to contain the dislocation of the hegemonic discourse likely pushed securocrats to strip the media field of its remaining autonomy.

Keywords

Political talk shows, Egyptian media field, hegemony, discourse

Introduction

Having stopped watching Egyptian political talk shows after the 3rd of July 2013 military coup I was surprised –as were probably many other Egyptian television viewers— when I tuned back into their broadcasts after the cession of two formerly Egyptian Red Sea islands to Saudi Arabia on the 8th of April 2016. Where a chorus of voices had until then unequivocally backed General turned President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, dissonance now dealt a final blow to what remained of

the new regime's claim to hegemony. Sparked by what many perceived as "a sale of Egyptian land" in exchange for Saudi economic aid, a political crisis snowballed and found its way to the airwaves. An absurd spectacle unfolded as so-called liberal pundits, who had until recently hailed El-Sisi as the knight in white armor who saved the nation from the clutches of the Islamists, all but questioned his patriotism, while the staunchest spokesmen of the post-2013 regime's brand of fascist nationalism found themselves defending the *Saudiness* of the two islands.

Far from being dissident voices or impartial observers, political talk show hosts were a central part of Mubarak era 'upgraded authoritarianism[i]' (Heydemann, 2007); while they adopted a looser conversational tone than their colleagues on state-owned television, their shows were designed to delegitimize dissident voices and act as safety valves for popular anger (Adib Doss, 2020). As a result of a temporary increase in journalistic freedoms and a newfound interest in politics among large segments of Egyptian society after the 25th of January Uprising, the popularity of these shows skyrocketed during the subsequent transition period and their hosts effectively became leaders of public opinion (Armbrust, 2019: 181-205). When the authoritarian rollback initiated on the 3rd of July 2013 put an end to this period of 'protracted liminality' (Armbrust, 2019: 4-8), the silencing of new talk show hosts affiliated with the Islamist and secular-revolutionary camps came as no surprise. It is more difficult to comprehend why, from 2016 onwards, the consolidated El-Sisi regime moved against established Mubarak-era pundits, who were among its strongest allies. Until then, these hosts had enjoyed a relative degree of autonomy. By imposing a more restrictive legal framework (Guaaybess, 2019), purchasing most satellite networks in the country (Reporters sans frontiers, 2019; Bahgat, 2017), and side-lining talk show hosts from the editorial process (Hakim, 2019), securocrats[ii] enacted a shift from the relatively autonomous configuration of the media field under Mubarak to the more heteronomous one that is characteristic of the El-Sisi regime. Hence, talk show

hosts ceased to be secular preachers[iii] at the service of the regime and became mere puppets in the hands of the state.

This article argues that the Islands crisis of 2016 highlighted securocrats and talk show hosts' diverging views on the role of the media in an authoritarian context. Since it was one of the earliest and most important rifts of the post-2013 hegemonic order, the crisis spawned a wide range of reactions from television pundits, thereby offering a unique insight into the relative autonomy of political talk shows that preceded it. A discourse analysis of hosts' strategies will show how their positions in an earlier configuration of the media field informed their decisions during the crisis and how the latter might have failed to contain or, on the contrary, exacerbated the dislocation of the hegemonic discourse. I argue that this failure showed established Mubarak-era talk show hosts' practices to be irreconcilable with the new regime's vision of the media, thereby catalyzing securocrats' efforts to strip the field of the last vestiges of its autonomy after 2016. In understanding how the Islands crisis ushered in a reconfiguration of the Egyptian media field, this article provides a more nuanced analysis of the often-conflictual relations undergirding the production of political programming in authoritarian contexts. It also demonstrates how pundits' mediated positions can be a valuable resource for analyzing media landscapes when traditional fieldwork is not possible.

The analysis of political talk shows' coverage of the Islands crisis will mainly consider segments from the shows of three hosts between the 8th and the 25th of April 2016. The 8th of April has been selected as the starting point of the examination window as it coincided with the signature of a maritime demarcation treaty between Egypt and Saudi Arabia, which established Saudi sovereignty over the two formerly Egyptian-administered Red Sea islands. The 25th of April corresponded to the day the second call for demonstrations against the cession of the islands failed to materialize. It marked the point when the regime got past *the worst of it*, and the conflict shifted from the streets to the courts.

The three hosts studied represent different positions in the media field. Ahmed Moussa, a renowned regime henchman who has been hosting the talk show *'Ala Mas'uliti* on the *Sada Elbalad* network since 2014, stands for the category of hosts who most closely echoed the discourse of securocrats during the crisis. On the other end of the spectrum, Ibrahim Eissa, a vocal regime critic hosted *Ma' Ibrahim Eissa* on *Al-Kahera Wal Nas* until being banned from appearing on television in early 2017, eventually returning to the screens in late 2021 after 'having learned his lesson'. He represents talk show hosts who were more confrontational and open about voicing their opinions. Lamis Al-Hadidi, the host of *Hona Al-'Asema*, a popular political talk show broadcast on the *CBC* network, represents the strategy chosen by the largest segment of Mubarak era hosts, whom this article refers to as *secular preachers*. Under the guise of impartiality, these pundits presented both the government's narrative and the views of opponents of the treaty and pleaded for 'reason' and 'calm' while the treaty was being discussed through institutional channels.

