“MAN OF THE IMPOSSIBLE”
NATIONALISM AND CREATING NEW HEROES IN POST-NASSER EGYPT

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INTRODUCTION

Modern representatives of the superhero genre are no less impressive than their predecessors in that illustrious fraternity. However, while in antiquity the orally transmitted epic poem was the medium in which tales of heroic exploits were circulated to a limited audience, today the superhero’s prowess is readily available worldwide by means of mass produced book, countless moving pictures and television productions and through Internet search engines. Superman, Captain Marvel, Wonder Woman, James Bond – these and other larger-than-life figures are the counterparts of the classic superheroes of the past. While they may differ from the latter in that science, rather than the gods, provided them with their extraordinary gifts, and while they often wear more colorful costumes and speak in other languages, the two groups are far more similar than they appear to be at first glance. Indeed, Achilles and Superman, Rustam and Captain Marvel, the Hulk and the Frankenstein being, Odysseus and James Bond – all are essentially blood brothers, their shared essence derived from a wellspring of motifs that the Swiss psychotherapist Carl Jung designated with the term archetypes.1

The idea presented in Benedikt Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* that nations and nationalism are essentially imaginary constructs that allow for the development of new social and political groupings points to the importance of collective imagination in solidifying and envisioning the nation. The way individuals envision their identity and their nation’s identity is manifested in the new production of myth, history, culture, cuisine, etc.2 One of the essential binding forces in these new nations is the spread of literacy and what might be called print capitalism, that is, the phenomenon of high interest in mass-producing print media with the purpose of promoting consumption of that media in order to make a profit. The two phenomena undoubtedly have a reciprocal effect. Widespread literacy, which was virtually unheard of and unthinkable just a few

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centuries ago, is one of the major channels through which citizens of modern nations
connect with each other on an intellectual level.

If one were seeking to examine the ways in which new nationalist creations are
articulated, these new media of print capitalism are undoubtedly an invaluable source.
Within the realm of popular fiction and literature one finds the creation of new stories
with new characters that express and better address the changing concerns and ideas of
the nation. To refer to the above quote from Don LoCiero’s 2007 work entitled
Superheroes and Gods, the new media of print capitalism, books, newspapers, magazines
and the like provide the space for the creation of new mythologies about the nation. If
t folk poetry provided the space for the creation of epics like the Iliad long ago, today’s
graphic novels indeed provide the basis for American legends such as Superman and G.I.
Joe. Modern history books and comic books alike serve a similar function in this regard
of creating a mythology, historical or otherwise, to be shared in a collective national
consciousness.

However, history tells us that not all experiences of nationalism are the same. In
countries that experienced some form of colonialism, the consequence of nationalism and
the concurrent modernity it effects has often been Westernization and incorporation of
“Western” or foreign values. Just as the political systems of so many countries are

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3 Of course some may argue that comparing the Iliad and Superman comics is not an equal comparison due
to the sophistication of the former; however, one must bear in mind that the Iliad most likely does not
represent the first recounting of the tale of Odysseus. Rather, it itself in all probability stands on a tradition
of stories, just as the original Superman comics drew on the tales of Greek mythology and later comics
drew on the Superman comics themselves.
inherited from colonial Western powers, new cultural products, including even the most nationalist of literature, bear the imprint of a visible Western hegemony. As Ibrahim Kaya has written in dealing with the issue of the Turkish experience of modernity, this tension between Westernization, modernation and nationalism is pervasive even for countries that were not formally colonized.\(^4\) Print capitalism brought new genres of popular literature from the West to other parts of the world. These works carried with them the values and modes of representations of the cultures from which they came, creating an interference with and disconnect from their new audiences. In this way, children all over the world consume the products of Western and Japanese graphic fiction and animation, but the notion of an Egyptian or Turkish superhero, for example, gaining popularity in these foreign countries somehow seems ludicrous. One who grew up as an observer of this phenomenon in a thriving national culture reading about the heroic exploits of foreigners from the very colonial nations that their nationalism stood against might question this paradox and seek to change it. The project of “decolonising the mind” as it was called by Kenyan novelist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o in which intellectuals operating in a postcolonial environment attempt to counteract the influences of the colonial and imperial experiences through a rejuvenation of local traditions and modes of expression has been of major concern in countries across the globe.\(^5\) For Turkish authors in the

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\(^5\) Ngugi suggests that in order to combat the deep psychological and intellectual effects of colonialism and the subordination that they bring about, African authors must choose to write in their native languages, for
genre of graphic fiction, this meant the creation of new comic book series with Turkish heroes to compete with the West both in their storylines and on the Turkish market.⁶

Egypt has faced similar challenges in overcoming the effects of European colonial impact throughout the 20th century, particularly as Arab states began to achieve independence in the years following World War II. As a country having both great regional significance and a long experience of involved British colonialism, Egypt found itself at the center of the process of decolonization in the Middle East. The revolution of 1952 led in part by the prominent political figure Gamal Abdel Nasser, whose ideology of socialist Arab nationalism, anti-imperialism and strategic non-alignment came to dominate Arab political discourse, inspired politicians and citizens of the Arab world for years to come. Indeed, the politics of Nasser captured the hearts and political imaginations of millions of Egyptians who experienced growth in opportunities and income during the 1950s and 1960s as Egypt emerged as Egypt attained a degree of regional hegemony as the primary challenge to Western attempts to maintain colonial relationships with the Middle East and the newly formed state of Israel in the Arab World. However, the colossal defeat that Egypt suffered at the hands of Israel in 1967, the subsequent death of Nasser, and the relatively unsuccessful wars and policies of the 1970s under President Anwar Sadat left Egypt at a crossroads by the beginning of the

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⁶ Levent Çantek, Türkiye’de Çizgi Roman (Istanbul: İletişim, 1996).
1980s. Having made peace with Israel and abandoned many of the social services that made Nasser’s government so popular, the Egyptian government was faced with the reality that it had abandoned most of the principles upon which the new Egyptian nationalism was founded and was neither able nor willing to satisfy the demands of its citizens. While heralded from certain perspectives in the West as a time in which Egypt finally made peace with its neighbor Israel, it should also be viewed as a time of anxiety, uncertainty and even despair marked by a seemingly final political defeat and failure of Nasserism.

The political and economic ramifications of this period of transformation in Egypt have begun to receive attention from political scientists and historians who have recognized the development of new trends such as the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood’s political influence, the failure of Egyptian mechanisms of social welfare, the dominance of businesses over the Egyptian state, and the deeper and deeper entrenchment of a bureaucracy that serves little more purpose than sustaining itself. Of course, most symbolic of the political failures of Nasserism is the years of imbalanced peace with Israel and the normalization of relations between the two countries, as well as the Mubarak regime’s dependence on the support of the United States. This being said, policies and politicians only comprise one side of the complex picture of Egyptian

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7 One such recent work is the 2005 book entitled “The Strong Regime and the Weak State: Management of Financial Crisis and Political Change in the Reign of Mubarak,” written in Arabic by Samer Soliman. I will discuss the arguments of this work in further depth later. Sāmir Sulaymān, al-Nizām al-Qawiyy wa al-Dawla al-Ḍażīfa (Cairo: Merit, 2005).
nationalism. The principles of Egyptian nationalism popularized by during the climax of the independence movement still resonate with the Egyptian public. While the death of Nasser may have marked the end of his ideology on one front, on the cultural level many of Nasser’s goals have in fact come to fruition only after his death. Much has been written about prominent Egyptian writers such as Naguib Mahfouz, Tawfiq al-Hakim and Taha Hussein; however, this study will not attempt to examine the topic of Egyptian nationalism through the lens of official political discourse nor through the publications of prominent Egyptian thinkers in essays and books. Rather, I will take up the issue through the case in point of another popular Egyptian author who has published hundreds of works and sold millions of books in his career: author of youth fiction Nabil Farouk.

Nabil Farouk is the author of a popular Egyptian spy novel series that was first published in the early 1980s during the moment of intense social crisis described above. The series, entitled *Man of the Impossible* (*Rajul al-Mustaḥīl*), represents one of the earliest attempts at creating original adventure literature targeted at youth in Egypt that addresses directly the political and social concerns of the time. I will situate this series in its international historical context in the adventure genre, which, as will be shown, is a key factor in the formation and replication of an abstract nationalist mythology, as well as in its own historical context for Egypt. The genre of adventure literature was conveyed to Egypt through the channels of economic imperialism from the West. Before the advent of a native genre in the 1980s, Egyptians youth read mainly about the exploits of foreigners in translated works as well as in the original languages. As such, the development itself
of a native genre represents a conscious effort to subvert the imbalanced relationship between Egypt and the former colonial powers. I will examine how the author Farouk articulates the heroism of the books’ protagonist, agent Adham Sabri, in a unique attempt to create a modern Arab hero within the genre. As a coda to this investigation, I will try to gauge popular response among readers to Farouk’s through an examination of current discussions of the series in internet forums and fan websites in order to explore the extent to which Rajul al-Mustaḥīl resonates with the public as well as points at which readers disagree, agree or do not notice the messages put forth in the novels.

In creating the Rajul al-Mustaḥīl series, he has spearheaded the process of developing literary genre that is imbued with values that he deems fit for Egyptian youth. These are a reflection of commonly held values in Egypt, and Farouk’s worldview is one in which Egypt appears as the anti-imperial, modern and powerful nation that exercises a degree of hegemony, is able to challenge strong enemies such as the Untied State and Israel, and successfully defends its interests abroad. Such a portrayal arises out of the converging factors of nationalism and crisis. Nabil Farouk sought to create an Egyptian hero in a time in which Egypt needed such a hero. In creating Adham Sabri, the “Man of the Impossible,” Farouk consciously defies the expectations for the role of “the Arab” in modern spy fiction, brushing aside Orientalist stereotypes and creating a world in which an Egyptian man reigns supreme over a world full of inferior spies, rebels and terrorist from Western countries along with a slew of reversals of typically Arab roles in Western fiction featuring Israeli collaborators and suicide bombers. Adham Sabri represents a hero
that embodies a mainstream Egyptian nationalism with a capacity for universal appeal as a heroic, modern, morally and religiously sound, and most of all patriotic model of masculine dominance. In addition, Farouk displays an internalization of Egyptian nationalist values as put forth by during Nasser’s years and successfully conveys them to a younger generation. Thus, the series stands as proof of the success and continuity of Arab nationalism in Egypt through the 1980s and 1990s, despite the myriad administrative failures of the government that by that time had become once but no longer the steward of said nationalism.

At the same time Nabil Farouk’s work also exhibit an intellectual phenomenon described by Joseph Massad in his recent work entitled Desiring Arabs. According to Massad, Arab intellectuals, even in their resistance to the West, clearly have internalized many of the values of Western culture and modernity. Thus, they articulate their resistance to the West not necessarily through a rejecting of Western values, but rather, through assertions that they in fact are equally or more modern and possess superior morals.\(^8\) In creating an Arab hero intended to surpass Western counterparts in morality tied to an Arab identity, Farouk participates in the same discourse on modernity as other Arab intellectuals, however, he transmits this discourse to the arena of popular literature targeted at a much wider and younger audience. This indicates that the trend identified by Massad in Desiring Arabs is in fact tangibly spreading beyond the “elite” intellectual culture he describes. Aside from key points of morality and geographical positioning,

Nabil Farouk’s *Rajul al-Mustahîl* is very much a modern middle-class hero as is found in Ian Fleming’s James Bond.

Through this study, I hope to contribute to knowledge about the international trend of new adventure literature and its complementary role in nationalist movements on every continent. Many excellent works have been written by American authors on American superheroes and even Turkish authors on Turkish superheroes, however, this study seeks to bring these cultural phenomena together for analysis to show how new heroes emerge in the literature of each nation. By adding the comparison of the Egyptian *Rajul al-Mustahîl* series, I hope to shed some light onto how an anti-imperial nationalism necessitates different national products whether on the level of politics or, as in this case, spy novels. In its close resemblance to works of Western fiction, Rajul al-Mustahîl displays the effects of Western hegemony on Egyptian nationalism, while at the same time, the anti-imperial messages in the novels assure that project of Egyptian nationalism put forth by Gamal Abdel Nasser and the many other proponents of the independence movement are etched into the emerging national mythology of modern Egypt.
Heroes and tales of heroism play a vital role in the development and maintaining of group identity. Most documented societies possess orally and textually transmitted stories and myths of fictional or semi-historical figures that embody the values and concerns of the collective social consciousness. Scholars from disciplines within the

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humanities have recognized this important function of myth. One of the most recent and interesting contributions to the discussion of heroes and their cultural roles is a comparative study by Don LoCicero entitled *Superheroes and Gods*. In his analysis of various ancient cultures such as those of Babylonia, Greece, India, Persia, Egypt, Rome, Scandanavia and so forth, LoCicero points to similarities between the so-called heroes of mythology and the modern superheroes of comic books, novels and movies. According to LoCicero, modern superheroes hold the same significance in society as Greek divinities and mythology, for example, held in the cultural consciousness of ancient Greek society. In LoCiero’s work, foremost is the idea of the archetype. For Jung, an archetype was “a psychic system of a collective, universal and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals.” In other words, the archetype is something part of a collective unconscious that is present for all individuals, which manifests recurrently in forms of cultural production.

While Jung’s heroic archetypes must on some psychological level be universal, it is much more fruitful here to discuss the creation and reinvention of archetypes, which results from the collective desire for temporally and socially contextualized manifestations of archetypical figures upon whom can be laid as customized exterior, leading to the creation of new heroes and myths. In order to illustrate this point by example I will briefly take up the example of American 20th century comic book heroes.

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10 LoCiero.
11 *Ibid 5*.
12 *Ibid 5*. 
Superman is perhaps the most prominent superhero of American invention. Although he may have become a general cultural archetype of heroism in American culture, Superman’s origins can be traced to the anxieties a pivotal national moment during the Great Depression and what followed in World War II. Superman was created by American writer Jerry Siegel and Canadian artist Joe Schuster, both of whom came from Jewish immigrant backgrounds. The adventures of Superman were first published by DC Comics in the late 1930s around the same time that Batman and other superheroes were emerging. These superheroes helped control the crime of America’s economically depressed cities at times when law enforcement was unable to in addition to protecting the citizens of America and the world from powerful evil forces. Superman’s omnipotence provided reassurance for an American public living in a time of economic uncertainty. When the United States entered World War II, this role was magnified, as Superman and the like became protectors of America battling so called “Japanazis.”

The importance of these superheroes was their ability to confront modern threats in the American national consciousness. Batman, the alter ego of self-made man Bruce Wayne whose superpowers arise not from some biological abnormality, but rather, from his own investment in developing powerful gadgets and mastery of combat, was also employed in the propaganda efforts to promote wartime solidarity. These heroic archetypes served many purposes. First of all, they allowed the wartime struggle to be more easily contextualized as a battle of good vs. evil, since the superheroes would naturally be

\[13\] Ibid 163-165.
understood to be on the side of the moral right. Second of all, they were heroes that fought modern enemies by modern means in a modern setting. They were American and they were up-to-date. Odysseus could have been a fine model of heroism, but his enemies were the Trojans and not “Japanazis;” his weapon of choice was a sword and not a gun. Moreover, only a new hero could wrestle with new modern conditions, in other words, be “faster than a speeding bullet” or “more powerful than a locomotive” as was said of Superman.

