

# The Evolution of Arabism: From One Arab Idol to Multiple Arab Idols

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Through 2010 to 2017, the show *Arab Idol* or *Mahbub Al Arab* ran through Saudi Arabia's *Middle East Broadcasting Company* or *MBC*, a powerful television network that records in Dubai and airs free of charge in all Arab states. *Arab Idol* was just one of many global offshoots of the Idol franchises. In fact, it wasn't even the first Arab one. The first was what is now an almost forgotten version titled *Superstar* that aired on the late Saad Al Harari's *Future TV* from 2003 until 2007. Through all its seasons, *Superstar* was acknowledged as the most popular show that ran on Arab Television (Kreidy 2010) and produced a list of mainstream artists including Diana Karazoun and Melhem Zain. Similarly, *Arab Idol* also scored an exceptionally high viewership, estimated by Al Arabiya news channel at a two-third's share of all Arab TV (Al Arabiya 2013). It also debuted Mohammad Assaf who quickly became a global icon of the Palestinian cause, for whom a staggering 120 million viewers tuned in for the season's finale (The National News 2016), which he predictably went on to win (Malik 2022).

While both may seem like ordinary franchises of a global talent show, they do exhibit a notable departure from the dominant model. The majority of the global franchises are state-centric such as Indian Idol, Italian Idol, Bangladeshi Idol, Nepal Idol, New Zealand Idol, Singapore Idol and many others. While some of the franchises don't always contain the country's name within it such as Sweden's generically named *Idol* or Portugal's *Idolos*, they are still state-centric in that they highlight national talent, target a national audience and are mainly consumed locally. In this, both *Superstar* and *Arab Idol* displayed a clear departure in that neither of them was state-centric. On the contrary, they were targeted at a generic so called Arab audience (Malik 2022).

While the decision to air to a generic Arab audience may seem like an executive production decision to maximize viewership, it can also be interpreted as the expression of a political ideology in an artistic format, in this case Pan-Arabism. Pan-Arabism is a political movement predicated on the axiomatic principle of Arab unity that peaked in its popularity during the 50s and the 60s. Pan-Arabist ideology is nested in a view of all Arabs as (organically) one nation, as evident in notions of an Arabic *Umma* or *Al Watan Al Arabi (The Arab Nation)* or *Al Sha'ab Al Arabi (The Arab people)*. Pan-Arabism as a formalized philosophy was developed and articulated by influential intellectuals such as Zaki Al-Arsuzi, Satti Al Husry, Michele Aflaq and Salah Al-Din Al-Bittar, gripping entire generations of then present and future Arabs. Amongst whom were leaders who made pan-Arabism their grand political projects including Gamal Abdel Nasser, Hafez Al Assad, Saddam Hussein and briefly Muammar Al Gaddafi.

Important to the pan-Arabist goal was the revival and promotion of the Arab identity. To aid that, the Arab league launched the Pan-Arab games in 1953 to express cultural unity between the Arab states (Henry, Amara and Al-Tauqi 2003). Similarly, Satti Al Husry ensured Arab identity diffusion through centralizing Iraq's curriculum (Zhukovskiy 2019). Meanwhile, Gamal Abdel Nasser directly addressed an imaginary Arab nation '*from the ocean to the gulf*' through one of the most famous tools for mass Arab identity promotion; *Sawt Al Arab*. Similarly, in a modern media framework, *Superstar* was the first unique media production that expressed cultural unity between the Arabs, emphasized one Arab identity and transcended political borders.

Indeed, *Superstar's* pan-Arab format was evident from the beginning even in its objective of seeking and finding talent from all 22 Arab states and to engage them. By the second season in 2004, *Superstar* also held auditions

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internationally for the Arab diaspora (Meizel 2007). By that, *Superstar* acknowledged the numerical significance of the global Arab diaspora, gave them representation and most importantly accepted geographically dislocated Arabs as Arabs *enough* to be branded ‘*The Superstar of the Arabs*’; the title at stake. This marked an important departure from a general resistance and deep distrust of *foreign* Arabs. *Superstar* set up precedent for *Arab Idol*, which also held auditions in international cities like Paris and Berlin (Malik 2022), arguably reinforcing the view that a renegotiation of what it means to be Arab in a globalized world was taking place. In that sense, *Superstar* and its successor *Arab Idol* weren’t just ordinary tools for a cultural promotion of the Arab identity, but were also visual vehicles for its evolution. In retrospect, this might be the most important political legacy of both shows, begging further research.

Furthermore, both *Superstar* and *Arab Idol* judges made plenty of remarks to and about the Arab world by using phrases like *Kul Al Alam Al Arabi* (*the entire Arab world*), *Al Watan Al Arabi* and *Al Umma Al Arabiyya* (Malik 2022). For instance, judge Assi Al Hellani congratulated season 2 winner Mohammad Assaf on air by remarking: “I congratulate the entire Arab world [Al Watan Al Arabi] ...because Mohammad is Arab, not just Palestinian” (Malik 2022). While textbook pan-Arabist slogans, Shibley Telhami argues that the overall rhetoric of both shows doesn’t embody the same pan-Arabism associated with the political project of statehood characteristic of the 50s and 60s (Phillips 2012). It is instead a macro nationalism that calls for a loose Arab unity through cultural, political and ideological cooperation *through* the established Arab states (Phillips 2012). This, he calls “New Arabism” (Phillips 2012).