New Media and authoritarianism

Much ink has been spilled on how authoritarian regimes strive for hegemony; in Egypt, scholars have shown that Nasser's introduction of state television in 1960 served the mission of 'national guidance' (Abu Lughod, 2005; El Issawi, 2014). The ambiguous reception of the state's mediated paternalist discourse (Abu Lughod, 2005) and the first cracks in its claim to hegemony with the rise of cassette culture and its adjacent counter-publics (Armbrust, 1996; Hirschkind, 2006; Simon, 2022) have been well documented. These cracks widened with the emergence of new media. Fifteen years before the Arab Spring drew attention to the disruptive potential of the internet (and subsequently to its instrumentalization by authoritarian regimes), Al Jazeera already undermined Arab states' control of television broadcasts. Subsequently, political scientists and media scholars alike speculated on whether the constitution of a transnational 'public sphere' would contribute to the democratization the region (Kraidy, 2002;

Lynch, 2005; 2006; Sakr, 2007). As the space of Pan-Arab satellite television became increasingly crowded, much attention was given to how Saudi-Lebanese reality TV (Kraidy, 2010) and Islamic televangelist programs (Echchaibi, 2008; Moll, 2012; 2021) became sites for contests between different identities and projects of modernity.

Conversely, less scholarly attention was given to how American neo-conservatives' pressure on Arab states to enact democratic reforms, the Mubarak regime's attempts to reconquer TV audiences from Al Jazeera, and a small part of the Egyptian economic elite's ambition for greater political influence converged in the early 2000s to transform Egypt's media landscape and enable the emergence of the country's first private satellite channels and their flagship prime-time programs: political talk-shows (El-Issawi, 2014; Guayybess, 2019; Sakr, 2007). Media scholars and political scientists have demonstrated how the hosts of these programs were able to take advantage of a relatively autonomous configuration of their field to push against editorial red lines, and employed sensationalist practices that bestowed them with widespread popularity and influence (El-Issawi, 2014; Adib Doss, 2020). Subsequently, several authors analyzed how the journalistic practices of these pundits contributed to the polarization of the Egyptian public following the 25th of January uprising (El Issawi, 2014; Lynch, 2019).

Unfortunately, the fate of these political talk shows under the El-Sisi regime has remained underexplored. Tourya Guayybess' analysis of securocrats' efforts to strip private pro-regime media of its remaining autonomy is a notable exception (2019). However, it does not set out to explain why securocrats moved against their former allies, who were instrumental in the lead-up to the 30th of June mass demonstrations that preceded the ouster of Islamist president, Mohammed Morsi.

This article aims to address this gap in the literature on Egyptian political talk shows, the format of which has been thoroughly analyzed in the American and Arab contexts. However, unlike previous studies, I do not attempt to analyze how Egyptian pundits 'construct intimacy' with

viewers (Adib Doss, 2020; Haag, 1993; Moll, 2021) or whether the debates they stage contribute to the constitution of a 'public sphere' and the democratization of society (Al-Kasim, 1999; Ayish, 2019). Nor does this article set out to dissect television hosts' speech (Putra and Rose, 2019) to highlight how they attempt to persuade audiences and/or cultivate affective-emotional states of fear or nationalist pride. Instead, this article follows in the footsteps of a body of literature—openly or implicitly inscribed in the Bourdieusian tradition—on the power relations undergirding the production of media in Egypt. In doing so, I hope to contribute to scholarship on hegemony and authoritarianism in the Middle East more generally.

Television Pundits and the Egyptian Media Field

My main contention is that accounting for *field-specific* dynamics is crucial for studying the production of media in authoritarian contexts, as external political and economic pressures are often insufficient explanatory factors on their own; political talk show hosts' mediated positions during the Islands crisis must be approached as discursive strategies, founded on habits and practices acquired during professional trajectories shaped by the relatively autonomous configuration of the Mubarak-era media landscape, and designed to differentiate themselves from other pundits.

I argue that political talk shows were shaped by 'a competition between two antagonistic principles of hierarchization' (Bourdieu, 1991). In the context of the controlled liberalization of the late Mubarak era (a shift from Nasserist control of political programming under the monopoly of state television to a more diffuse control that relied on journalists' self-censorship and clientelist ties between the regime and network owners), talk show hosts' success depended on two factors: their loyalty to the regime and their capacity to 'read its lips' on the one hand, and their ability to attract viewership and generate advertisement revenue for network owners on the other. In this context, some hosts were able to leverage their economic success to carve for themselves a limited margin of autonomy. I refer to them hereafter as *secular preachers*, an

ideal type that designates this subgroup of television presenters who share similar career trajectories and derive their position of authority from their popularity.

Having debuted their careers in the press, most secular preachers switched to state and then private television, often acquiring international experience and training in American, European, or Pan-Arab networks. This allowed them to adopt a sensationalist style that set them apart from the monotonous tone of official news bulletins and undoubtedly made them more attractive to audiences (El Issawi, 2014). This trajectory led them to inherit existing journalistic habits, namely self-censorship and a paternalistic attitude toward their audience, while at the same time adopting novel practices introduced by newcomers to the field like transnational channels and bloggers (El Issawi, 2014).