Far from being the exception, American superheroes were part of a continuing observable international trend that produced new, modern heroes and adventures that spread through the channels of print capitalism. These heroes and the stories embody the ideals, values and concerns of their authors and times and places in which they were produced. The most famous and successful French-language adventure series, for example, is the serial comic *Les Aventures de Tintin* by Belgian artist Georges Remi, better known by his penname “Hergé.” Although originating in Belgium, the series rose to international fame, particularly in the Francophone world, before and after World War II. Unlike Superman or many other archetypal heroes, Tintin was not characterized by a dominant masculinity. The characterization of Tintin is almost completely absent. In fact,
Tintin means “nothing” in French. As Tom McCarthy asserts in *Tintin and the Secret of Literature*, Tintin stands as “a typographic vanishing point,” meaning that he has no real backstory, no sexuality and no internal conflicts.\(^\text{14}\) The reader is aware that Tintin is a curious young journalist who constantly finds himself embroiled in mysteries and conspiracies in his various travels throughout the globe. While he occasionally participates in brief physical fights as a consequence of his sense of obligation to defend others and his attempts to uncover the nefarious plots of criminals, his small physique and non-confrontational personality embody a different kind of heroism. Tintin uses his intellect to defeat enemies, and his adventures are very much reminiscent of detective fiction and travel literature, both of which were very popular. His role as pseudo-journalist is to provide the reader with balanced and nuanced understanding of the different locales to which he travels. It is necessary for Tintin to have as little complexity as possible to prevent interference and create a portrayal of the world that is somehow taken as credible, realistic or objective. In this way, Tintin is able to see the whole world from close-up, yet despite his intimate involvement, he is able to provide purportedly objective judgements and observations about other peoples and places.

The series finds its roots in the colonial era, during which Belgium held colonies in Africa, the largest being Congo. Tintin’s second adventure, *Tintin au Congo* published between 1930 and 1931, is full of colonial themes. Tintin appears in a paternalistic role as a tutor for Congolese, bringing them knowledge of medicine and science. This portrayal is

very much in line with the paternalistic colonial rhetoric of the time period.\textsuperscript{15} Just as Superman emerged as an omnipotent but self-restrained and benevolent hero along with America’s envisioning of itself as the world’s “Superman” during Word War II, the portrayal of Tintin as bearer of civilization would have appealed to the way in which colonial Belgium would have liked to imagine its role in Congo.\textsuperscript{16} Tintin’s adventures brought him to foreign and exotic places that his readers could probably have never seen for themselves. The overriding themes of Tintin’s adventures are clearly inherited from the colonial era in which the series finds its source. Tintin possesses an ability to solve any mystery and accomplish any feat in any setting. He is able to go anywhere; his world has no borders. This is clear whether he is retracing the steps of T.E. Lawrence across the deserts of Arabia\textsuperscript{17} or being the first man to set foot on the Moon.\textsuperscript{18} These adventurous exploits served to expand the horizons of a colonial imagination and endow a certain confidence in the infinite potential of adventure. Despite this, his presence in these


\textsuperscript{16} While this model may have been acceptable in the 1930s, the experience of Belgium and the rest of Europe during World War II effected a change in public opinion. The paternalistic portrayals found in Tintin’s adventure in Congo were no longer politically correct, and thus, the issue was redrawn in 1946 with some notable changes including erasure of references to Belgium’s colonial role in Congo. For this reason some critics and Hergé himself claim that the earlier issues to based on the naïveté and racism that were endemic to the times and that the later issues reflect a more mature, nuanced and fair portrayal of “others;” however, as will be shown later, colonial stereotypes continue to abound in Tintin’s later adventures, if slightly more nuanced, and a colonial, Western hegemonic portrayal pervades throughout the series.

\textsuperscript{17} Hergé, \textit{Les Cigars du Pharaon} (Paris: Casterman, 1934) 23. In this adventure Tintin is led on an adventure to uncover an opium smuggling ring in Cairo, which leads him into and across the deserts of Arabia before finally arriving in India.

\textsuperscript{18} Hergé, \textit{On a marché sur la Lune} (Paris: Casterman, 1954). In this adventure Tintin is part of the first space crew to successfully land on the moon, which was a bit prophetic considering its publication predated the first moon-landing by 15 years.
foreign places is presented as a positive influence rather than meddlesome. The world is not just Tintin’s playground; rather, it is his responsibility. While these themes would probably appeal to large audiences anywhere, they resonated particularly well with the situation of Belgium and other European nations who were striving towards greatness and progress while at the same time beginning realize the limitations of this power as colonial empires began to fall apart.

The spy novels featuring British intelligence officer James Bond, created by Ian Fleming in the 1950s, were likewise an embodiment of the British Empire, its anxieties and its aspirations during the 1950s, as Jeremy Black has argued in the 2001 book entitled The Politics of James Bond. The first Bond novel, Casino Royale, was published in 1953. The political tone of the book fit appropriately in the post-World War II context of conservatism and anti-communism that typified early Cold War Britain. Bond’s international exploits on behalf of Britain fit with Churchill’s attempts to make Britain an international power once again and usher in a “New Elizabethan Age.” As Tony Bennett and Jane Woollacott wrote in their 1987 book entitled Bond and Beyond: The Political Career of a Popular Hero,

As, above all, a pre-eminently English hero, single-handedly saving the western World from threatening catastrophe, Bond embodied the imaginary possibility that England might once again be placed at the centre of world affairs during a period when its world-power status was visibly and rapidly declining.20

James Bond was a reassurance to an uncertain British public that England remained an international power able to independently influence world affairs at a time when it increasingly appeared that the United States had overtaken the role of Britain in the West after World War II. However, James Bond was not just a national hero, but a specific kind of hero that could achieve mass appeal. Bennett and Woollacott call Bond “a political hero for the middle class” because he was essentially a government employee that achieves great things in service of the country. Bond was not royalty nor was he wealthy. He was also a hero for the middle class precisely because the novels and later films were targeted at and marketed for consumption by the masses.21

Like Tintin and countless other modern adventurers in popular fiction, James Bond successfully travels the world, beating foreign enemies on their own turf and upholding British supremacy. However, what stands out about James Bond is his masculinity, especially with regards to his sexuality. In Suzanne Moores’ 1989 article entitled “Britain’s Macho Man,” she discusses James Bond posing the following question, “Where could you find a better example of xenophobic, chauvinistic behaviour?” Whether as a fantasy of post-colonial or masculine power, James Bond films

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21 Ibid 25-29.
are rampantly reactionary. So how do you explain (the novels’) popularity?" 22 This question, which addresses questions of academics studying the “Bond phenomenon, should answer itself. James Bond’s chauvinism and sexual conquest of other (female) spies, while perhaps morally reprehensible to some, nonetheless serves as a metaphor for British masculine dominance that must enjoy wide appeal. Indeed, it is Bond’s sexual encounters with exotic female enemies that represent a most complete victory for Bond. A male enemy who resists, fights and is beaten represents a victory for James Bond, but a female enemy who is yet unable to resist Bond’s sexuality symbolizes Bond’s, and thus Britain’s dominance even more completely.

The aforementioned role of adventure literature expressing and reaffirming national hegemony in various Western countries has applications even for nations that never held colonial empires or superpower status in modern international politics. Turkey’s national experience, for example, has been somewhat different from those of many countries in Western Europe that were formed around powerful colonial empires. Turkey inherited some land and institutions from the Ottoman Empire, but the Turkish nationalist movement following World War I called for drastic redefinition of national ethnic identity, which led to the promotion of ideas such as Turkishness (Türklük). 23 While an ethnic component has been part of most modern nationalisms, the Turkish experience and the experience of many other nations that were once part of the Ottoman

23 Ibrahim Kaya, Social Theory and Later Modernities: The Turkish Experience (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University, 2004) 48-53.
Empire can be characterized by a more sudden need to create this ethnic component. In addition, Turkey shared with many other countries, including Egypt, a need to define its nationalism against or in the face of Western hegemony. Turkey was never colonized, however, the Turkish War for Independence is remembered as and very much was a struggle against attempts of invasion by Western imperial powers. While nationalisms are frequently defined against various “others” and various times, this anti-colonial sentiment can be seen as much more pronounced in countries whose national foundations rest on some kind of anti-colonial revolution.

This being said, many modern innovations that came about in Western countries were readily imported and adapted by the citizens of Turkey during the 20th Century. For example, Turkey witnessed a major increase in publication of comics, or “graphic literature,” in the years following World War II. During the 1950s many comics translated from Western languages began to appear in newspapers, such as adaptations of Americans Alex Raymond’s Rip Kirby (published as Dedektif Nik) detective series and Hal Foster’s Prince Valiant (published as Kahraman Prens) adventure series set in the European Middle Ages, as well as an adapted version of Tintin (published as Tenten). Cowboy series such as Pekos Bill, Oklahoma! and Tommiks were also introduced by Italian publishing houses.24 The cowboy genre of comics enjoyed great popularity, however, it also caused great controversy in Turkey as well as many Western countries due to the use of firearms by many of the characters. These books were subject to

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24 Levent Cantek, Türkiye’de Çizgi Roman (İstanbul: Iletişim, 1996) 95-105.
censorship in Turkey, and many began to ask why comics featured mostly American and Western heroes as opposed to Turkish heroes produced by Turkish authors in the first place.\footnote{Ibid 103}

At the same time, nationalist concerns began to manifest in Turkish print media. Comics were seen as a way of reinforcing Turkish nationalism through portrayals of successes of the modern state of Turkey and promoting the concept of Turkishness, which refers to an ethnic Turkish nationalism with historical roots in the migrations of Turks from Central Asia and thus encompassed a larger realm of Turkish peoples stretching across Asia. In 1952, two comics about the Turkish War of Independence again the Allied Powers following World War I were also published. These comics detailed the heroism of the people of Turkey and their leader Atatürk during the founding of the modern Republic of Turkey. This war was a significant nationalist moment and symbolized the ability of Turkey to repel foreign invaders.\footnote{Ibid 110} Also, a series entitled Kunuri Savaşı (The Fight of Kunuri) appeared in the pages of Hürriyet, a major newspaper with nationalist and leftist leanings founded in

Advertisement featuring Karaoğlan standing beside Cengiz Han. The caption at the top reads, “Recommend it to your children, students and friends!” from Cantek, Karaoğlan.
1948. This series portrayed the heroism of a brigade of Turkish soldiers that fought alongside Americans during the Korean War near the town of Kunuri. At the time, the Korean War was the biggest confrontation between the United States and its allies communist countries allied with the Soviet Union. Turkey’s participation in this fight was important for the nationalist moment in Turkey, which saw the Soviet Union and communism as a serious and imminent threat. Although these were one-dimensional and purely nationalistic series, they were the first major portrayals of Turkish heroes created by Turkish artists. This development led to a transition away from adaptation of foreign comics to the creation of Turkish comic book heroes and what Levent Cantek terms as an “explosion” of Turkish graphic fiction in the 1960s.27

Of all the 1960s Turkish comics, Karaoğlan by Suat Yalaz was perhaps most prominent and symbolic.28 The character of Karaoğlan was a mixture of old cultural archetypes of heroism with modern innovations and contextualization. The sword-wielding, macho, young “dark hero” has long been an aspect of rural Turkish folklore. This character-type also had a precedent in the world of modern comics in Turkey, as Cantek likens Karaoğlan very much to the “lonesome cowboy”29 types that could be found in the immensely popular Western comics of the 1950s. Karaoğlan’s adventures are situated interestingly in the time of Genghis Khan (in Turkish: Cengiz Han).

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28 The name “Karaoğlan” literally means “dark boy,” but “dark” in this context has the connotations of a strong, powerful and handsome young man.
29 Levent Cantek, Erotik ve milliyetçi bir ikon: Karaoğlan (İstanbul: Oğlak Yayınları, 2003) 81.
According to author Suat Yalaz, he chose this time period in order to give Karaoğlan a powerful and tyrannical force to combat, so that while battling thieves and criminals, there would be a greater evil nemesis.\(^{30}\) Cantek lists several other reasons why the time and place of Genghis Khan was the ideal setting for creating a Turkish hero. The use of this time period allowed for the creation of a fictional past with a real historical basis, giving the series a sort of instant legitimacy and context. Yalaz cast Karaoğlan as an Uygur Turk living in the wilderness of Central Asia. This came at a time in which the young Turkish ethnic nationalism was beginning to turn away from the Islamic and Ottoman past that was heavily influenced by Arab civilization in favor of looking to Central Asia as a sort of launching point for all of Turkish civilization.\(^{31}\) Central Asia as a homeland of Turkishness was an intentional political assertion of Turkish nationalism on the part of Yalaz.\(^{32}\)

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1. Ow…I won’t do it again! That’s enough… Ooww!... But… I’ll make you pay for this… You bastard!

2. Never again huh? Are you going to speak in a proper way, or are you going to keep swearing?

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\(^{30}\) Cantek, *Türkiye’de* 161.

\(^{31}\) Cantek, *Erotik* 39.

\(^{32}\) *Ibid* 40.

\(^{33}\) In this scene Karaoğlan’s exotic captive has clearly done something wrong and he is punishing her accordingly in a display of masculinity. *Ibid* 129.
The other crucial aspect of Karaoğlan’s character with regard to Turkish nationalism aside from his pure Turkish origins in Central Asia was the construction of his masculinity. According to Cantek, Karaoğlan could be characterized as a “sarcastic, sword-in-hand, narcissistic windbag” who, in addition to being an incredibly powerful and brave fighter that moreover fought on the side of good, was a very skilled and successful lover.34 This aspect of his character was so essential and well-developed in the series that Cantek’s 2003 book about Karaoğlan labeled him “an erotic and nationalist icon (Erotik ve milliyetçi bir ikon),” a label that might well be perfectly applied to James Bond in Britain. However, Karaoğlan’s power over women represented much more than a simple Turkish masculinity. Each adventure followed a similar plotline in which Karaoğlan conquers a certain place and in the process has a romantic encounter with an expressly “docile or wild, virgin or whorish foreign woman,” who he “tames.”35 Karaoğlan establishes his supremacy over foreign enemies not just through battle but also through dominating their women. The implications of this portrayal in a Turkish national context are clear; the Turkish hero Karaoğlan reigns supreme over all others, and goes so far as to physically and sexually lewd foreign women who are sometimes presented with “Western features” such as light hair and eyes in contrast to Karaoğlan’s “darkness.” Thus, Karaoğlan emerges as a full and authentic representation of a Turkish ethnic and

34 Ibid. 35 Cantek compares Karaoğlan’s archetype to the many characters portrayed by American film actor Douglas Fairbanks.
nationalist hero in his triumph of Turkishness over foreigner enemies embodied in the archetype of the masculine hero battling the forces of evil in a dualistic framework.