While the distinction between the Arabism of *Sawt Al Arab* and that of *Superstar* and *Arab Idol* for instance is clear, I argue that it is equally clear that it is wrong to assert that they were apolitical either. This is despite both shows’ admittedly rhetorical pan-Arabist ideology (Kreidy 2010) that stripped the underlying political argument of its intellectual impact. Instead, the peripherally political nature of *Superstar* and *Arab Idol* was significant because of the authoritarian constraints despite which this Arab macro nationalism was expressed. I further argue that the political significance of *Superstar* wasn’t designed and packaged by the production team, but was the message interpreted by an Arab audience. This is a direct consequence of the ideological and political void that had become a permanent regional characteristic (Awwad 2005). Hence, it is my view that *Superstar* and *Arab Idol* inspired the resurrection of a constrained cultural Arabism that is only performatively political. This cultural Arabism is evident, for instance in *Superstar*’s production decision to suspend the show for a month after the US invasion of Iraq, showing Arab solidarity and unity (Meizel 2007). However, the performative nature of the show was also evident in its resumption shortly afterwards, which enraged plenty in the Arab world, including Libyan president Muammar Gaddafi and Jordan’s Muslim Brotherhood branch (Meizel 2007).

The particular form of cultural, performative Arabism that emerged in *Superstar* and *Arab Idol* can be explained by noting that the Arab identity itself is a situational, compounded identity (AbdelRahim 2005). For instance, when Arabism was a strong contender against Islamism and Nationalism for the basis of state-formation before the emergence of the modern Middle East, it qualified as a possible primary identity. However, now that the Arab identity is subordinate to state identity (Phillips 2012), it qualifies only as a possible secondary identity against the Muslim identity. Naturally, the demotion of the Arab identity from a competitive primary to a secondary one included a reduction in its ideological and political significance, as embodied in the domesticated Arabism of *Superstar* and *Arab Idol*.

Meanwhile, the Arab identity remains the primary identity regionally; in which the Middle East is, to some, synonymous with the Arab world (Monier 2014). This naturally excludes important states in the Middle East such as Iran, Turkey and Israel. Indeed, the Arab identity has long been noted to be exclusionary. Consider, for instance, the fact that Shi’a Arab minorities in some of the Arabian Gulf states are frequently not portrayed as Arabs (Malik 2022). While the Arab identity has regional cultural hegemony in the Middle East, Lebanon maintained cultural hegemony on Pan-Arab television (Malik 2022). Hence, *Superstar* was novel in that it gave access to all contestants to a pan-Arab audience, ensuring equal cultural representation to all Arab states.

However, while a pan-Arab macro nationalism was built into both shows, so was state nationalism. For instance, consider that contestants were presented with explicit mention of their state identities and a small country flag next to

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their voting codes, emphasizing and essentializing national identities. Hence, a clear trend emerged of voting in line with national identities (Meizel 2007). So much so that Jordanians claimed that voting for their 'national representative' was a national duty (Meizel 2007). It was this national duty that local service providers capitalized on by providing voters with discounts and special offers (Malik 2022). Similarly, both Muammar Gaddafi and Yasser Arafat verbally supported their 'national representative' in *Superstar's* second season, while King Abdallah congratulated season one's winner, Jordanian contestant Diana Karazon personally over the phone (Meizel 2007).

Phillips argues that *Superstar* and *Arab Idol* actually promoted dual identities; a supranational Arab one and a national one (Phillips 2012). In other words, the shows paradoxically promoted both Arab unity and intense nationalist rivalries. This intra-Arab rivalry amounted to a competition of the nations, as opposed to that of the talents. This legitimated and almost endorsed intra-Arab competition, as approved circles of comparison and preceding. The net political message wrapped in the paradox was clear; the cultivation of an Arabism that stops when nationalism starts. In other words, the shows reaffirm the status of the Arab identity as only a secondary identity subordinate to state identities, as evident in the rallying behind national 'representatives' while chanting Arabist slogans.

However, by the end of 2017, *Arab Idol* had lost its once strong momentum, having aired its last season. Shortly afterwards, the *Idols* franchises reappeared again, however, this time as national offshoots. The first national *Idols* offshoot in the Arab world was *Iraq Idol*, which aired in 2021 on *MBC Iraq*. *Iraq Idol* was designed to fit the global model of a state-centric talent show, in which the talent, the judges, the targeted audience and the votes were all Iraqi. It also privileged Iraqi music over generic pan-Arab music. Similarly, by 2022, the second Arab state-centric offshoot of the program appeared, this time *Saudi Idol* which aired on *MBC1*. *Saudi Idol* followed the same format as *Iraq Idol*, with the exception of non-Saudi judges. Both *Iraq Idol* and *Saudi Idol* did not hold global auditions, limiting the contestants to real-time resident-citizens of their states. Another discrepancy was found in the unavailability of *Iraq Idol* on *MBC's* streaming platform *Shahid*, but the availability of *Saudi Idol*.

A repositioning is evident in the shift from a supra-national *Arab Idol* to a national, state-centric collection of Arab Idols and the political message embedded within this shift is the further demotion of Arabism to the point of irrelevance. In other words, the strengthening of state-nationalism to the choke point of Arabism. This can be linked to a general geopolitical repositioning in the region with an ideological shift from Arabism to Arab regionalism, more occupied with cooperation and economic coordination than identity politics (Awad 2022). It can also be linked to the ongoing renegotiation of both the Arab identity and the Arabization of the region, after the signing of the Abraham Accords. This is particularly consequential because Palestine was often over-represented in *Superstar* and *Arab Idol* and was a main pillar of Arabism (Malik 2022).

The trend of Arab Idols is expected to continue with more Arabic franchises appearing possibly first on *MBC Misr*, *MBC's* dedicated Egyptian channel. While it may be difficult to limit an Egyptian Idol to an Egyptian audience, because of the cultural (and musical) significance of Egypt in the rest of the Arab world, its success might be conclusive visual evidence of the death of Arabism.

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