While secular preachers' habits and practices were the product of a relatively autonomous configuration of the media field, it is important to note that overall, said field has been dominated by the securocrats since the 1952 Free Officers' Coup. While the controlled liberalization of the last decade of the Mubarak era was a significant change, the state's semblance of hegemony continued to be sustained through the repression of dissident voices. Consequently, the media field has never been truly autonomous; its different configurations throughout the years correspond to different levels of heteronomy.

Secular Preachers and the Post-2013 Regime's Hegemonic Discourse

My analysis of political talk shows' speech follows in the footsteps of Laclau and Mouffe, as it approaches social reality as a continuously changing web of meanings, which are temporarily fixed through discourse (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001). This discursive field is constituted of so-called *floating signifiers* that only acquire meanings when they are *articulated* into a specific discourse, that is to say, when connected to other signifiers through relationships of equivalence or difference (Torfing, 1999: 35-37). Within a given discourse, signifiers are organized in a web around so-called nodal signifiers, such as "the people" and the "nation", which assign meaning

to the elements of the structure, but become devoid of any substance themselves (Torfing, 1999: 35-37).

Laclau and Mouffe conceive of politics as a discursive arena where different agents attempt to establish hegemony for their reading of social reality (Grimm, 2019: 34). Hence, they situate themselves in the intellectual legacy of Gramsci, who first conceptualized hegemony as the moral-intellectual leadership of a group, while also providing an account of how the hegemonic group acquires said leadership, namely through a hegemonic discourse that seeks to become '*the dominant horizon of social orientation and action*' (Torfing, 1999: 101).

In the Egyptian context, the hegemonic discourse is built on a central antagonism opposing the nation and the other. This struggle has its roots in the constitutive myth of the post-2013 regime (Grimm, 2019: 265): a narrative that served to portray the army's ouster of Mohamed Morsi on the 3rd of July 2013 and the bloody crackdown that followed, as a national salvage operation meant to free the country from the clutches of terrorists.

Since then, this narrative has become a central element of the post-2013 regime's discourse. It is used to frame a wildly disparate array of issues, it is no longer confined to a specific historical context. Thus, the war on terror became a struggle between good and evil that could serve as an ahistorical framework explaining all the misfortunes of the nation. This central antagonism served to delineate the hegemonic discourse's borders with competing discourses –which could be framed as destabilization attempts by the antagonistic other– and provided securocrats with a constant threat in the name of which they could securitize issues.

Furthermore, I use Laclau and Mouffe's notion of *dislocation* to understand the discursive dimension of the Islands crisis of 2016. A dislocation occurs when new discursive elements cannot be incorporated into the hegemonic discourse without rearranging it first. These instances create opportunities for opponents to formulate counter-hegemonic projects which contest the hegemonic articulation. As noted by Grimm, political crises constitute dislocations

of the hegemonic discourse. They reveal that the regime's discourse is challenged by counter-hegemonic projects and that its claim to hegemony is unfounded (2019: 34).

Thus, this article is built on the assumption that the primary function of political programming in an authoritarian context is the articulation of new elements into the hegemonic discourse, and the containment of discursive dislocations in the event of a political crisis. Admittedly, this linguistic bias reproduces a defunct Habermasian view of Egyptian society as a public sphere inhabited by bourgeois rational subjects (Kraidy and Krikorian, 2017). The notion of dislocation fails to capture how the affective qualities of scandals *compel* subjects to act (El-Ariss, 2018). While omitting the minutiae of secular preachers' performances, such as changes in tone, grimaces, and gesticulations, as well as the visual and sonic elements that accompany their monologues limits our understanding of the effect their shows might have had on their audiences, it does not impede the analysis of how their coverage of the Islands crisis expressed journalistic habits and practices that were not reconcilable with the new regime's vision of the media.

The Islands crisis: A Transformative Event and a Dislocation of the Hegemonic Discourse

On the 8th of April 2016, Egyptian prime minister Sherif Ismail and his Saudi counterpart signed a maritime border demarcation treaty, ceding sovereignty over two Red Sea islands, Tiran and Sanafir, to Saudi Arabia (Middle East Monitor, 10 April 2016). The secretly negotiated agreement quickly drew harsh criticism from opposition figures and online activists (Grimm, 2019: 253). The resulting crisis dislocated the regime's hegemonic nationalist discourse, leading to street protests, organized by an alliance of civil society actors known as the Popular Coalition to Protect the Land (PCPL), and shattering the coalition of actors that had supported the post-2013 regime, with many political figures and even certain branches of government opposing the cession of Tiran and Sanafir (Grimm, 2019: 253). As such, it constituted a

transformative event that pushed securocrats to widen the sphere of repression to actors who had been spared during the previous phase of authoritarian consolidation.

Ahmed Moussa: the populist-securitizing discursive strategy

Moussa's discursive strategy during the Islands crisis most closely resembled the rhetoric of securocrats and government officials. This is due to his career trajectory. Moussa is the ideal-typical *henchman*, a representative example of a subset of television presenters that have evolved differently in the media field than the secular preachers described above.

Unlike most prominent television presenters, Moussa and other media henchmen are not inheritors. He hails from a small Upper Egyptian village near Sohag, where he completed a bachelor's degree in journalism in 1983. For this reason, he exhibits a form of anti-intellectualism and chooses to speak to the "simple citizen", in a way that is reminiscent of Bourdieu's comment on populist intellectuals: *'Regimes find their best watchdogs in those intellectuals that are disappointed in and even scandalized by inheritors*' (Bourdieu 1991: 12).