Although each series of adventure literature discussed here bears some differences from the others, some common trends can be established. First, adventure literature necessitates the creation of an imaginary world in which their protagonists and their communities have no limits. This can be seen especially for the case of Tintin and James Bond, who carry out the vast majority of their adventures in exotic locales as opposed to “bringing the action home” so to speak. Both the nation and the hero continue to extend their limits and never face permanent retreat. The nation’s dominance is often mitigated through a hyper-masculine hero. In addition, new heroes seem to arise at vulnerable or anxious moment in which there is a looming threat or rapid change. There is, however, one main difference between the Turkish example given of Karaoğlan and his Euroepan counterparts. Whereas the Western literature emerged “naturally” out of specific national contexts, the Turkish literature emerged as a response or a competitor to foreign series. The stories themselves are enactments or displays of nationalism, but the act of creating adventure literature in these countries who experienced the “cultural colonialism” of Western authors and their literary heroes is in itself part of a post-colonial or nationalist project. This similarity will be found for the case of Egyptian adventure literature, because like Turkey, Egypt fell under the cultural umbrella of Euroepean powers, mainly Britain, in the domain of modern literature.
MAKING AN EGYPTIAN HERO

The above selection from Hergé’s *Les Cigars du Pharaon* illustrates in an uncanny way the relationship between Western adventure literature and its readers in other parts of the world that were in fact colonized or economically and politically subjugated by Western empires. Tintin is pictured seated next to a desert sheikh named Patrash Pasha after being brought into his tent somewhere in the Arabian Peninsula. Much to his surprise, Patrash Pasha confesses how great of a fan he is of Tintin’s heroic adventures as he summons his black slave to bring a copy of one of Tintin’s books, which appears to be *Obejectif Lune*, an adventure in which Tintin and his pals successfully build and pilot a spacecraft to land on the

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Moon.\textsuperscript{37} This particular cell was clearly added in later reprints of the series because \textit{Objectif Lune} was published twenty years after the original released of \textit{Les Cigars du Pharaon}. The scene is a clear expression of pride for the international fame that Tintin’s adventures had risen to. On one hand there is nothing particularly incorrect about this claim to Tintin’s fame. \textit{Les Aventures de Tintin} were translated and published into many languages, including Arabic, and widely read around the world. On the other hand, there is a certain irony or incongruity in this portrayal of a desert sheikh being starstruck by this icon of colonial adventure.

This sense becomes even clearer when we look at the body of \textit{Les Aventures de Tintin} and examine its Orientalist overtones. Take for example the following selection in which Tintin witnesses a swindling Portuguese trader take advantage of his Arab patrons’ lack of consumer knowledge:

The Arab character has unwittingly purchased a bar of soap, which he has mistaken for food and ingested. Thus, he is left angrily vowing reprisal and shaking his fist as bubbles emerge from his mouth. Along with the implication that this Arab is so unfamiliar with soap that he would not know that it is not edible, one finds a portrayal of Arabs as rash and naïve. This stereotyped portrayal pervades Les Cigares du Pharaon and Tintin’s many other adventures in the “Orient.” Arabs are rarely cast in intelligent or heroic roles and usually provide an opportunity for comic relief. Even when Hergé’s portrayal is not overtly offensive, his Arab

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Perhaps most striking is Hergé’s seemingly subconscious desire to humiliate his Arab characters. Consider the below frame:

In this scene the reader finds a detective who has trailed Tintin through the desert approaching a group of praying Muslims and kicking one of them from behind. The Muslim man reaches angrily for his knife as he turns around to find the detective saying, “I had taken you for a mirage!” This scene is designed for comic relief, the object of which is, as is often found, an Arab. Hergé’s offense becomes even more apparent when the detectives mistakenly crash through the walls of a Mosque full of praying Muslims with their jeep.

Although it is safe to say that Les Aventures de Tintin are imbued with a worldview inherited from the era of colonialism in Europe, they are far from exceptional in their

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40 In addition to sending Tintin on various adventures in the East, Hergé constructs an imaginary Arabian world based on stereotypes. This is not a unique innovation in the series; he also creates and uses at various times an imaginary kingdom named “Sylavia,” which E.M. Fleming refers to as a Balkan “everycounty” in an essay about Orientalism and the Balkans. See: K.E. Fleming, “Orientalism, the Balkans, and Balkan Historiography,” The American Historical Review, Vol. 105, No. 4 (October 2000) 1218. The name of Hergé’s Arab everycountry in the series is “Wadesdah,” which in Brussels French known as “Brusseleer” means “what is that,” possibly roughly equivalent to a name such as “Whatchamacallit.”

41 Hergé, Tintin au pays de l’or noir (Paris: Casterman, 1950) 43.
essentialized portrayal of Arabs in Western adventure literature. In *The Middle East in Crime Fiction*, Reeva Simon describes quite convincingly and thoroughly the place of Arabs or “Middle Easterners” in the genre of spy literature. In her introduction she writes,

> The 1967 Arab Israeli War, the unfolding of terrorist plots, the development of gasoline lines, and a new awareness of “fanatical Muslims” put the Middle East in the daily news and on television… The geographical area from Iran to Morocco began to be exploited extensively in fiction. Suddenly, thriller writers awoke to the fact that the Middle East provided all the basic ingredients required for successful thrillers or spy novels. Its locale was exotic and foreign, its “culture” unfamiliar enough to the American reader to allow abundant stereotype fodder for credible villains and spectacular deeds with just the ring of familiarity about them to be safely perpetrated. Plane hijackings, oil boycotts, or a wealthy sheikh casually dropping thousands of dollars at a private London casino were completely believable.42

According to Simon, Arabs appeared in roles that were familiar to the general British public, meaning that their portrayals came as a combination of old, inherited Orientalist stereotypes and prominent images taken from current media. These images were not overwhelmingly positive, especially for Egyptians during the 1950s and 1960s. Simon observes that a major shift in portrayals of Egyptians took place during the 1950s when the 1952 revolution led by Nasser challenged British hegemony that came with Egyptian nationalization of the Suez Canal and embracing of socialism.43 Whereas Egyptians had been previously cast as peasants or as typical “natives” of Third World countries, the Nasserist revolution transformed the image into a true villain; as Simon put it, “the Egyptians emerge from the shadowy background of bellboys, servants, market hucksters, and mute peasants planted in the shadows of the Pyramids to full-fledged villains.”44 The only “good Egyptians” in spy fiction

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43 Ibid 50.
44 Ibid 51.
of the 1950s and beyond were those who opposed Nasser and minorities such as Greeks and Copts that were portrayed as collaborators with the West.\textsuperscript{45} In addition, the Arab-Israeli conflict provided additional fodder for these unfavorable portrayals of Arabs, as spy novels began to incorporate more the activities of the CIA and Israeli Mossad.\textsuperscript{46} In this case, Arabs appear clearly on the wrong side of the conflict with Israel, and emerge as criminals and ultimately as the terrorist trope that is still very much alive and well in modern English language fiction.

Orientalist stereotypes about the Arab world are undeniably pervasive in adventure literature. They are perhaps accentuated by the nature of the genre. Adventures bring Western heroes to new, exotic and necessarily dangerous locales in which they encounter various characters. Since so much focus is placed on the hero and the suspenseful storyline that surrounds him (or her, theoretically), the foreign characters emerge as little more than “others” who are modeled after well-established tropes familiar to the reader. Indeed, Hergé, Ian Fleming and many other authors of adventure literature present essentialized portrayals of Arabs, but for the most part their portrayals of Chinese, Africans, American Indians and even other Europeans are built primarily on stereotypes. Arab readers in search of adventure, especially children who would be unaware of stereotypes, might be able to filter out or ignore the stereotypes they encounter; however, this Western literature would be unable to provide a model of heroism with which the reader could identify within a nationalist framework. In other words, an Egyptian reader could not find in Tintin or the like an Egyptian national hero.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid 112-3.
if he or she so desired, but instead understand Tintin’s adventures as the exploits of an outsider whose position affords him the privilege of such adventure.

**Egyptian Nationalism and the Need for New Heroes**

Thus, the birth of Egyptian adventure literature and the creation of the hero of “the Man of the Impossible” took place in a specific national context as a result of a convergence of historical trends. As in aforementioned cases of British James Bond, the Turkish Karaoğlu and others, the making of a national hero in Egypt is first and foremost tied to a pivotal and uncertain moment in the national development. The roots of Egyptian nationalism and state formation can be found in the era of Mehmet Ali and indeed “Egyptian identity” as such may be much older, however, Egyptian nationalism as we know it today was largely a product of an anti-colonial movement against the British that began to take shape between the World Wars and fully manifested in the Egyptian Revolution of 1952, which led to the final expulsion of Great Britain from Egypt. With the defeat of the Ottoman Empire at the hands of the Allied Powers during World War I, much of the Arabic speaking world fell under the colonial control of powerful European nations, namely Great Britain and France. In Egypt, Great Britain’s dominance was met with strong popular resistance under the leadership of the *Wafd* party and its central figure Sa3d Zaghlūl (henceforth: Saad Zaghlul). This moment was significant in defining Egyptian nationalism, most notably because the anti-colonial independence movement was supported by many different political and social groups including Muslims, Christians and Jews. While this may have been a sort of national awakening, at least
politically, for Egypt, it proved to be only a precursor to independence. Great Britain was
able to maintain control of its interests in Egypt through promoting and dealing with the
Egyptian royal family, which was descended from the dynastic line of Mehmet Ali (also
Muhammad Ali) but by that point subordinate to British interests.

The year of 1952 is a significant year in Egyptian history and is considered the
beginning of true Egyptian independence from colonialism. A group known as the Free
Officers founded by a lieutenant colonel in the Egyptian army Gamāl ʿabd el-Nāṣir
(henceforth: Gamal Abdel Nasser) staged a coup against the Egyptian monarchy and their
British advisors on July 23, 1952. Although it was a coup staged by young military
officers, the revolution was widely supported and reflected the growth of a popular
political consciousness among the lower and middle classes. In their 1987 book entitled
Workers on the Nile, Joel Beinin and Zachary Lockman point to the growth of the
Egyptian working class and their labor movements during the first half of the 20th century
as a key factor in the revolution. They describe an industrial proletariat that formed
during the 1930s and 1940s, especially during World War II. Indeed, Abdel Nasser and
most of the prominent members of his movement arose from the Egyptian working class,
and the revolution can be seen as the combined effort of the socialist, communist and
Muslim Brotherhood movements that drew popular support from the working classes. As
Said Aburish writes in his 2004 biography entitled Nasser: The Last Arab, the Free

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Officers put forth a six-point program for Egypt which called for the ousting of British colonialism in Egypt particularly in the Suez Canal, the end of the monarchy and what they called “feudal despotism,” redistribution of wealth, social equality, strengthening of the army, and finally promotion of legitimate public elections and a “healthy democratic atmosphere.”

Under Gamal Abdel Nasser, the Egyptian government achieved some of these goals with relative success. The nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956, which was the final step in removing British imperial control from Egypt, remains one of the most memorable and celebrated moments in Egyptian national history. In addition, Nasser’s policies referred to as “Arab socialism” satisfied the working class, which experienced a consistent improvement in standard of living during the 1950s and a 1960s, thanks to a more productive economy, better social services, and land “reforms” that amounted to a redistribution of land allowing for increased opportunities. Egypt’s military also grew substantially and survived the “Suez crisis” in which Britain, France and Israel colluded to attack Egypt in order to recapture the Suez Canal; however, Egypt suffered significant military defeats to Israel during the 1960s. As for promoting a “healthy democratic atmosphere,” Nasser’s reign was one during which the Communist Party and the Muslim Brotherhood experienced political alienation and repression, although many did convert so to speak and join ranks with the government.

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49 Beinin and Lockman 457-8.
Despite the failures of many of his policies, Gamal Abdel Nasser was most successful on the level of nationalism and image. As Beinin and Lockman argue, Abdel Nasser’s repression of political opponents would not have been successful had he not convinced the majority of Egyptians that their lives were improving and that he was leading in the right direction. He established anti-imperialism as a central issue that united Egypt to a great extent on an ideological level. After Israel helped attack Egypt in 1956, the Egyptian public was convinced that Zionism was a real threat to Egypt as a nation. Nasser took his position as the foremost leader in the Arab world. However, the antagonism between Israel and the Arab countries led by Nasser escalated to war in 1967, with Israel defeating Egypt, Jordan and Syria devastatingly in what is sometimes called the Six-Day War. This would prove to be a turning point in Arab nationalism and modern Egyptian history. Said K. Aburish’s historical take on the event is emotional and passionate, useful not for an academic analysis per se, but because it reflects the view of an Arab nationalist journalist and writer (though not Egyptian; he is a Palestinian who obtained U.S. citizenship and has spent much of his life in the West) who observed the event and the pivotal moment of irrevocable changes that began with the 1967 defeat. Aburish writes,

If a whole people, or the governments that represent a whole people, could go to war expecting defeat at the hands of a merciless enemy, then the mass suicide of a religious cult, in this case a cultural entity, is an accurate way of describing what happened. In 1967, the Arabs, belatedly acting as one just before Israel attacked them, sanctioned the idea of cultural suicide. The Arabs of today, of the twenty-first century, are living in the shadow of that event, just as individuals live in the shadow of the suicide of family

members. They are tainted and haunted by it, unable to reverse, justify of even accept it. Any comparison to how other wars affected a whole culture falls short of explaining the impact of the 1967 War on the Arabs. Were it subject to mathematical analysis, a generous multiple has to accompany any such comparison. For the Arabs, nothing has been the same since. In all likelihood, nothing will ever be the same... Compared to its consequences, what happened in the field of battle pales and becomes a nonevent. The collective suicide Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and the PLO committed with the rest of the Arabs behind them becomes a simple transitory act of stupidity – an act of stupidity that Nasser understood more than to her Arab leader (sic) because he was the primus inter pares, the chief of chiefs, of the Arabs. King Hussein and the army officers who ran Syria held on to their reduced positions, and Arafat’s comparative position was actually enhanced, but Nasser never recovered from the defeat. After 1967 his celebrated and undisputed leadership of the Arabs receded almost imperceptibly until it became nothing more than a memory. Nobody spoke of the dignity and pride of the Arabs after the 1967 setback. Nobody does now.\footnote{Aburish 250-1.}

Of course Aburish’s comments come much later in hindsight after experiencing the aforementioned consequences and fallout of this colossal defeat of Nasser, Egypt and the other Arab states. What Aburish calls “mass suicide” was probably not seen as such by so many at the time, although the political leaders themselves may have been able to anticipate the outcome of the war. He does, however, provide a historical understanding that also encapsulates the sense of loss that many felt at this time, and establishes 1967 as a crucial breaking point in Egyptian history, which, whether inevitable or not, led the Egyptian nation and state down a different track.

The Six-Day War was soon followed by the War of Attrition, in which Egypt and its allies fought for nearly three years to regain what had been lost. The result was a ceasefire that reset the borders to the same place they were before the War of Attrition, amounting to a stalemate. Just over a month later on September 28, 1970, Nasser died surprisingly from a heart attack at 52 years of age. This was another catastrophic blow to
the collective Egyptian psyche, even if Nasser had amassed many opponents. Aburish writes that “my generation was orphaned when Nasser died.”52 Indeed, the sudden death of the most prominent champion of Arab nationalism must have come as a shock, and moreover, Egypt was totally unprepared for such an event. Nasser had become a living hero and a champion of an Arab identity that so many had embraced. Although his policies did not die immediately with him, they did not last long. Anwar Sadat assumed control of the Egyptian government, and led Egypt to war with Israel in the 1973. In this war, sometimes referred to as the October 1973 War or the Yom Kippur War, Egypt did not suffer a severe defeat as in the 1967 war. Although in the end the war was stopped by UN intervention after Israel penetrated the Egyptian forces, the war was seen by many Egyptians as a major vindication due to some early successes in the war. It was touted by the government as a moral victory for Egypt, and would prove to be the last of Egypt’s wars with Israel.

Within a decade, the strong Egyptian central government that had led the Arab world found itself in immense trouble with regards to its people, its allies and its financial realities. The 1978 Camp David Accords, which formally began the process of normalization between Israel and Egypt, were symbolic of the structural transition that Egypt was about to undergo. After twenty years of hostility, Egypt and Israel would not fight another war, nor would Egypt militarily support the Palestinian resistance. This represented a complete departure from the politics of non-alignment and anti-

52 Ibid 314.
imperialism, which could not have sat well with the majority of Egypt’s citizens even if
many were hungry for an end to the conflict. For bringing this about, Anwar Sadat was
assassinated, however, his successor and current Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak
continued and accelerated the process of change, i.e. the infitāḥ or open-door policy to
the West, that had begun with Sadat. As Hani Shukrallah wrote in 1987,

The most essential fact about post-1967 Egyptian society and polity is that crisis of
hegemony brought about by the June defeat, remains, two decades later, unresolved. Put
very simply, this means that the growing weakness of the existing political system has
not been transformed into the power of an alternative political force. A political conflict
outside which the majority of the population remains, is one where the weak struggles
against the weaker, while the less weak appears eminently powerful.53

The adjustments made by the regime in the 1980s served to sustain its power while at the
same time surrendering its control over Egypt’s affairs and its political capital with the
Egyptian populace. As Nazih Ayubi wrote in 1990, “The Egyptian system of government
is in a period of transition, which, among other things, is characterized by a number of
contradictions.”54 This contradiction could be summed up in what was later dubbed by
Samer Soliman as “The Strong Regime and the Weak State (al-Nizām al-Qawīyy wa al-
Dawla al-Ḍażīfa)” Beginning with the Mubarak regime in the early 1980s the nearly
bankrupt Egyptian government sought to decentralize, meaning giving great power to
local and regional authorities. In doing so, the regime consolidated its own position at the
expense of the state. Moreover, the policies of economic opening (al-infitāḥ) only allowed

54 Nazih N. Ayubi, “Government and the State in Egypt Today,” in Egypt Under Mubarak eds. Charles
the higher classes to augment their position at the expense of the working classes that were so instrumental in the 1952 revolution and the Nasser’s regime.  

It was in this social and political crisis in Egypt that “adventure literature” and the first Egyptian action hero emerged. In the 1980s, Egyptian lived in the shadow and memory of years of conflict with Israel, and the popular television series entitled Ra’fat al-Hagān based on the actual exploits of an Egyptian spy working in Israel during the years of violence with Israel was amongst the most popular series with the Egyptian public. The image of Egypt continuing to rival Israel and best them every time also arose in this new adventure literature as well. The most prominent example of the new genre in Egypt is undoubtedly the Rajul al-Mustaḥīl series written by Nabil Farouk. As previously stated, Rajul al-Mustaḥīl translates as “Man of the Impossible,” and the series centers around and Egyptian intelligence agent named Adham Sabri who indeed does accomplish the seemingly impossible. Although set it its present (the series began in 1984), Rajul al-Mustaḥīl seems to provide a picturesque version of an Egyptian past in which Egyptian agents do battle with Israeli Mossad on the international stage. Adham Sabri is the spitting image of masculinity, heroism and patriotism, putting his country before all else and defeating his enemies in fantastic displays of physical and mental prowess. Modelled after James Bond, Adham becomes an “Arabized” version of his predecessor along the lines of how such an identity was envisioned by his creator Farouk. Unlike Bond, Adham does not drink or have sexual encounters with his nemeses. However, like Bond, he is the

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55 Soliman 106-7.
resurgence or the resilience of an idea that would seemingly belong to the past. Adham Sabri represents the Egyptian nationalism of the revolution and Nasser, in a time when such discourse had fallen by the wayside in the political arena.

Of course, the making of this series would have little significance had it been received as a second-rate version of the James Bond series built on an obsolete ideology. However, the great popularity that the series amassed is a testament to a resilient Egyptian nationalism priding itself in Farouk’s favorable portrayal of Egypt’s global position. The exact size of the Nabil Farouk’s readership is difficult to determine, but, according to one article his novels had sold an estimated 2.5 million copies by 2006. The issue with this number is that it is unclear how many people have actually read the novels, since Farouk’s catalog contains hundreds of works, over 150 alone from Rajul al-Mustahīl. What further complicates the picture is that second-hand copies are widely available in markets and bookstores throughout Egypt and the Arab World. In addition, virtually every one of Nabil Farouk’s works has been pirated by readers in scanned electronic copies in recent years, allowing any internet user to download the files and disseminate them for free. As for the makeup of the audience, it is intended for “youth (shabāb),” however, the definition of the word “youth” can be vague. It traditionally refers to teenagers and individuals who are in the early 20s such as students, but the definition can be expanded much further to practically any unmarried person. Based on the information given by users who report an age in online

forums, assuming it is more or less correctly reported information, I submit an approximate age range of 12-24 years old for the readership of the series. Although the target audience is ostensibly male and female, *Rajul al-Mustaḥīl* appears to be one of the more male-oriented series in the Modern Arab Foundation catalog, which simultaneously published series such as the crime fiction series *Office #19* (*Maktab Raqam 19*), the science fiction series *Future File* (*Milaff al-Mustaqbal*),57 the child detective series *The Adventures of Emad and Ghilla* (*Mughāmarāt Ẓimād wa Ghillā*), and the romance series *Blossoms* (*Zuhūr*).58 This being said, the discussion in internet forums clearly indicates both male and female readership.

The books are relatively compact and short. The length of the earliest stories was roughly 100 typewritten pages, and four pages would fit onto a page the size of this page. Thus, an avid reader could easily read an Egyptian Pocket Novel in a few days. The books appear designed to be consumed and discarded like periodicals. Their extremely flimsy pages and often somewhat faulty printing reflect a relatively cheap cost. However, the front and back covers do feature color illustrations customized for each issue. The books are designed for consumption by a literate middle class who began to participate in the wild consumption of the infitāḥ years of the 1980s, a period which, ironically, the books’ themes themselves seem to call into question.

In a semi-autobiographic account entitled *The Man of the Impossible and Me* (*Rajul al-Mustaḥīl wa Ana*) published in 1998, Nabil Farouk explained his goals and intentions in

57 This science fiction series set in the future portrays a world in which Egypt and other Arab states are leaders in politics and technology.
58 Farouk, “Luṣḥat al-Muḥtarīfīn,” *Rajul al-Mustaḥīl* No. 38 (Cairo: al-Mu’assasa al-Ṣarabiyya al-Ḥadīthā, 1987?) 91-95. The slogan for the romance series *Zuhūr* was “The only romance series that mom and dad aren’t ashamed to have in the house.”
creating the character of Egyptian superspy Adham Sabri and the famous *Rajul al-Mustahīl* series. Farouk came from a middle class family living in Tanta, a large town situated between Alexandria and Cairo along the Nile River in Egypt. During his childhood, he was fascinated with reading the fictional works of authors from other countries and the colorful characters of crime and police fiction such as the French Arsène Lupin, Scottish Sherlock Holmes, and of course the British James Bond. Farouk writes, “we were dazzled by the ideas of their stories and the extreme excitement in every page, despite the fact that they completely contradicted all the values, morals and principles that we were raised on.” After Farouk began medical school in Tanta in his training to become a physician, his fascination with Western adventure inspired him to emulate his favorite authors. In *The Man of the Impossible and Me*, Farouk reports that he asked himself, “why don’t we have a similar character, possessing all the characteristics of those famous novel characters,” only “with authentic Egyptian and Arab values befitting our belief and our society?” When he posed this question to one of his friends, he was met with the casual response of “fine then why don’t you write it” and thus the character of Adham Sabri began to foment in his mind.59

In light of the previous examples of how the creation of heroes and great adventures in popular fiction has been shown to be often indelibly tied to nationalism is other countries, it is not surprising to find that the creation of Egypt’s first modern fiction hero arising from similar motivations. As part of the first generation of Egyptian students to grow up in an independent Egypt, Nabil Farouk (born 1956) not only internalized the

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national political rhetoric of the times, but also adopted this perspective and applied it in his reading of foreign works of fiction. Finally, Farouk took the position as one of the first to react to the sentiment that Egypt needed a native hero and quit his profession in medicine soon after being hired to write the novels. The publisher of Rajul al-Mustahil, the Modern Arab Association (al-Mu’assasa al-3arabiyya al-Haditha), assisted Farouk in realizing his goal of creating an Egyptian hero. Founded in 1960, the Modern Arab Association published many successful textbooks for Egyptian students. However, the company’s true success began in 1984 with the introduction of its line of Egyptian Pocket Novels (Riwayat Misriyya lil-Jayb),” one of which was the Rajul al-Mustahil series. Some of the early issues of the series contain various insert back materi that consist of various promotions and advertisements. One such insert entitled “Three stars shining in the sky of stories and literature carrying fun, excitement and suspense throughout” explains the general goal of the Modern Arab Association saying, “The Modern Arab Association is proud to lead a comprehensive national crusade to motive youth to get used to reading.” 60 In addition their website lists the goal of producing Egyptian works in Arabic without the use of translation or plagiarism from foreign stories. The website also lists Nabil Farouk as the most prominent contributor to the development of the Egyptian Pocket Novels series.61

Backed by a publisher motivated by a common goal, Nabil Farouk continued to try to “produce an exciting individualist character to compete with and even surpass the foreign

characters whose stories were widespread at that time." As one may recall, this concern with one-upping modern literary heroes from the West, in this case James Bond in particular, was shared as well by early Turkish authors of graphic novels. Of course, the character of Adham Sabry, “the Man of the Impossible,” resembles Bond in his mannerisms, skills and even the types of missions he carries out. However, they differ on points that Farouk considered to be morally significant, namely the fact that Adham Sabri does not drink, engage in promiscuous sex, or use excessive violence. At the same time, Adham Sabri and James Bond share similar points of departure. Just as Bond emerged in the twilight years of the British Empire faced with the a communist threat and the loss of hegemony, Egypt too seemed extremely vulnerable in the wake of Nasser’s death, defeats to Israel and diminishing regional power.

The values that Farouk intended to impact upon his readers are extremely significant. The books are not meant to be solely consumer goods but also educational materials, representing one of the series’ main differences from the James Bond series and pointing to its even more important role in defining and asserting Egypt’s nationalism and global position for a new generation. This is evidenced early on in the series at the end of issue #12 of *Rajul al-Mustahīl* entitled *Allies of Evil (Hulafā’ al-Sharr)* where the series’ first contest appears. This contest is comprised of 36 quotes pulled from the Modern Arab Association’s three main publications at the time, *Maktab Raqam 19*, *Milaff al-Mustaqbal*, and of course *Rajul al-Mustahīl*. These sentences are not chosen at random; rather, they reflect some of the

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values being put forth in the series. One quote for example reads, “This case is different, sir. For I truly hate destruction, but I do not hesitate to break this hatred for the sake of Egypt.” Another reads, “Indeed God, to whom be ascribed all perfection and majesty, helps those who fight for a just cause, my dear, and those who try to save souls, not those who try to exhaust them.” Several of the quotes deal with this issue of good and evil and the fight for one’s country. For example one quote reads, “It is known that Egypt is not one of the belligerent or terrorist countries.” Another interesting quote addressing the nature of women saying, “in this work of ours a person finds himself compelled to take extremely harsh measures for the good of the country, and this is what you women lack.” Finally, a quote evokes a great Arab past in referring ostensibly to Adham Sabri saying, “What do you think about working for me? I need a man like you, with the bravery of the Ancient Egyptians in his blood and the courage of the Arab knights, a man who fears not the impossible.” With any context or explanation of these quotes, it already becomes clear some of the nationalist and moralistic messages that one might expect to find in the novels, however, it is perhaps best to start with the first adventure of Adham Sabry entitled *The Mysterious Disappearance*, in which heroism, nationalism and gender take center stage.

**THEMES IN RAJUL AL-MUSTAḤĪL**

He answered the man with tough resolve, “an Egyptian spy.” This phrase violently grabbed the attention of the prime minister, so he repeated it tensely, “an Egyptian spy?” Then he went back to yelling congestedly, “and have you ignited this scandal because of

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one Egyptian?! One?! How can I explain this to the president?! To the American ambassador?! Or even to the journalists and media?!” The director answered harshly, “Indeed he is one spy, but not an ordinary spy… He is one of the most powerful intelligence men in the world… Rather, he is truly stronger and more dangerous than them, across all of history.” The prime minister shouted faintly, “Who’s this?! James Bond?!” A look of scorn emerged from the eyes of the director of intelligence, as he sighed saying, “James Bond is a British Agent, not Egyptian Mr. Prime Minister, and he is merely a fictional character that a former British naval intelligence officer (Ian Fleming) created. But the person we’re talking about is completely real, and he is a famous Egyptian intelligence man called Adham Sabri.” The prime minister repeated in amazement, “Adham Sabri… What the devil!”

The first adventure of Adham Sabri entitled *The Mysterious Disappearance*, sets the stage for what readers should expect in the coming issues of the series. The first section of the book is labeled “The Man of the Impossible (*Rajul al-Mustaḥīl*)” and contains a description of the book’s main character Adham Sabri as follows:

Adham Sabri: Egyptian intelligence agent, 35 years of age, given the symbol N-1 (*Nūn-I*). The letter N means that he is a rare (*nādir*) breed. As for the number 1, it means that he is the first of his kind. This is because Adham Sabri is from a unique type. He excels in the use of all types of weapons, from handguns to fighter planes, and all martial arts, from wrestling to taekwondo. This is in addition to his complete mastery of six living languages, his extreme proficiency in using disguises and make-up and driving cars, flying planes and even submarines along with numerous other skills. Everyone has unanimously agreed that it is impossible for a single man of Adham Sabri’s age to master all of these skills. However, Adham Sabri has realized this impossibility, and he has earned the nickname that the intelligence world has given him: Man of the Impossible.

The reader gathers from this description that Adham Sabri is not just an extraordinary man with many skills, but that he is also fully modern and possesses mastery of all the tools of modern espionage. The story begins with a chapter entitled “A Suicidal Jump,” in

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which Adham Sabri is undergoing training in parachuting. He uses this experience as an
opportunity to show his fearlessness. The instructor tells him to jump and to count from
one thousand until one thousand and ten before pulling his parachute chord. Adham asks
how long one could conceivably wait to pull the chord, which the instructor tells him is
one thousand and seventeen, but that it is extremely dangerous. Without hesitation,
Adham Sabri leaps from the plane, “swimming on the air like a giant bird” and counting
all the way to one thousand and seventeen before pulling the chord of his parachute and
making a successful and safe landing. This feat stuns all the onlookers, including the Air
Force general, whose surprise increases as the head of Egyptian intelligence enumerates
for him all of Adham’s other previously mentioned skills. To this the general replies “I
thought that a man like this did not exist except for in police novels” to which the head of
intelligence responds, “we thought that too until this young man worked with us.”66 This
exchange establishes the context of Adham Sabri’s adventures: that he is a physical
embodiment of a personality only found previously in Western crime fiction. The irony is
of course that he too is a fictional character; however, this irony is supplanted by Nabil
Farouk’s ardent and continuing assertion that Adham Sabri’s character is based on an
actual Egyptian intelligence officer that existed. Either way, Adham Sabri is more than
just the best Egyptian officer; he is the world’s greatest intelligence agent.