While secular preachers enjoyed a position of authority due to their high ratings, henchmen achieved success thanks to their loyalty and cooperation with intelligence apparatuses, who invest in their careers and shield them from the law. After graduating from Reserve Officers' College upon the completion of his three-year military service (Sada Elbalad, 2017), Moussa started working at the state-owned Al-Ahram newspaper. He later admitted on his show that he was an officer in the Egyptian army's Morale Affairs Department at the time (December 9, 2019). Moussa eventually became the newspaper's correspondent at the Ministry of Interior and even headed the accidents section. It is also important to note that during his time at Al-Ahram, Moussa was reportedly known to spy on his colleagues for the Ministry of Interior (Assahifa, 2019).

However, it should not be understood that henchmen like Moussa do not enjoy a similar degree of popularity to other hosts or that they should be considered simple appendages of intelligence

apparatuses. While they were relatively minor media personalities during the Mubarak era, they exploited the 'protracted liminality' of the post-revolutionary period and gained large followings that made it unclear who, between henchmen and securocrats, depended on whom for their survival (Armbrust, 2019: 181-205).

Henchmen have a different set of habits and practices than other prominent talk show hosts. Secular preachers' trajectories in the media field made them acquire self-censorship habits that allowed them to walk a thin line between reading the regime's lips and pushing against editorial red lines to attract viewership. Conversely, henchmen's trajectories suggest that they had access to more direct canals of communication with intelligence apparatuses, making them more receptive to direct orders and producing a discourse that more closely resembled the rhetoric of securocrats.

Consequently, on his show *'Ala Mas'uliti*, Ahmed Moussa reacted to the Islands crisis by adopting the populist-securitizing discourse of securocrats. Initially, Moussa denied that the maritime border demarcation agreement had any dislocating effects on the hegemonic discourse. This dislocation hinged on the perceived 'Egyptianness' of the two islands. By articulating the signifiers 'Tiran and Sanafir' and 'Egyptian' through a relation of difference, Moussa could ignore the dislocation of the hegemonic nationalist discourse. After all, if the audience were to believe his claim that the islands were '*a hundred percent not Egyptian*' (10 April 2016), the treaty could not possibly have been a sale of land, as was claimed by its opponents, because officials could not have sold something that they did not own. Hence, El-Sisi's status as the foremost patriot could remain unchallenged.

Moreover, by portraying his opinion on the 'Egyptianness' of the Islands as the objective truth, Moussa could appeal to the notion of the rule of experts, which figures heavily in the discourse of securocrats. This link between science and securitization has been well documented (Berling, 2011). By appealing to science, the speaker objectifies the issue, thereby cementing their

position of authority as an expert and closing the debate (Berling, 2011). It is for this reason that Moussa frequently relied on documents provided by the Information Center of the Council of Ministers and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to prove that the two islands were Saudi. This did not only serve to make his arguments more palatable by conjuring abstract notions of scientificity and expertise; it also invoked the position of authority of these technocratic institutions. By relegating the debate surrounding the maritime demarcation treaty to the domain of experts, he sought to depoliticize it:

> *The matter is not political. Please do not let politics interfere in issues related to state interests. Do not let political opposition interfere with this issue*
>
> (11 April 2016).

More than other hosts, Moussa used the objectivation of the Islands deal to smear opponents and frame them as '*ignorant*' and '*people who do not know history or geography'* (10 April 2016). He not only subordinated them to state institutions, who are represented as the ultimate authority on the matter, but also framed himself as a purveyor of truth and vulgarizer of scientific knowledge: '*I will show you all the documents. If there is a document you cannot find anywhere, you will find it with me*' (11 April 2016).

Moussa's antagonistic tone when addressing opponents to the deal became more evident when he started commenting on online mobilization attempts. His response to the PCPL's campaign was not as much substantial, as it relied on the delegitimization of those who opposed the treaty. Following the president's lead (Grimm, 2019: 263-264), he simplified social reality through chains of equivalence that transformed a debate surrounding a policy issue into a battle pitting the state, its institutions, and '*the true Egyptians who stand with the country*' against the antagonistic other who seek to '*lead them astray*' (13 April 2016). The media constituted the battlefield for this struggle for the people's souls. Instead of addressing public opinion, Moussa preferred to talk about public awareness, a securitized object threatened by those who were

'*sowing doubt in everything*' to push the people to the brink of '*national suicide*' (13 April 2016).

This polarization of social reality allowed Moussa to frame the Friday of the Land protests, on the 15th of April, in a way that was reconcilable with the hegemonic discourse. After the protests, activists took pride in 'breaking the wall of fear' (Grimm, 2019: 314), challenging the hegemonic discourse by undermining the regime's claims to popularity and legitimacy and its claims to power and control of public spaces.

Moussa addressed both symbolic challenges to the hegemonic order respectively by minimizing the size of the protests and othering their participants:

> *One hundred and fifty people went out at Mostafa Mahmoud Mosque. Five minutes later, a car… a tuk-tuk… its siren made people run…*
>
> (16 April 2016)

Moussa not only blatantly lied about the number of protestors, but he also spun a fable that implied that they were cowardly and stupid, mistaking an approaching tuk-tuk (or motorized rickshaw) for a police car. The smearing and othering of protestors were *driven home* by accusing them of being members of the Muslim Brotherhood, stripping them of their agency—the brothers' mindless obeisance to their leaders was a common trope during the post-revolutionary period. The henchman even frames the Egyptian flag, typically carried by protestors as a sign of unity or patriotism, as a cheap trick, a sheep skin underneath which a whole pack of wolves was hiding. The rule of the militias they were supposedly conspiring to install, is a reference to civil war-torn Libya, a salient image in securocrats' scare tactics.

> *The Muslim Brotherhood? Yes. Seventy percent of those were present at the syndicate yesterday. […] Those who left their homes were following instructions. [He speaks as*

if he were a member of the Muslim brotherhood:] 'We are hiding behind the Egyptian flag, but our goal is clear. The fall of the regime and the rule of militias'.

(16 April 2016)

Moussa's discursive strategy is not astonishing considering his trajectory and his position in the field. The strong resemblance between Moussa's arguments and securocrats' discourse suggests a degree of coordination with the latter. His arguments were nearly identical to statements of the Presidency and the Ministry of Interior (Grimm, 2019: 232), which he either explicitly referenced, or borrowed notions such as '*national suicide*', '*online brigades*', and '*fourth and fifth-generation warfare*' from. Moreover, Moussa openly addressed his position in the field, by distinguishing himself from hosts who criticized the cession of the island, calling them the '*media of shame*', and accusing them of using '*the language of demagoguery, clamor, sowing of doubt and shaking of trust which rapidly spread from Facebook to the screens without any care for professional standards*' (13 April 2016).

Ibrahim Eissa: the populist-oppositional discursive strategy

While Ibrahim Eissa was a strong supporter of the post-2013 regime—he had been one of the most outspoken opponents of Morsi and had supported the demonstrations that culminated in his ouster—, he was growing increasingly critical of El-Sisi since 2015. This change of heart was to be expected given Eissa's position in the field and his journalistic practices. Reaching fame as the editor-in-chief of the opposition newspaper *Al-Dostour* in the late nineties, he carefully constructed his persona as a regime critic who would criticize policies and officials while being careful not to challenge the pillars of the hegemonic discourse. The two prison sentences he was handed in 2007 and 2008 for 'spreading fake news' and 'slander' likely shaped Eissa's awareness of how far he could push until being met with resistance (Zayed, 2007; Talaat; 2008). At the end of the 2000s, the journalist made his way to television by hosting programs on the private networks *Dream* and *ON TV*. Eissa is certainly a major figure in the

Egyptian media landscape and deserves more scholarly attention. His professional and personal trajectory, namely the alleged shady dealings surrounding his involvement with *Al-Dostour* and the short-lived 'pro-revolutionary' *Al-Tahrir* network, as well as his journey from treating the Muslim brotherhood as legitimate political rivals to viewing them as an existential threat (See Fadl, 2022; Kandil, 2014), are both fascinating and necessary to comprehend his nuanced position in the media field. For the sake of this article, it is sufficient to point out how Eissa's condemnation of the Islands deal is in line with his ambiguous position between regime critic and supporter. For instance, it is worth mentioning that *Mubarak's harshest critic* avoided going to prison due to a presidential pardon. Later, his testimony in favor of the former autocrat was instrumental in the latter's acquittal from the charge of killing protestors (Mahmoud, 2014). Consequently, it is not surprising that, after being suspended in early 2017, Eissa ultimately returned to the screens in 2021, albeit not as an opposition figure but as an enlightened intellectual on a crusade against obscurantist Islamists.

During the Islands crisis, Eissa constructed his position in the field in opposition to the regime's henchmen, and through their exclusion from the fold of journalism.

> *Is there no one among the talk show hosts, excited by the Saudization of Tiran and Sanafir, and who enthusiastically affirm that they are Saudi… If you had asked them, I swear to God, if you had asked them Wednesday morning, they would have told you that they are Egyptian. They got excited because it is the government's decision or the president's decision. […] You are misleading people. You are corrupting people's awareness. You are washing people's brains. You are hypocrites.*
>
> (10 April 2016)

Eissa's discursive strategy was the symmetrical opposite of henchmen like Moussa. Instead of downplaying the disruptive nature of the maritime border demarcation deal, he stressed to what

extent the surprising nature of the event dislocated the hegemonic nationalist discourse and upset a widely held belief that the two islands were Egyptian.

> *We all woke up on Wednesday to the fact that Tiran and Sanafir are Saudi. […] All of us have lived for years, thinking that Tiran and Sanafir are Egyptian. The curricula, the geography, and history textbooks at school… Tiran and Sanafir are Egyptian. Channel one and its programs… Tiran is Egyptian. Songs… Tiran is Egyptian […] You are talking to a country that you woke up from sleep to face something contrary to what it believes in […]. Like that... From one day to another.*
>
> (10 April 2016)

By acknowledging the magnitude of the signing of the maritime demarcation agreement's dislocating effect, Eissa could interpret it as a shortcoming of authoritarian governance. Hence, the current controversy was signified as one more crisis resulting from the exclusion of citizens from decision-making processes.