66 Ibid 5-11.
The next chapter sheds some light onto Adham Sabri’s personality and masculinity. He is summoned to the general’s office and is charged with the mission of finding an important Egyptian aeronautics scientist who disappeared in Paris and bringing him back dead or alive. However, Adham is met with an unpleasant surprise when it is revealed that he will be working with a female partner named Lieutenant Munā Tawfīq (henceforth: Mona Tawfīq). Adham becomes flustered saying, “but sir, I always work alone” and “she’s a woman, and this is more than I can bear. I need my nerves to be completely calm on this mission.”

As soon as Adham leaves the room feeling bitter, the director says to the general, “this is his one weak point… that he doesn’t have any confidence at all in the gentler sex.” Meanwhile, Adham is speeding away in his car thinking to himself how much he will hate to work with a woman, especially a police woman because “there’s no doubt that she will be very ugly and skinny.” He assuages his fears by telling himself that he will just find a way to keep her out of the way, yet he still finds himself sleepless that night.

In his later recounting of the creation of the series, Farouk states that Mona is named and modeled after his sister Iman, whom the family always called Mona. Farouk claims that she made him promise to do the favor of mentioning her if he ever became a famous writer in exchange for ironing his pants. Farouk, *Ana wa Rajul al-Mustaḥīl* 31.
dreading the thought of working with a female partner.\footnote{Ibid “al-Ikhtifāʾ al-Ghāmiḍ” 13-19.} This sequence appears carefully crafted by Nabil Farouk. This portrayal of Adham Sabri is somewhat misogynistic yet also helps to build his image as a maverick and independent hero. At the same time, the appearance of Mona as a female intelligence officer should be seen as somewhat novel and modern in this adventure series. Farouk uses Adham Sabri’s chauvinism to prove a point about gender equality, or at least the fact that Egyptian men should accept gender equality. This becomes clearer as Adham and Mona begin to interact. They meet while on the plane to Paris. Mona, on one hand, is completely starstruck by the great Adham Sabri and he is likewise surprised by Mona’s beauty. However, they soon find themselves arguing about gender equality. Mona poses the argument that she is just as smart as a man, just as skilled with weapons, and just as well-trained in hand to hand combat, and therefore, is equally as qualified as a man. Adham responds that woman lack “cruelty (gaswa)” which is a necessary ability in their line of work, to which Mona replies that she “doesn’t think cruelty is a trait to be proud of.”\footnote{Ibid 21-24} Adham concedes this point but insists that sometimes it is necessary. Through interactions like this with Mona, Adham’s perspective on gender equality becomes more ambivalent and finally more accepting as the story progresses.

Before Adham and Mona fully come to terms with each other, they go on an adventure that provides the reader with a glimpse of the exciting world of international
espionage for the first time. Adham and Mona stay in the same hotel in which the disappeared scientist was staying, Mona as the daughter of said scientist and Adham separately as an Egyptian businessman traveling in Paris. They pretend to have not previously known each other, and when they converse in public they use French as opposed to Arabic. In the hotel, they see a suspicious bald man in the lobby whom they are sure played a role in the disappearance of the scientist. They decide to tour the city a little and look for more clues. Adham drives the pair to the Eifel Tower in his red rental Porsche. As they take in the breathtaking view of Paris from the top of the tower and discuss the case, they suddenly find themselves being shot at by men wielding pistols with silencers, one of whom is the bald man that they saw before. Adham is able to push Mona out of harm’s way and engages in hand-to-hand combat with the men, punching and kicking them until they lose consciousness. They escape safely, but Adham decides that Mona

The caption reads “Mona fell to the ground, stuck by surprise, as a strange whizz passed by her ear. When she turned around, Adham was attacking one of two men.” From The Mysterious Disappearance (p33)
jeopardizes his mission because of her lack of reaction time and her unawareness, which therefore cause her to require Adham’s protection. Adham resolves to create some kind of meaningless task for Mona to perform to keep her out of his way.  

Thus, Mona spends most her time performing surveillance and gathering information on individuals unrelated to the mission while Adham continues to battle against a team of spies with French names such as Jean Paul and Jean Louis, as well as an apparently but not expressly Israeli spy named Yael (yāʾīl) and a behind the scenes mastermind named Goldman who recurs throughout the series. This is the first of many appearances in the series of Israeli spies working internationally as the primary movers in a conspiracy against Egyptian interests that involves agents from virtually every Western country. By going undercover as a blond agent named Simon Cloud, Adham Sabri is able to infiltrate the enemy’s ranks and find that a young man and his sick grandfather who are also staying in the hotel are actually a secret agent and the missing scientist who is disguised and kept bedridden by being continuously administered small amounts of poison. This is thanks in part to Mona’s surveillance of the pair, which Adham had assigned her to only to keep her out of the way. Despite her usefulness, Adham is harsh with Mona and is constantly criticizing her actions and intelligence.

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70 Ibid 29-34.
71 This is peculiar because while Nabil Farouk’s character Yael is clearly a man, Yael is a very common but exclusively female name.
72 Ibid.
73 Ibid 64-69.
74 Adham criticizes Mona for logging information on paper, which leaves behind evidence, Ibid 56. He calls her suggestion that the kidnappers have killed the Egyptian scientist and dumped his corpse “stupid
The final moments of the story showcase Adham’s powers, both physical and mental. After an intense care chase in which Adham trails an ambulance secretly carrying the kidnapped scientist and his kidnappers, he races with a plane and leaps aboard just in time to rescue the scientist who is being smuggled out of the country. Inside the plane, he meets an apparent former adversary named Eleazar, which clearly denotes that he is Israeli. When asked by Eleazar how he knew the kidnapped scientist was being transported in the ambulance, Adham displays his sharp thinking by explaining that the old man in the ambulance was allegedly being rushed to the hospital because of a panic attack; however, Adham knew that the panic attacks that befall elderly people are not dangerous enough that they would be transported so urgently in an ambulance, which would only expose them to greater harm. In a final attempt to escape, Eleazar offers Adham 10 million dollars and a parachute in exchange for allowing him to leave with the kidnapped scientist. Adham pretends to accept the deal, saying, “Egyptian intelligence offers you thanks for this charming gift Mr. Eleazar… Pardon me, but I must knock you out” and proceeds to strike Eleazar on the back of the neck with the stock of his gun, rendering him unconscious.

The final scene of the book features Adham and Mona celebrating their victory with the Egyptian director of intelligence and Air Force general. They laugh and read "ghabiyy" because the scientist is worth more alive than dead, Ibid 91. Adham calls her a madwoman (majnūna) for shooting at the tires of an ambulance that contains the kidnapped scientist, Ibid 103. Farouk frequently uses stereotypical names that hint at his character’s origins before expressly revealing their exact identities.

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75 Farouk frequently uses stereotypical names that hint at his character’s origins before expressly revealing their exact identities.
76 Ibid 101-18.
about the events as they are presented in Le Monde, which of course makes no mention of Adham Sabri or the secret operations that were carried out. A tense moment takes place when the director of intelligence asks Adham to evaluate Mona’s performance: “Mona’s face went pale and her heartbeat sped up… She knew well the many mistakes she had made on this mission. Her eyes were stuck on Adham’s face as he said, ‘as far as Mona goes, as a beginner, she’s…’ Then, he turned to her smiling and continued, ‘excellent (mumtāza).’” Adham appears here as a reformed man, having magnanimously affirmed Mona’s value as an agent despite the fact that she supposedly confirmed all of his assumptions and concerns about working with a female partner. By the end of the story, Adham has grown as a hero and accepted the modern condition of workplace gender equality, while still being able to maintain his role as a dominant and, at times, patronizing male hero, who due to Mona’s relative incompetence, rightly occupies this position of protector.

Within this short plot summary of Adham Sabri’s first adventure, many of the Rajul al-Mustaḥīl series extant themes are apparent. Nabil Farouk creates a world in which Egypt exercises a degree of hegemony, pursuing its own interest around the world in combating enemies that prove to be not just a threat to Egypt, but to global security as well. This threat comes in the form of international criminals and spies, often with direct or indirect ties to Israel. Like many authors of the adventure genre, he provides his readers with description of foreign and exotic places to which they themselves may never

77 Ibid 121-2.
travel. Adham Sabri is established as a man among men who, despite his machismo, is able to work constructively with women while still protecting them and asserting dominance. Finally, while Adham does from time to time employ violence to achieve his goals, he does so only as much as necessary, making a point to knock his enemies unconscious even when he is in a position to kill them once and for all. In this way, Adham Sabri exercises his power responsibly and mercifully, as a representative of Egypt’s national might and reputation.

Although one must not forget that the primary function of these adventure novels is to entertain an audience and of course sell a product, it is worth investigating these themes and the symbolism of the Rajul al-Mustaḥīl series in order to better understand the way heroism and nationalism are understood and represented in Egypt. Moreover, Nabil Farouk’s expressed goal in creating a distinctively Egyptian hero in contrast as well as in homage to James Bond imbues the books with clear messages. The Rajul al-Mustaḥīl series is not only a manifestation or representation of one Egyptian author’s worldview; rather, it is an attempt to methodically create instructive models of nationalism, masculinity, modernity and morality. In other words, Adham Sabri represents the meaning of heroism in an Egyptian nationalist conception, but more precisely, Adham Sabri represents everything that Nabil Farouk thinks Egyptian nationalism should be. Thus, Farouk uses the genre of adventure fiction to articulate a

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78 For example, in a battle with French and Israel spies, one of Adham’s adversaries is killed, but it is revealed through later dialogue that this is by the stray bullet of another enemy. Ibid 61.
vision of the world that on one hand is fantastical and on the other is meant to be taken as possible or attainable.

**Man of the Impossible**

If we return for a moment to the very first scene of the series, we find Adham Sabri accomplishing a seemingly impossible task of jumping from a plane and deploying his parachute at a dangerously low altitude with incredible ease. The words of the Egyptian director of intelligence indicated that Adham Sabri had changed his very conception of the meaning of the word impossible and foreshadowed the feats to come in subsequent adventures. Indeed, this defiance of the impossible is the central theme of the novels. In each adventure Adham performs many impossible feats and escapes many seemingly inescapable predicaments. Whether singlehandedly defeating a helicopter while suspended over a deep chasm in the Andes\(^{79}\) or successfully escaping from an entire army in adventure \#142 *Man vs. Army (Rajul wa Jaysh)*,\(^{80}\) it is clear the he possesses a superhuman abilities that leave his stupefied enemies screaming “What the devil! That’s impossible!” every time. Adham’s very existence within the genre of spy fiction represents in some sense an overcoming of the impossible. However, even the idea of a man who never fails and embodies the power of good working on the side of Egypt is a challenge to the discourse of Western hegemony. In a book that discusses the

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themes of conflict and heroism in literature written by Tunisian author Ahmed Mammu and published in Arabic in 1984, the same year that *Rajul al-Mustahil* was first published, Mammu characterized the modern spy fiction as a genre of adventure literature that features a conflict between one hero party that represents capitalism and another party that represents socialism. The nature of the genre as understood by Mammu did not even exceed the boundaries of the Cold War and the bipolar view of conflict between capitalist and socialist countries allied with either the United States or the Soviet Union. The persona of Adham Sabri is not just impossible with regards to beliefs about human physical potential but also with regards to the boundaries set by Western hegemonic discourse that would seemingly limit the Egyptian national imagination. In creating an “impossible man,” Farouk seeks to expand the imagination of his audience to include a model of heroism that reigns supreme over all forces, external or otherwise.

As a representative of Egypt, Adham Sabri’s heroism is articulated through his own feats as well as his contrast with other characters, which is presented in a highly gendered framework. Adham’s heroism is indelibly tied to his masculinity. This masculinity is illustrated through his interactions with both men and women. As Beth Baron has argued, Egyptian nationalism is often envisioned in gendered terms, with Egypt as a woman and national honor encompassing masculine protection of lady Egypt. In other words, chivalry is strongly equated with good masculinity in this Egyptian

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nationalism. Adham Sabri’s heroic masculinity is constructed vis-à-vis his female colleague Mona, who accompanies him on almost every mission. Although Mona is positively portrayed as a modern and capable female agent, her primary role is often to serve as a “damsel on demand” so to speak; she is very vulnerable and susceptible to falling into harm’s way, which forces Adham to dutifully rescue her time and time again.

In the adventure entitled _The Suicide Bombers (al-Intihāriyyūn)_ , Adham Sabri squares off with Mossad “suicide” (intihāriyy) agents in the London Ritz hotel lobby. When the first assailant comes, Adham immediately neutralizes him and pushes Mona out of the way, proceeding to disarm and pummel the Mossad agent. Unbeknownst to Adham, the agent is carrying an activated time bomb, a fact that he realizes just before it is about to detonate. Once again, he pushes Mona out of the way just in time to save her from the explosion. When the smoke clears, they find the suicide attacker has completely blown himself to pieces, to which Mona reacts in horror, covering her face and shouting “it’s horrible!” In contrast Adham replies “What’s horrible is that he met his demise before I could interrogate him, Mona.” Soon after this they begin to take fire from a rooftop gunman. Adham quickly pushes Mona to the ground yet again, leaving her behind an upturned table as he flees the scene in pursuit of his attacker.

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82 Beth Baron, _Egypt as Woman: Nationalism, Gender and Politics_ (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005) 49. This is not to say that Egypt is particularly exceptional in this regard.

The uselessness of Mona in this encounter is quite obvious, however, not exceptional within the series. Although Mona does from time to time play a positive role or provide support for Adham, she is more often than not a liability. In *The Stuntman* (*al-Mukhāṭir*) for example, Adham gives her the duty of schmoozing for information at a cast party for the movie that he is working on as a stunt double for an uncover Mossad agent working as a Hollywood actor. However, she ends up as a hostage and requires Adham’s saving.84 Another adventure entitled *Mountains of Death* (*Jibāl al-Mawt*) bears a similar role for Mona. She is kidnapped almost as soon as she and Adham arrive in Peru to begin their mission to root out a guerilla insurgency.85 Adham spends the entire book trying to rescue her and by the end he has landed in extreme peril because of her kidnapping.86 In *Operation Jungle* (*3amaliyyat al-Adghāl*), Mona is immediately grabbed by an enormous boa constrictor in the Congo jungles that Adham must save her with his typical bravery that is able to overcome even the largest beasts.87 After escaping this menace, she is later kidnapped by the French smugglers that she and Adham are supposed to be tracking down.88 The pattern is clear. Mona’s role in the series is not to be an intelligence agent but rather to serve as a love interest for Adham and validate his masculinity both in her admiration of and need for him.

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86 Ibid 97-108.
87 Farouk, *3amaliyyat al-Adghāl* 20-22.
88 Ibid 75.
As a consequence of their constant interaction and reliance on each other (or Mona’s reliance on Adham), Mona and Adham begin to develop feelings for each other very early in the series. In adventure #25 *The Silver Dagger* (*al-Khanjar al-Faḍdiyy*), Adham proposes to Mona for the first time after he has a near death experience. However, she refuses, not because she does not love him, but because she had experienced so much sadness and distress when she thought he had died and fears the thought of losing her husband someday. Nonetheless, she promises that she “won’t be a wife to anyone but the Man of the Impossible.”