> *It is not a matter of force. The world has changed, and Egypt has changed. It cannot be administered by simple obedience to orders, nor by surprises and shocks, implicitly asking people to surrender to them as if they are decisions from the heavens. This will not work. […]*
>
> (10 April 2016)

Eissa even went one step further by affirming the 'Egyptianness' of the two islands. By clearly articulating 'Tiran and Sanafir' as 'Egyptian', he was able to portray the maritime border demarcation treaty as a humiliation to the nation and a violation of both the people's sovereignty and the constitutional process (11 April 2016). His arguments mirrored the pillars of the PCPL's counter-hegemonic project: the nation, the rule of law, and the sovereignty of the people (Grimm, 2019: 287). Even though he went to great lengths to affirm his allegiance to the hegemonic order, specifying that his criticism only targeted a specific policy (10 April 2016),

he was still giving a platform to the opposition's arguments, which might otherwise have been confined to social media.

Throughout the days leading to the Friday of the land protests, Eissa further criticized the government's attempt to contain the crisis. He recognized the dislocating effect of these attempts and proceeded to articulate them in his oppositional discourse. When the Council of Ministers and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a set of documents allegedly proving the 'Saudiness' of the Islands, he did not acquiesce to the state's position of authority on the issue, as Ahmed Moussa did. Instead, he recognized and deconstructed the attempt to objectify the cession of the two islands and issued a veiled warning to securocrats that their attempt to take the 'people' for fools would not work.

> Do *not imagine, even for one moment, that the arguments they are trying to convince you with can only be understood by experts […]. I do not want to say that you all lied, so I am going to say that you all disgraced yourselves. […] we ask God almighty to reform everyone and guide our leaders not to belittle their people. […] The papers, based on which you signed the treaty, are not worth the ink they are written with*.
>
> (11 April 2016)

Ultimately, this led to Eissa's coverage of the Friday of the Land protests differing from Moussa's mix of mockery and conspiracist fearmongering. Whereas the latter drew a line of antagonism between the nation and the Muslim Brotherhood, the former pitched the people against their government. In his rhetoric, protesters were demonstrating against a disregard for their dignity, putting them in the historical continuity of the 25th of January and 30th of June demonstrations.

Lamis Al-Hadidi: the pluralistic discursive strategy

The discursive strategy chosen by Lamis Al-Hadidi reflected the more ambiguous position of many established Mubarak-era talk show hosts. Analyzing the in-betweenness of what I call the pluralistic strategy and understanding how it is rooted in secular preachers' habits and practices will shed some light on why securocrats later stripped them of their autonomy. This phenomenon would otherwise be more counter-intuitive to explain than the silencing of oppositional voices such as Ibrahim Eissa. Ultimately, in the author's view, it is the in-betweenness of most, rather than the open criticism of some, that spelled the doom of secular preachers.

The wife of prominent television host Amr Adib who himself is the son of famous screenwriter Abd al-Hai Adib, the American-educated Al-Hadidi started her broadcasting career as a correspondent for several pan-Arab and international media outlets such as Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabeya, NBC, and CNBC. She then transitioned to state-owned television, where she hosted a political talk show until the 25th of January Uprising. After the ouster of Mubarak, she and other prominent hosts joined the newly founded CBC network, which was owned by crony businessman Mohamed Amin, where she hosted *Hona Al-'Asema* until she was suspended from appearing on television for two years in 2018 (Mada Masr, 2018).

Al-Hadidi initially expressed her criticism of the signing ceremony, not because she opposed the cession of the Islands to Saudi Arabia, but because the secrecy of the negotiations and their untimely revelation – coinciding with King Salman's visit to Egypt – caused a dislocation of the hegemonic discourse. She adopts an almost paternalistic tone, schooling the government on how they should have presented the issue to the public; she is more familiar with the tricks of her trade than securocrats after all.

> *So that we do not wake up in the morning to discover this clamor, and then a statement is issued by the council of ministers… All this is too late, and the solution to the problem*

is too late. There should have been a clear preparation of public opinion regarding the negotiations that were taking place […]. The preparation of public opinion protects the political decision-maker from all this clamor.

(April 9, 2021)

On the 12th of April, she developed this line of thought into a harsher, more abstract criticism of the regime's lack of transparency, in a clear allusion to Ibrahim Eissa's rhetoric.

The truth is that the state is managed according to the theory of the surprise. […] ***The truth is that the rule by surprise is not the way of states built on institutions because the rule by surprise is a way to individualize power.*** *The administration of the state through institutions is built on […] publicity, transparency, and prior knowledge [of government decisions], so we are not surprised in the morning […]. We go to sleep at night thinking that the two islands are Egyptian, and suddenly they are Saudi. Even if that is the truth… Again, even if that is the truth, surprise is not the right way.*

(April 12, 2021)

However, Hadidi insisted on maintaining her adherence to the hegemonic discourse. In the introduction of the same episode, the moment in our examination window where the host was the most critical, she went to great lengths to ensure the audience of her trust in the armed forces and apologized for every critical statement. Admittedly, this might have been an instinctive self-preservation effort, given the red lines surrounding the military establishment. However, I believe that it is indicative of the fundamental in-betweenness that was characteristic of the secular preachers' discourse during the crisis. The following statement from her show illustrates the former point particularly well:

[1] There has to be a straightforward preparation [of public opinion]. Yes, the documents are convincing. But after how much time? After people already lost their trust. After we left the space for everyone to chatter and spark the controversy. […] All

these mistakes undermine the popularity of this regime.| [2] And this is what we do not want. This is most definitely not what we want. Apart from me being entirely supportive of this regime | [3] because it is a patriotic regime, a regime that loves this country, a regime that defends this country,| [4] but I think that we need a moment to contemplate how this country is ruled. Patriotism is not enough.