The couple never marries even though Adham proposes several times throughout the series. Each time the moment is interrupted or intervening circumstances prevent Mona from accepting Adham’s marriage proposal. When Adham proposes in adventure #132 *Team of the Impossible* (*Farīq al-Mustaḥil*), they are interrupted before Mona can reply. Mona

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later decides once and for all that although Adham obviously loves her dearly, nothing will ever matter to Adham as much as “his first sweetheart, Egypt.”

Adham’s inability to marry Mona is not presented as a romantic failure, but instead as a consequence of his utmost loyalty to his beloved country Egypt. It is still clear that Adham is the consummate masculine hero that any woman, even Mona, would dream to marry. For example, when Adham is once again presumed dead, this time after more than a year missing, Egyptian intelligence hires a new agent to replace him. This arrogant new agent decides that he will outdo Adham Sabri by accomplishing the one thing he could not: marrying Mona. However, when he proposes, Mona erupts with anger, explaining why no man could take Adham’s place saying,

Adham was not merely an amazing intelligence officer, surpassing all of his peers in the field of intelligence. Rather, he was a human being with a heart of gold. He would caress your wounds with compassionate touches, with the same hand whose fist crushed giants. With his smile he would bestow hope and love upon you, with the same ability to bestow upon his enemies anger and fear. Adham Sabri was not an ordinary man. He was a cavalier, combining all of the wonderful attributes in the world. He loved Egypt, just as much as he hated her enemies. He would never kill except for in self-defense, when the conditions necessitated it with no other alternatives. He simultaneously combined all opposites, hating and loving, hitting and showing compassion. He was a man in a time in which men are rare.

Mona’s ode to Adham Sabri and her “chivalry is dead” attitude convey exactly what type of hero and world Nabil Farouk intends to construct. Adham Sabri is a dominant champion over his enemies but is also extremely caring and morally sound. He lives by

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unwavering ideals that no enemy or otherwise can force him to compromise. He is the quintessential national hero and a quintessential man in a time that lacks real men.

Nabil Farouk gives Adham Sabri a morality to which an Egyptian audience could relate. In contrast with Western heroes of the genre such as James Bond, Adham Sabri’s sexual morality is more preferable; he does not seek sexual conquest of the world. He only seeks marriage to the woman he loves. This being said, Nabil Farouk provides ample occasions that underscore the fact that Adham Sabri could sexually conquer the world, including his enemies, just as James Bond. Adham’s female enemies help build his masculine image. Their collective role in the series is similar to that of the memorable “Bond girls” such as Pussy Galore, Honey Ryder, Kissy Suzuki, Octopussy and so forth. In fact, James Bond’s sexuality has been scrutinized from every angle in Western scholarship. In the films, James Bond is always as Christine Bold put it “a libidinous hero” who dominates his enemies both through fighting and sexual conquest. The ability to conquer the world politically and sexually is a major trope in the James Bond series, much more so than in Rajul al-Mustahil, although in fact sex became a much bigger part of the James Bond series when it made the leap from print to the silver screen.

Women are indeed objects of Adham’s sexual “conquest,” albeit in less explicit terms than the Bond novels. The most frequently recurring enemy in the series is Sonya

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92 Christine Bold, “Under the very skirts of Britannia’: re-reading women in the James Bond novels” in The James Bond Phenomenon 176.
93 Black 5-8.
Graham. The description given for Sonya fits the description of a femme fatale, although perhaps a bit more femme than fatale in the end. When she appears, she is described as “breathtaking in every sense of the word.” Nabil Farouk can barely write a sentence about Sonya without referring to her immense beauty whether Adham is seizing her by her “slender wrists” or slamming her to the ground by her “fine hair.” According to the rewayat.com website, Adham and Sonya square off in 45 different issues. Practically speaking, the reason why Sonya is able to persist when every other enemy of the Egyptian state perishes at the hands of Adham Sabri is that she is a woman and therefore, he cannot harm her. Sonya is Adham’s female foil in the sense that she is the “expert” intelligence agent called in by Mossad when things go awry, but she is defeated by Adham in the end every time. In The Daredevil for instance, Sonya is brought in by Frank Hall and his associates to deal with Adham and Mona when they become too elusive. Her surprise presence initially creates a threat. At one point she has a gun pointed at Adham and is about to extract a forged CIA card from him. When she takes her hand off her gun to grab the card, Adham dives at her, “grabbing her by her fine, beautiful hair and throwing her to the ground” in a perfect display of masculine dominance. She begins to scream “hysterically” saying, “you just boast with your

94 Farouk, “al-Mukhāṭir” 49. The word I am translating as “breathtaking” here is fātina, which could also be translated as enchanting, charming, lovely, beautiful, alluring, etc.
96 Farouk, al-Muxāṭir 49.
97 Ibid 72.
muscles” while on the verge of crying. He wrenches her wrists behind her back and ties her to a chair, rendering her helpless so that he can leave. When Mona asks in exacerbation why Adham once again refuses to finish off Sonya or take her into custody, he replies smugly that “our dear Sonya is always a charming opponent.” Adham dominates Sonya with his superior strength to put her in line only to release her again as if he were fishing for sport.

Adham Sabri does not treat his Sonya as he does his male opponents, referring to her as “my dear” instead of calling her a “villain” or “fiend” as he normally would. Their meetings are a bit flirtatious. Sonya’s admiration for Adham Sabri is already clear after their first meeting. In adventure #25 entitled *The Silver Dagger* (*al-Khanjar al-Faddiyy*), she is dispatched to confront Adham once again in order to dispose of him for good. She repeatedly tells the director that Adham Sabri “is not an ordinary officer” and that “if the director could see him at work” he would understand how formidable of an adversary

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Adham really is. The sexual tension is most evident in the fact that being around Sonya makes Mona feel extremely uncomfortable. For example, Adham leaves Mona to supervise Sonya while she is tied up, and this awkward exchange takes place.

Sonya sat silently, staring into the face of Mona, who was pointing the barrel of a small machine gun at her...she hastened to get control of her nerves saying mockingly, “You love this Egyptian fiend... Am I right?” Mona calmly answered her. “We’re just colleagues.” Sonya said mockingly, “So then he loves you.” Mona continued answering coldly. “Perhaps.”

Sonya’s utter jealousy of Mona underlies this tense dialogue. Although not explicit in this episode, Sonya’s desire for Adham fully manifests in adventure #83 Battle of the Summit (Maṣrakat al-Qimma). In this episode, Adham Sabri has temporary amnesia and is the hostage of Sonya Graham who is posing as a girl named Norma. He cannot remember much, but he does remember that he many times had asked for a beautiful girl’s hand in marriage, and by that logic mistakenly accepts Sonya as this girl and they marry. A series of events takes place that leads to a new confrontation.

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101 Ibid, “al-Mukhāṭir” 76.

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between Sonya and Mona as she seeks to rescue Adham. However, she is puzzled to find that Sonya has in fact saved Adham’s life. When Mona asks why Sonya would rescue an archenemy, Sonya responds, “everyone woman does everything she can, when she’s in love.”

This marriage ends badly when Adham regains his memory and returns to Egypt, unknowingly leaving Sonya to give birth to a half-Israeli, half-Egyptian son fathered by Adham. Sonya’s character as a professional intelligence agent is completely undermined by her being a woman so attracted to Adham Sabri, even in his domination of her, that when she had the chance she chose to seduce and marry Adham Sabri instead of defeating him. Eventually, Adham and Sonya once again become enemies and Sonya comes to regret her brief relationship with Adham Sabri. Adham too learns to regret this unintentional mistake when he learns of the existence of his son and that he is being raised Jewish in Israel. Although N-1 is not in the business of international sexual conquest like his British counterpart 007, Sonya is proof that he is capable.

Adham’s romantic relationship with Sonya Graham is more than proof of his irresistible masculinity. Like Turkish comic book hero Karaoğlan, Adham Sabri performs

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104 Ibid, “al-Sinyūrā,” Rajul al-Mustahil No. 120 (Cairo: al-Mu’assasa al-Żarabiyya al-Ḥadītha, 1999?) 130-1

105 All of this is not to say that the position of women in the series is incredibly low. The adventures are filled with other female enemies similar to the “Bond girls” of the James Bond series that became the main draw for audiences when the novels were adapted to film. These women include Donna Carolina, Claudia Morris and “Senora.” Far from being inferior to men, or even somewhat helpless like Mona, these women are among the most dangerous intelligence agents, terrorists and criminals in the world, often in roles of domination over men. One clear example is an encounter between Sonya and a man named Masumi, who mocks Sonya for having a female bodyguard. This leads to a fight between Sonya’s female bodyguard name Juta (German name) and Masumi’s male bodyguard, resulting in the defeat of the male. Ibid 79-81.
an act of dominance in his success with a woman who is not just foreign but also an enemy. The nationalist implications that an Egyptian hero could make an Israeli spy put her loyalties and duties aside in order to have a romantic opportunity with him project a power relationship between Egypt and Israel in which Egypt, not Israel, exercises hegemony. Of course this assertion of Egyptian hegemony does not only take place on a sexual metaphorical level. Adham’s domination of his male enemies in no less complete; in fact, through his defeat of them, Adham shows his enemies to be somewhat less than men on the level that he is.

**A Lion Among Men**

To understand the way Adham Sabri’s masculinity is fully expressed, one must also examine his interaction with male enemies. The aforementioned two part series comprised of episodes #52 and #53 *The Mountains of Death* and *Wolves and Blood* demonstrates the type of inferior males that Adham Sabri deals with and their evil nature. In this adventure, Adham and Mona are dispatched to South America, to battle against a guerilla group called “The Mountain Wolves” in Peru, who have tried to kidnap the Egyptian ambassador. Even though they will be forced to do battle in the infamous “Mountains of Death” in the Peruvian Andes on this “suicidal” mission, Adham eagerly accepts the mission saying, “I accept the mission sir, for it is the type of mission that appeals to me… I love to teach all those who challenge Egypt a lesson they will never forget.” As for Mona, she gives a somewhat less zealous though affirmative response saying, “I would follow Major Adham Sabri, even to hell, sir” and blushing with
bashfulness (*khajal*). Upon arriving to Lima, Adham and Mona are almost immediately attacked by five armed men representing the Mountain Wolves and their leader Sancho. Adham dispatches of them quickly using kicks and punches, and even Mona gets involved, decisively ending the skirmish by pointing her gun at the final still-conscious enemy, once again illustrating her unique skill in pointing guns at men after Adham pummels them. Adham pats her on the shoulder for a job well done saying, “be glad my dear, you’ve put an end to this operation skillfully this time.” Then Adham grabs the man, instructing him to give his leader Sancho a message: “Tell him to stay away from Egypt and the Egyptian embassy, or else I’ll force him to crawl across the paths of the Andes, barefoot.”

In the next scene the reader meets Sancho, who is described as follows:

Sancho lit a fancy cigar, the kind that Cuba makes and exports to the whole world, and released its smoke coldly while leaning against the stone wall of a deep well with his huge body, wearing a military uniform similar to the ones the elite strike force soldiers wear in Egypt. He looked strange (*qaqīb*) with his bald head and bushy beard.

Sancho seems to be based on a sort of Fidel Castro “prototype” for Latin American rebels, with rough features and demeanors that contrast with Adham Sabri’s handsomeness and confident savoir faire. Upon receiving Adham’s message, Sancho reacts with incredulously calling “who does this arrogant guy think he is?... He won’t

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107 Ibid 19.
110 Of course on one hand, the idea of a Latin American rebel appeals to the shared legacy of socialism and Marxism as discourses of resistance against the West, however, one must bear in mind that Farouk’s portrayals are largely taken from his reading of Western fiction and as will increasingly be seen in the paper, his enemies often are based on these Western stereotypes.
hold up against Sancho.” Next, the readers finds the familiar Israeli enemy of Adham Sabri named Goldman, who appears to be in league with Sancho:

A gaunt man grumbled, standing next to Sancho wearing a full suit and necktie:
“Don’t underestimate Egyptians, Sancho. We got a hard lesson when we did that in October 1973.”

Here Farouk invokes them memory of the October 1973 war in which the Egyptian and Syrian coalition attacked Israel on two sides in order to regain territories lost in the 1967 Six-Day War. This was an important moment for Arab governments and nationalists who claimed some of the successes of the war as triumph and vindication. The significance of an Israeli issuing this warning in the context of a nationalist narrative is clear but not unprecedented. In a book entitled *The Heroism of the Egyptian Soldier* published in 1975, the Egyptian government made a similar claim using the voice of its enemies. The book is comprised of pictures of Egyptian soldiers at work during the October 1973 War along with quotes that attest to the strength of the Egyptian army. What is interesting about this is that the quotes all come from Israeli officials, Israeli press, and international press. The book contains quotes from each of Israel’s generals such as Ariel Sharon and Moshe Dayan describing the heavy toll of the war on both sides and Israel’s surprise at how strong the Egyptian army had become. The testimonials from the world press follow a similar theme; most of the quotes refer to surprise at how strong Egypt had become.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}} Indeed, the fear and respect of Egypt’s enemies can be used as a testament to Egypt’s

\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}}

\footnote{Egyptian Ministry of Information, *The Heroism of the Egyptian Soldier* (Cairo: State Information Service, 1975).}
prowess, as Farouk clearly tries to illustrate in his novels. Goldman’s cowardice as an Israeli is continually contrasted with Adham Sabri’s courage. Although Goldman is a sworn enemy of Adham and Egypt, he also has a tremendous fear of him after suffering many defeats. When Goldman finds out that Adham Sabri is the Egyptian spy devoted to this mission in the Andes, he panics and screams “what the devil!,” telling Sancho “Adham Sabri surpasses all the demons in hell, Sancho, and if you challenge him, you will lose everything.” These are hardly the words of a worthy adversary; whereas Adham appears as the consummate man of bravery his archenemy is cast a scheming coward.

However, the Mountain Wolves set a clever trap and successfully kidnap Mona right in the heart of Lima. Adham is able to fend off his attackers, but in light of Mona’s kidnapping he is faced with the reality that he must follow “The Road to Hell” in order to reach the Mountain Wolves base and rescue her.114 Along the way he stumbles upon various perils, especially while crossing the “Chasm of Death” by rope, where he successfully battles with a helicopter while suspended above the pit. However, most symbolic is his battle in the “Valley of Doom” with a pack of wolves. After being cornered by the pack and left without an escape route, his only option is to fight the wolves. The pack leader steps out to fight him and the battle ensues. Adham decides that he will defeat the wolf by strangling it, and continues to grasp the wolf’s powerful neck.

113 Farouk, “Jibāl al-Mawt” 22.
114 Ibid 34-43.
no matter how deeply it sticks its fangs into him. Farouk uses this opportunity to showcase Adham’s animal killer instinct.

Indeed, the precepts of the animal world state that “might makes right (al-zażāma ‘il-laqwā).” Adham knew this, and this was exactly what he was trying to put into effect. The wolf continued to try to destroy its opponent while Adham held it in the air by his neck with unyielding strength, avoiding its claws and fangs until the wolf began to suffocate. Its howls turned to entreating and submissive moans. And there Adham smiled with confidence saying, “This is better my king of the wolves.” Then released the wolf’s neck and dropped it among the remaining wolves that began shifting their confused gazes back and forth between the two. Then, Adham did the most extraordinary thing he had ever done. He cocked back his head, cast his gaze upon the moon and let out a howl resembling that of a wolf. His echo reverberated throughout the entire Valley of Doom before he leapt among the wolves and stood upright with his head raised. One of Sancho’s men cried in bewilderment, “What the devil?! He succeeded.”

In this scene, Farouk appears to evoke Tarzan in Adham Sabri’s mastery of the wild. He emerges as a new legitimate leader of a pack of wolves. He will later use this alliance to help him in his fight against Sancho and his pack of “Mountain Wolves.”

Adham successfully arrives to the Mountain Wolves’ den and fights off the guards before finding Mona suspended by her wrists from a tree. Sancho and his remaining men disarm Adham with the threat of violence toward Mona, leaving Goldman screaming “kill him!” Instead, Sancho offers Adham membership in the Mountain Wolves. Goldman shouts, “Be careful not to make this mistake, Sancho… Adham Sabri would never betray his country, even if you paid him all the money in the world.” Here it is revealed that the shaky alliance between Sancho and his Israeli backer Goldman is falling apart. Sancho shouts back, “this is none of your business, man” to which Goldman replies, “But it is my business, Sancho. For we don’t fund you and your men with such

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115 Farouk, Jībāl al-Mawt 77.
116 Ibid 103.
generosity in order for you to go against my orders.” Sancho fires back in anger, “Your orders?!... You must know that you are merely funding our organization, Señor Goldman. However I am the sole leader of the Mountain Wolves, and I alone hold the right to issue orders.”

Sancho once again offers Adham membership, which Adham pretends to accept. He is untied and as a sign of trust, Sancho gives Adham a pistol. Of course, Adham immediately grabs Sancho and hold the gun to his head saying, “which one of use is more naïve, you mountain villain. Tell your men to drop your weapons and release my colleague, or else I’ll blow out your brains with the bullets of this gun.”

However, this is a puzzling moment of weakness for the hero, because the gun turns out to be empty. Having exhausted his last means escape, Adham is forced to accept his fate. Sancho decides rather than shooting Adham, he will push him into a bottomless well and let him meet his demise screaming. Of course, this sends Mona screaming and crying in terror, however, Adham pledges, “Don’t worry my dear, I’ll be back.”

The book ends with Adham tumbling through the air towards the bottom of the well with a knife in hand.

However, the reader is well accustomed to such suspense in the series after Adham Sabri’s countless near-misses with death. The story resumes in the next book entitled *Wolves and Blood* with Adham still falling towards the pool of water at the bottom which, as it turns out, is home to vicious sharks. Despite his predicament Adham too seems accustomed to these situations, appearing “calmer than a man relaxing on a

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117 *Ibid* 103-104
118 *Ibid* 105.
119 *Ibid* 112.
comfortable sofa in an elegant room, listening to calm classical music.”

He spots a shark before reaching the bottom of the well and lands on its back, sinking his dagger deep into its flesh. Then, he swims down into the pool, passing by five other sharks that do not attack him. Adham knew they would not attack him because “his mind, which is always working unceasingly, knew that the five sharks would not attack him until after they had consumed the corpse of their comrade, which they were attracted to by the scent of blood released by the stabs of Adham’s dagger.” Once again, Adham displays his mastery and knowledge of nature and formidable predatory animals. While the sharks feast on their dead comrade, Adham rises to the surface of the pool and begins to climb his way up the side of the well.

Meanwhile, the reader finds Sancho and Goldman scheming and relishing in their victory.

Sancho sat smoking his cigarrette in calmness and gratification while he listened to Goldman, who began saying enthusiastically, “You’ve accomplish what many have been unable to. You’ve killed Adham Sabri.” Sancho mumbled boastfully, “It wasn’t a difficult matter like you think Señor Goldman. Plus nobody has ever defeated the Mountain Wolves.” Goldman smiled in comfort and said, “You’ve made me believe that, Sancho, so much that I asked my country to raise the amount that they’re paying you to a million and a half per month.”

The naïve arrogance of Sancho is a common way that Farouk shows difference between Adham and his enemies. The personalities of these enemies are ridden with vice, whether

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120 Farouk, “Dhi‘āb wa Dimā‘” 14.
121 Ibid 17.
122 Ibid 18.
it be pride, greed or simply bad habits like smoking and drinking.123 Moreover, Adham’s enemies, whether agents of states such as Israel or independent actors, operate primarily on a “cream” mentality. That is, they are driven primarily by money and power whereas Adham and his allies alone seem to be driven by nationalism, allegiance and morals. This point is further illustrated by Sancho’s decision to ransom Mona to the Egyptian embassy for one million dollars.124

While this is taking place, Adham is continuing his journey back from the depths of that well, which leads him on a steep climb though a series of caves. His heroism is on full display in this scene. As Farouk writes, “The rocks were sharp and painful, and the height lofty. However, Adham’s will was sharper than the rocks and rose higher than the walls of the cave.” Adham emerged from the cave’s exit back in the Valley of Doom. While lying on the ground in utter exhaustion, the same pack of wolves that he had previously dealt with arrives, but rather than attacking him and eating him as would be expected, they bow to him in acknowledgement of his supremacy and leadership in their pack. Adham’s masculinity and dominance here is so absolute that even wild animals can recognize and respect his power.125 After enduring another journey through the Valley of Doom, Adham successfully finds Mona and rescues her by fighting Sancho and his men

123 Of course one must also consider that picturing the hero Adham Sabri drinking and smoking would not be appropriate in any case for the series ostensibly young readership given the books’ education role.
124 Ibid 19.
125 Ibid 19-23.
hand-to-hand. They escape into a small wood hut, but are surrounded by the grenade-wielding Mountain Wolves. Here Adham demonstrates his superb fighting abilities.

He broke the window of the little wooden hut with the heel of his boot and fired the bullets of his machine gun towards the Mountain Wolves. Adham’s bullets were not merely single shots, his skill and systematic mentality transformed them into exploding bombs. For he did not fire one bullet at the Mountain Wolves; rather, his bullets hit the grenades that they were carrying.

This skillful act nearly disarms the attackers fully, however, in the melee that ensues Mona compromises her position while watching Adham battle one of the attackers in awe and surrenders at gunpoint, crying “Their attack surprised me, and when I turned towards your fight these Wolves took me by surprise and stripped me of my weapon.” Rather than erupting in anger, Adham maintains his composure and forgives Mona for this seemingly fatal error saying, “it’s OK my dear, this is fate… our fate.”

\[126\] Ibid 32.
\[127\] Ibid 40.
\[128\] Ibid 40-43
As a result of their surrender, Mona and Adham end up tied to stakes on piles of wood, to which Sancho intends to set fire. Before Sancho lights the torches, Adham lets off a series of howls, which the Mountain Wolves interpret as a “cry of death.” In foreshadowing, Adham says sarcastically to Sancho, “the wolves of the Valley of Doom are more merciful than you, you rat” to which Sancho replies, “without a doubt, you fiend. For they are afraid of crossing into our den, no matter how much hunger bites them.” A short while later as Sancho is lighting the Mona and Adham’s pyres, the Mountain Wolves are startled by the howls of the actual wolves of the Valley of Doom, whom Adham has successfully summoned with his howls for help. This distracts Sancho and his men who find themselves fighting with the wolves, which allows Adham to perform what Farouk deems a Houdini-like escape from his ropes and free Mona as well. Goldman flees the scene to fight another day. As for Adham and Mona, they escape and take Sancho hostage. Mona holds Sancho at gunpoint as Adham does battle with yet another ferocious animal, this time a mountain lion. In the meantime Sancho’s men come to rescue him. Another skirmish ensues which leaves the

\[129\] Ib\id 47.
\[130\] Ib\id 48-52.
Mountain Wolves all but defeated at the hands of Adham, who is led on a chase through the mountains by a desperately fleeing Sancho. In the end, Sancho is unable to escape. They have one final fight in which Adham kicks Sancho in the face breaking his jaw and dislodging several of his teeth. Sancho falls unconscious and Adham is able to throw him over his shoulder, bring him down the mountain, and deliver him personally to the Egyptian ambassador still alive.\textsuperscript{131} The final scene is quite symbolic; Adham has reduced Sancho to the status of a tamed animal, just as he mastered the wolves of the valley. Sancho appears on all fours completely prostrated before the ambassador.\textsuperscript{132} Adham’s domination of Sancho bringing him in not dead but alive represents a more complete subjugation and greater capacity for control in his lack of need to kill him.

Adham has the ability to not only defeat his enemies, but to tame them as with Sancho and Sonya earlier. As also shown in \textit{The Mountains of Death}, Adham is equally capable of taming large animals, be they wolves, sharks or otherwise. These battles with ferocious animals are not necessarily uncommon in the broad genre of adventure literature; however, as Mammu wrote in his 1984 work on heroism in literature, battles with animals hold a special place in Arabic stories of heroism. The conflicts between predatory animals and men serve to illustrate both the hero’s “killer instincts” so to speak as well the ability of that hero to use logic to over powerful creatures that operate purely on instinct rather than logic. The most commonly used animal for this effect is the lion,

\textsuperscript{131} \textit{Ibid} 75-102.
\textsuperscript{132} \textit{Ibid} 103.
which is Arabic is known as “king of the beasts (malik al-sibā‘).” Mammu mentions the stories of Ḥamza and Antara ibn Shaddad as two epic confrontations between man and lion in Arabic folk literature. Thus, Adham’s confrontations with animals on his missions often take place in the wilderness where he can display his Tarzan-like masculinity and be established not just as the most formidable spy but also as a dominant alpha-male defeating the most ferocious beasts.

This aspect of Adham’s character is especially on display in Operation Jungle. In this episode, Adham travels to the Congo to stop smugglers, but along the way he comes face to face with and vanquishes many fierce animals, including a crocodile, a python and of course a male lion. Adham’s battle with the lion is particularly significant. A tribe called the Wambezi had captured Mona and given Adham an absurd ultimatum. He must find a lion and bring it back to the camp alive if he ever wants to see Mona again. He sets out into the jungle, finds a lion and begins roaring at it in order to agitate it. He craftily manages to wrap a vine around its neck so he can attack it from above as it struggles to break free. As Farouk puts it “a lion among men clashed with the king of the jungle,” and a battle ensued that caused the whole jungle to “shudder from the terror of the clash.” Although we do not see how the battle unfolds, Adham returns to the Wambezi camp with the lion still breathing atop his shoulders, much to the dismay of the tribesmen and an overjoyed Mona. Through this act of valor, Adham successfully wins

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133 Mammu 20.
134 Farouk, ʿamaliyyat al-ʿAdīl 52.
135 Ibid 59.
the Wambezi over to his side. They make him an honorary member of the tribe saying “there will always be a place for you around the Wambezi table.”\textsuperscript{136} This scene serves multiple functions. First of all, it establishes Adham Sabri as a true masculine hero who can defy the impossible in taming even the most savage beast. Second, Adham uses his cunning to defeat the animal, thus making use of a reason versus instinct motif. Lastly, Adham is able to meet the demands that even the Wambezi themselves considered impossible, proving that he is able to reign supreme on any turf. This is an ultimate expression of hegemony, which will be discussed further in regards to Egypt and politics vis-à-vis Israel in the series.

Beyond Adham’s superior mental and physical abilities, morality plays an important role in the articulation of Adham’s heroism. As mentioned, each character he faces possesses certain vices that distinguish him or her from Adham Sabri’s model of perfection. Although it is not explicit in the series, Adham Sabri is a good Muslim. This is shown through contrast with his non-Muslim enemies, even in their habits. For example, it is clear that many of Adham Sabri’s enemies are cigarette smokers, which distinguishes them from Adham and Mona. In addition, many enemies are pictured drinking constantly. This scene from \#80 Den of Terrorism (Wakr al-Irhāb) illustrates this point:

Pancho seemed extremely tense that morning, as he gulped glasses of tequila, one after another, without having any of his breakfast. When Alfredo asked him what he was doing to his health, he screamed at him in anger, “It’s my health, and it’s none of your

\textsuperscript{136} Ibid 68.
business.” Alfredo furrowed his brow, mumbling, “Ok, Señor Pancho, it’s your health, but… fine… no one will stop you.” Pancho threw the tequila glass violently, shouting, “I don’t want any advice, understand? I’ll kill the first person that directs any advice at me.” Alfredo drew back, shouting, “No one will give you any advice Señor Pancho. Rest assured.” Pancho went back to pouring himself a glass of tequila, saying nervously and as though he were talking to himself in a loud voice, “How have they not got to him yet? How? He’s just one man… how?” Then he swallowed the glass of tequila in one gulp, shouting, red in the face, “We’ve beaten armies before. How could we fall short now before one man?” He went back to pouring himself another glass…

The Mexican terrorist Pancho (not to be confused with Sancho) is pictured indulging in his drink of choice and screaming in anger at his inability to defeat Adham Sabri. This is not an uncommon scene in the series, as is evidenced as well by the following depictions of Russian villains. Farouk writes, “A square-faced, wide-jawed man with short blond hair took a bottle of vodka and poured a little of it into a small crystal glass. He lifted the glass to his narrow blue eyes, as if he was putting some of their harsh coldness into it. Then, he tasted it with his lips, before parting them and saying coldly, “not like the stuff in Moscow, but not bad.” It may seem like a small note, but the fact that Adham Sabri does not drink as opposed to his enemies is one of the clearest indicators that he is a Muslim in the absence of an explicit statement of faith. This is essential for his mass appeal and relatability for an Egyptian audience, not to mention for contrasting against James Bond, whose most memorable tagline may very well be “shaken, not stirred.”

While Adham’s battles again these male enemies and predatory animals distinguish his masculinity, they are of secondary significance to the greatest threat to Egypt in the series of Israeli Mossad. In Adham’s conflicts with Mossad agents within

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137 Farouk, “Wakr al-Irhāb” 64-5.
Israel and around the world, Farouk most clearly distinguishes the difference between Arab and Israeli, Egypt and Israel, and right and wrong in the series. Adham’s cumulative victories over Mossad agents provide a picture of absolute Egyptian hegemony. This hegemony is not exercised in a fictional past harkening to the days of Nasser; rather, Farouk writes his adventures in the present, fully situated in the actual historical past or Egypt and its battles with Israel, thus creating an Egyptian hegemony that is alive and well.