(April 12, 2021)

There were four 'beats' to this statement. Al-Hadidi first repeated her diagnostic that the state was responsible for the dislocating event that undermined its popularity, setting her apart from Moussa, who denied the magnitude of said event. She then insisted on her support of the regime and adherence to the hegemonic nationalist discourse before drawing an abstract lesson from her earlier concrete criticism. Unlike the open criticism of Ibrahim Eissa, Al-Hadidi portrayed the secrecy of the deal, not as a slight against the people's sovereignty, but as a mistake that could cost a fundamentally good government its popularity.

Al-Hadidi's refusal to weigh in on the status of the islands also set her apart from Moussa and Eissa. Throughout her commentary, she insisted that her job was simply to present the 'facts'. This apparent impartiality was rooted in the journalistic practices prominent talk show hosts developed during the last decade of Mubarak's rule. It was central to Al-Hadidi's self-perception during the crisis, as it set her apart from others' "unprofessional" journalistic practices.

And here I am not talking about whether the islands are Saudi or Egyptian. This is not my business nor my profession: I do not know. It is not right that every show is saying: "No, they are not Saudi. No, they are not Egyptian". I do not know.

(April 12, 2021)

Admittedly, the reasons behind Al-Hadidi's reticence to take a clear stance on the 'Egyptianness' of the islands were more layered than that. For one, this reticence allowed her

to objectify the issue. She did not know the answer because it was up to the experts to decide on the matter. Hence, other 'laymen' should have also refrained from expressing opinions that were not based on scientific knowledge; instead of criticizing the treaty on social media, citizens should have waited for the procedural path to establish the facts. The secular preacher presents herself as an impartial observer who reminds viewers of the rules of the game (the parliament should decide on the fate of the treaty), omitting that the newly elected body was a rubber stamp parliament controlled by the intelligence apparatuses, and that it should not legally have a say in the matter if the islands were indeed Egyptian and the treaty unconstitutional.

> *This matter and the demarcation of the border ought not to take place on social media. I hope that we stick to documents and expert opinions. The ball is in the parliament's court.*

(April 10, 2021)

Simultaneously, by not openly siding with the regime, she could give the benefit of the doubt to opponents of the deal, rather than framing them as part of the antagonistic other, as henchmen such as Ahmed Moussa did. She portrayed them as a segment of society whose outrage was understandable, given the symbolic weight of the Islands 'won back' throughout the country's wars against Israel, and who were entitled to having a different opinion (if they could substantiate it with evidence).

> *We understand the emotions of the people. Egyptians are protective of every grain of sand. We paid with blood for this land. Hence, our feeling of owning the land and being sovereign over it is a very important feeling that cannot be taken away from Egyptians. So, when we see angry reactions, we can understand. When we see people demonstrating, we can also understand.*

(April 11, 2021)

Whoever has any documents or letters to the contrary should come forward with them to the state, the responsible committees, the government, or the parliament.

(April 10, 2021)

The ambiguity or in-betweenness of their discursive strategies not only pushed pundits like Al-Hadidi to interview opponents to the cession of islands on their shows, which provided platforms for the latter's counter-hegemonic project, it also had profound implications on how hosts articulated protests. Unlike henchmen, they could not other participants and frame these events as threats to the nation. During his commentary on the Friday of the Land protests, Amr Khalil, another host who stood in for Lamis Al-Hadidi for the day, acknowledged the narrative of securocrats, but still insisted on the right of demonstrators to express their opposition to the maritime border demarcation treaty (16 April 2016).

The Islands crisis: a turning point?

The analysis of political talk shows' coverage of the Islands crisis has shown that different hosts' positions in the media field led them to adopt diverging discursive strategies. What remains to be determined is whether these strategies exacerbated securocrats' discontent with the media's performance, thereby precipitating the heteronomization of the field. As previously mentioned, the rhetoric of henchmen like Ahmed Moussa most closely resembles securocrats' discourse. Therefore, these hosts risked little repercussions in the aftermath of the Islands crisis. Coincidentally, Moussa's program, which was first broadcast on *Sada Elbalad* in 2014, is the longest-continuously-running political talk show on Egyptian television. All other prominent hosts have been, if not suspended from appearing on television for some time, at least reshuffled across networks and programs as a response to declining audience ratings since securocrats stripped the media of its autonomy.

On the other hand, the regime's dissatisfaction with hosts such as Ibrahim Eissa, which led to him being *de facto* banned from appearing on television for almost five years, was not

particularly shocking. Oppositional discourse might be tolerable in contexts of controlled political liberalization, but it was irreconcilable with securocrats' changed attitudes towards the media after the 25th of January uprising.

While vocal critics of the Islands deal undoubtedly contributed to securocrats' decision to strip talk show hosts of what remained of their autonomy, they were relatively few and were quickly sacked after the crisis. They did not warrant the considerable efforts and resources allocated by the intelligence apparatuses to restructure the media field's balance of power. Most accounts suggest that securocrats' media empire accrued immense costs with little to no political or economic gains, leading to large layoffs in most satellite networks (Arabi21, 2018; Hakim, 2019). Considering the unprecedented scale and cost of intelligence apparatuses' venture into the media, one can assume that they were motivated by a more general dissatisfaction with the media's performance during the crisis.

Hence, it is more interesting to look at the potential shortcomings in the eyes of securocrats of the discursive strategy adopted by the largest segment of established Mubarak-era talk show hosts. Unlike critical pundits who deliberately attacked the regime, secular preachers attempted to protect the hegemonic order but failed to do so. Thus, the Islands crisis can be read as securocrats' realization of the risks attached to allowing secular preachers to make editorial choices and formulate strategies with a relative degree of autonomy, according to their perception of the regime's interest. This reading of securocrats' frustrations with the media is substantiated by El-Sisi vowing to rebuild the state's media apparatus (Al-Hurra, 2013), framing secular preacher's journalistic practices as *Ijtihad*[iv]—a necessary evil of the past that became obsolete now that the state can speak for itself (Sada Elbalad, 2014), and yearning for Nasser's docile media (Abbas, 2014). Understanding why secular preachers' discourse during the Islands crisis likely confirmed securocrats' views requires hypothesizing on the adverse effects the pluralistic strategy might have had.

Secular preachers' in-betweenness legitimized both opponents' positions of authority and the arguments they brought forward to criticize the deal. Talk show hosts' wariness of taking a clear stance on the 'Egyptianness' or 'Saudiness' of Tiran and Sanafir made them unable to offer a satisfactory framing of the central issue of the debate. They failed to articulate the nodal signifier of the counter-hegemonic project, which hinged on the 'Egyptianness' of the two islands. If the entire crisis could be subsumed in the struggle around the articulation of the floating signifier 'Tiran and Sanafir', then the effectiveness of the pluralistic discursive strategy was stunted by its refusal to participate in this crucial contest over meaning.

Furthermore, the pluralistic discursive strategy's failure to draw a clear line of antagonism could be read as a legitimization of opponents' right to criticize the cession of Tiran and Sanafir. Both Moussa and Eissa constructed a polarized social reality that is separated into two camps, which are each held together by chains of equivalence (Torfing, 1999: 97). On the other hand, chains of difference are more prevalent than chains of equivalence in Al-Hadidi's discourse, leading to a more complex social reality. This reflects a pluralistic view of society. Inspired by the controlled liberalization of the late Mubarak era, this discourse framed opponents of the deal as legitimate political actors so long as they remain within the regime's hegemonic consensus. As a result, secular preachers such as Al-Hadidi gave platforms to law professors and historians who opposed the maritime border demarcation treaty and portrayed protesters in a mostly favorable light.

This in-betweenness earned Al-Hadidi's two-year de facto ban from Egyptian television screens in 2018. Protective of their autonomy, she and other secular preachers increasingly collided with securocrats, who were intent on stripping the media field of its autonomy in the years that followed the Islands crisis. While Al-Hadidi, Eissa, and other hosts who had been suspended have since reappeared on the screens, they have been reduced to mere mouthpieces and their shows to a shadow of their former selves.

As a result of the severe economic crisis the country has been traversing since the Covid-19 pandemic and the outbreak of the Ukraine War, Egyptian pundits started occasionally adopting a slightly looser tone. However, these carefully choreographed performances are not indicative of a liberalization of public space. Rather, much like the national dialogue initiative launched by El-Sisi in August 2022, they are transparently obvious top-bottom attempts to absorb popular discontent. In light of the persistent heteronomy of Egyptian media, traditional fieldwork in the production circuit of talk shows remains impossible.

Consequently, I believe that content analysis remains the most productive approach to studying Egyptian media. Future research should make use of this methodology to understand how the El-Sisi regime is employing its media apparatus in the face of the turbulent times ahead. The working assumption of this article has been that political talk shows preempt or contain dislocations to the hegemonic discourse. While this hypothesis has been useful to compare different hosts' strategies, it fails to capture the full breadth of how media does or does not contribute to authoritarian resilience. The assemblage of vocal and physical performances of hosts, as well as other visual and sonic elements of talk shows require further investigation to develop a better understanding of the affects they cultivate with audiences. With the most recent research on Egyptian television audiences being almost ten years old, the use of focus groups or participant observation could answer crucial questions about who watches these programs and how they watch them.

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[i] 'Upgraded authoritarianism' is a notion that refers to how authoritarian resilience in the Middle East is due to the adaptability of its regimes. Despite the shortcomings of Heydemann's concept and its teleological assumptions, it highlights how the controlled liberalization of the Mubarak regime was the modus operandi of a *new and improved* brand of authoritarianism.

[ii] The term securocrats is derived from Abdelrahman's notion of securocratic state (2017). It is used here to refer to the security professionals who are at the center of the post-2013 regime, namely the National Security Agency, the Military Intelligence Administration, and the General Intelligence Directorate.

[iii] The term *secular preachers* was coined by El Khachab in reference to how Egyptians watch and critically engage with political talk shows (2016).

[iv] The term refers to the interpretative endeavor that a Muslim scholar undertakes to derive a ruling from the principles of the Quran and the Sunna in cases where no rule was explicitly formulated in these two corpora. This lexical borrowing implies that the God/Prophet-Scholar relationship is similar to the state-media relationship in al-Sisi's mind. Secular preachers are only allowed to navigate the spaces where the holy scripture of the state is silent.