**Arabs, Israelis and Egyptian Hegemony**

Nabil Farouk’s aspiration in creating an Egyptian hero to replace James Bond and ostensibly other Western models of heroism within Egyptian literature is to ultimate repaint the picture of Egypt’s place in the world. In dispatching his hero Adham Sabri to various locations around the globe to combat the greatest threat to Egypt’s, and indeed, the world’s security, Nabil Farouk creates a portrayal of a hegemonic Egypt perhaps far removed from the political realities of the 1980s and 1990s. Rather than acquiescing over time to Egypt’s real-life warming of relations with Israel and the West throughout the course of the writing of the series, Nabil Farouk is affected by his historical context only in that he resists it. The trilogy comprised of issues #122-124 of *Rajul al-Mustaḥīl*, entitled *The Golden Fingers* (*al-Aṣābiā al-Dhahabiyya*), *The Impossible* (*al-Mustaḥīl*), and *The Final Touch* (*al-Lamsa al-Akhīra*) is highly indicative of Farouk’s attempt to posit a new position for Egypt in world politics on the level of the imagination. While
these book certainly do not represent Adham Sabri’s first face-off with Israeli Mossad agents, and in fact, do not represent his first mission inside Israel, they represent an attempt to delegitimize Israel and at the same time portray Egypt as a dominant nation. For understanding the dynamic between Israel and Egypt that Farouk attempts to create, these books present the clearest picture of Farouk’s intended themes and portrayals.\textsuperscript{139}

*The Golden Fingers*\textsuperscript{140} begins with the revelation that Adham Sabri’s colleague and lifelong friend the professional counterfeiter Qadrī (henceforth: Qadri) has been kidnapped from New York City by Mossad agents and brought to Israel.\textsuperscript{141} In order to retrieve Qadri, Adham parachutes from an altitude beyond the coverage of Israel radar wearing an oxygen mask in order to land near Mount Hebron (in Arabic: al-Khalīl). As Adham prepares to jump, he tells the instructor, “rest assured, man… We can outdo them every time.” The instructor replies, “I hope so, for this is the first time we’ve jumped intentionally on their territory since the stage of direct wars between us ended.” Here Farouk supplies a footnote reading, “Egypt officially announced the end of a state of war between them and Israel after the signing of the peace accords in 1977,” establishing that the story does take place in a historically situated present in which Egypt and Israel are at

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\textsuperscript{139} Although publication dates are absent, the issue numbers indicate that they were probably written around the turn of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century, during which Israel was involved with the Second Palestinian Intifada. These events may have played a role in Farouk’s representations.
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\textsuperscript{140} Although this may seem to be an allusion to the novel from Ian Fleming’s James Bond series entitled *Goldfinger*, the “golden fingers” in this story are those of Adham Sabri’s colleague named Qadri, who earned the nickname “the golden fingers” because of his impeccable skill in counterfeiting.
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peace. Adham’s adventures are in this way not a alternate fantasy reality of Nabil Farouk, but instead are a sidestory to a factual narrative of the conflict between Israel and Egypt.

After landing, Adham is rescued by an Israeli agent secretly working for Egyptian intelligence, who turns out to be “a blond woman in her early thirties, with a beautiful face closer to Russian women than to Israelis.” The agent’s name is Rachel Freeman, and while she is an Israeli citizen and works for Mossad, her sympathy for the Palestinian cause has persuaded her to work on the behalf of Egypt. This is crucial to Farouk’s subversive portrayal of Israelis sympathizing with Arabs on the side of good, as opposed to the opposite portrait of the Arab collaborator in Western fiction. As they drive under the cover of night, Rachel asked Adham if he was surprised that she was a woman. Like most of Adham’s female acquaintances she finds him frustratingly arrogant but is at the same time very impressed by him. Much to her disappointment, Adham tells her that he has in fact worked with many women in the past and that whether she is a man or a woman makes no difference to him. However, he does add that Rachel was a good choice, only to add, “certainly, the Israelis will be suspicious of every man, but they will not suspect for one moment that I’m disguised as a woman.”

142 Ibid 42-43.
143 Ibid 59-60, 74-75.
144 Ibid 93-95.
Meanwhile, Farouk introduces the main enemies of the book, head of special operations for Mossad Meir Goldman and Mossad agent David Blue. Of course, Goldman is extremely concerned by the fact that Adham Sabri has penetrated Israeli defenses, however, the arrogant agent David vows that he will destroy Adham and that “the gates of hell have been opened.” The next scene featuring David portrays him in dialogue with Qadri, from whom he is withholding food in order to obtain top secret information about Egyptian intelligence. The reader is fully aware from constant instances of Adham’s playful mockery that Qadri is extremely overweight and this is often a source of mild comic relief. However, in this case Qadri maintains an unprecedented level of dignity in the face of his Israeli interrogator saying, “you know how much I love food… but you don’t know how much I love Egypt” and refusing to supply any information. The resolve shown by Qadri here is consistent with the behavior of the other Arab characters in the series when confronting Israelis. They do not bend under torture or threat of violence when it comes to the security of Egypt.

The next character that Farouk introduces is the Palestinian would-be collaborator Adīb al-Rayyis (henceforth: Adib). After being pulled over and almost arrested by an

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145 The first name of the head of Mossad, Meir (Mā’īr), is the same spelling of the last name of prominent Israeli politician Golda Meir and seems to be an allusion to her. Most of the Israeli characters bear the first and last names of prominent Israeli figures.
146 Ibid 86-87.
147 In #120 La Signora (al-Sīnīrā) Qadri becomes stuck climbing through a hole as he Mona and another agent named Waṣfī attempt to escape from a ship and are pursued by gunmen, however, this humorous situation becomes significantly less humorous when as they flee in a rowboat only to find that Waṣfī has been killed by gunfire in their delayed escape. Ibid “al-Sīnīrā” 38-48.
Israeli officer for drunk driving, Adib ends up in a confrontation with an old man who yells at him, “what’s come over you, Adib?! How can you bring shame upon your family this way?!” Here it is revealed that Adib is a member of one of the most prominent Palestinian families, al-Rayyis. The man continues to scold him until suddenly Adham appears and explains that Adib is only pretending to be a collaborator with Aman and that he is actually sympathetic with the Palestinian resistance. Here Adib, the subversive collaborator appears in contrast with Rachel, the secret traitor against Israel. At the end of the first book of the trilogy, Rachel and Adib meet for the first time and discovering they will be working together along with Adham to rescue Qadri from Mossad. Thus, the stage has been set for an intelligence battle between Israel and Egypt in which Egypt has both an Israeli officer and a Palestinian collaborator working on the inside.

With Adham on the loose in Tel Aviv, the Mossad agents continue to scramble to catch him, yet he slips through their grasp in each encounter. Palestinian witnesses to Adham’s exploits express optimistic surprise at the difficulty Mossad is experiencing in trying to apprehend Adham saying, “I have never seen them doing this ever, not even in the days of the October 1973 War.” In once again conjuring the memory of 1973, the greatest military victory in Egyptian history, Farouk asserts the continuing power and influence of Egypt and its leadership in an ongoing resistance against Israel. This theme becomes even clearer in the first meeting between Adham Sabri and the alleged
collaborator Adib. After battling five Israeli police officers and knocking them unconscious, Adham asks Adib to help him tie them up and hide him in his house. Adib is hesitant to do so, which leads to the following exchange:

Adham’s eyebrows narrowed sternly as he approached him and looked him directly in the eyes saying with a tone that made the man’s blood freeze in his veins, “You’re Arab… Isn’t that so?” The man’s eyes widened as he stared back at him before muttering, “yes.”

Adham said with the same sternness, “Palestinian?” The man swallowed his saliva with difficulty muttering, “certainly.” Adham said, “Say it then, man… You are a Palestinian Arab.” The man didn’t know why zeal was pouring out of his veins with Adham’s words, nor why he pulled his body up straight in confidence saying, “Yes, I am a Palestinian Arab.” Adham motioned with his forefinger saying firmly, “Cooperate with us then, let’s tie up these villains.” The man shouted, “Certainly!” Then he took off towards his house, his veins about to explode from the strength of their pulsation with zeal and enthusiasm (ḥamās wa nakha). Rachel shouted as he came out from where she was hiding, “What did you do to him?!” Adham answered her as he pulled the Israelis inside, “Nothing… I just awoke the Arab zeal (nakha) in his depths.” She replied in surprise, “Arab zeal?!?”

He turned to her saying, “Yes… something no one knows but us.”

This awakening of “Arab zeal” within Adib has a transitive effect when Adib defies his boss at the Israeli factory in which he works, which fills the onlooking Palestinian workers with pride when it is revealed that Adib’s wine bottle that he always carried was not really filled with wine and that he was merely pretending to be a drunkard. Adham’s role as awakener of the Arab spirit and champion of the Palestinian cause is reminiscent of the rhetoric of Egyptian nationalism during the Nasser regime, and stands in contrast to the political rhetoric of the Mubarak regime at the time of the book’s publication in the early 21st Century when Egypt’s political stance vis-à-vis the Palestinian issue was growing increasingly ambivalent. This portrayal is a reassertion of Egyptian national identity as the vanguard of Arab pride and resistance to Western imperialism.

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152 *Ibid* 144-145.
Despite the ardent anti-Israeli tone of the novels, Farouk is careful to convey to his readers an informed worldview, including with regards to Israel. In addition to explaining the significance of prominent historical figures such as early Zionist thinker Theodor Herzl and Israel’s first Prime Minister David Ben Gurion, Farouk provides detailed footnotes on various aspects of Israeli and Jewish culture and history. For example, one of his Israeli characters makes a reference to the Torah, which Farouk explains in a footnote as, “A sacred book of God, to whom be ascribed all perfection and majesty, revealed to the prophet Moses. It was mentioned in the Qur’an several times.”

Here, Farouk not only displays his knowledge of Judaism but also contextualizes it within a religious tradition in which Islam shares. This stands in contrast to his many explanations of Zionism as a response to anti-Semitism and a movement to settle in or colonize Palestine. At the same time, he supplies footnotes about Egyptian history discussing successful undercover Egyptian spies in Israel and attesting to the superiority of the Egyptian navy over the Israeli navy in both “quantity and quality.” In each other the stories, and moreso in the later adventures of Adham Sabri, Farouk supplies footnotes and information about various peoples, events and places as well as new technological developments throughout the series’ progress from pagers to text messaging.

153 Ibid 199.
156 For the reader’s viewing pleasure, I will list only a small sample of the footnotes found in some of the issues of the Rajul al-Mustahiīl series from issue #115 No Mercy (Bilā Rahma). On page 28, Farouk explains to his readers the beliefs surrounding “Day of the Dead (jayd kull al-mawtā) celebrated by
“scientification” or attempt to utilize objective knowledge in his portrayals serves to give the worldview in the novels added legitimacy, thereby making them more authentic.¹⁵⁷ This all lends to Farouk’s project of creating a relatable and believable modern Arab hero.

Through the use of his newfound allies in Israeli collaborator Rachel and the “born-again” Arab Adib Adham is able to defeat the entire Mossad apparatus and rescue his colleague Qadri. While Qadri returns to Egypt, Adham decides to stay behind in Israel to continue battling Mossad and to retrieve the son that he unwitting bore to his archenemy Sonya Graham. Farouk writes, “He couldn’t leave his son to grow up in the heart of Israel… In the heart of the colonial Jewish Zionist entity that he detested so.”¹⁵⁸ This final conflict between Sonya and Adham never fully becomes resolved, however, Sonya intentions in keeping the child in Israel away from Adham are revealed 8 issues later in #132 Team of the Impossible. Adham and Sonya meet face to face for the first time since she was mistakenly presumed dead in a previous battle. They have the following exchange:

“Native South Americans.” On page 60, he also explains the American Indian system of smoke signals, which he writes “resemble Morse code telegraphs.” On page 154, Farouk explains E-mail and the use of email across the internet for instantaneous communication using phone lines. One page 186, he explains to his readers the concept of cannibals saying with this entry, “eaters of human flesh (Cani Pals (sic)): primitive (bidāʾiyy) tribes living in the jungles of South America, and they are warlike tribes, usually feeding on the meat of animals of the region, however, they do not hesitate to eat their enemies (especially their livers), or any stranger…” All of these footnotes serve to provide objective or factual information to the reader and establish the authority of the author and his comprehensive knowledge of the world.¹⁵⁷ This was also seen in Les Aventures de Tintin. After Hergé first few editions of the series were considered offensive by some of his peers, he tried to spend time researching the locales and peoples that he was portraying in the books, however, this merely led to a more detailed essentialization of his subjects whom he looks upon with a colonial gaze.¹⁵⁸ Ibid 207.
“Where is my son?!” She said with the same sarcasm, “You mean our son… Rest assured my dear Adham… Our son is well and receiving the best education possible. He will grow to become a devote Jew in the future.” Then he voice harshened a little and she added, “Do you know why I’m making him this way?” He said in anger, “Your Zionist associations need no explanation, Sonya.” She shouted, “What associations?” Then she let out a powerful, sarcastic laugh adding, “You’re so mistaken. Did you imagine that the issue of a national homeland, and the promised land, and all this silliness that the Zionist organizations live on has crossed my mind for one moment of my life? Nonsense, my dear… I’m making your son into a fanatical Jew for another reason entirely.” Her voice kept gaining a cruel ring as she went on, “I’ve done all of this and keep at it because it accomplishes something for me that all other means have failed to accomplish.” He asked firmly, “What is that, Sonya?” She answered him with a tone carrying all the hate in the world, “Humiliating you, Adham.”

Sonya’s utter disregard for Zionism and all of the ideologies that she allegedly protected as a Mossad agent represents a major blow to the legitimacy of Israeli nationalism. Whereas Adham Sabri is unconditionally devoted to Egypt, his Israeli foil only raises her son as an Israeli Jew in order to spite and humiliate Adham Sabri.

The contrast between the Arab characters and Israeli characters in the novels convey Nabil Farouk’s expression of Egyptian nationalism in terms as a challenge to Israeli legitimacy. Through Adham and Egypt’s continual victories over Israeli enemies, Farouk creates a portrayal of Egyptian hegemony over Israel that satisfies the national imagination in enacting the defeats of Israel that many Egyptians undoubtedly longed to witness. This is most clear when Adham’s missions are carried out within Israel. Adham transgresses successfully on Israeli soil, which of course is indelibly tied to Israeli sovereignty. His first visit to Israel takes place only shortly after the devastating incident in which he almost died, lost his memory and mistakenly married his arch-enemy Sonya Graham as mentioned before. Thus, Adham Sabri’s journey to Israel is not just one of the

most important missions of his career, but also represents a comeback from his previous brush with defeat. In episode #91 entitled The Hidden Face (al-Wajh al-Khafiyy), Adham travels to Israel disguised as a German tourist. His first encounter in the airport of Tel Aviv with the customs inspector is noteworthy for the tension and animosity between Adham and the unwitting Israelis. The officer asks,

“What is the reason of your visit to Israel, Adon Rudolph.” Adham answered him with a wide smile, “Tourism.” The officer asked him somewhat carelessly and sarcastically, “And what would a German tourist wish to see here?” Adham said with similar sarcasm, “I want to see who’s left of you after Hitler’s wise decisions.” The officer’s eyebrows met in anger, and he said, “Are you fond of bad jokes (dużábát ṭhaqīla), Adon Rudolph?” Adham asked him with the same sarcastic smile, “What, aren’t you fond of offensive jokes (dużábát samīja)?” The officer bit his lip in rage, then turned and handed the passport to one of his colleagues saying, “I want a clear photocopy of every one of the pages in this passport.” Adham said mockingly, “Looks like you’re fond of foolish nonsense as well.” The officer hit his desk suddenly with his fist saying, “Listen you German… If not for the strict order for good treatment of tourists, I would grab you by your ears right now and throw you in the first plane going back to Germany.” Adham said sarcastically, “Really?! I can hardly wait to see you do that.” The Israeli officer’s muscles contracted, and anger appeared on his face, but his colleague quickly intervened saying, “Here’s the passport… I’ve copied it all, and it’s all perfectly sound.” Then he handed Adham the passport going on to say, “Welcome to Israel, Adon Rudolph. We hope you have a fine stay.” Adham took the passport and said, “That’s what I like to hear.” Then he cast a mocking glance at the first officer before leaving calmly, so the officer shouted sharply, “This despicable German… We should forbid the likes of him entry here.” His colleague patted his shoulder soothingly saying, “Calm down, man… If we did that with every tourist, we would lose half our yearly revenue… come on… put up with them a little.”

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160 “Adon” means “sir” or “mister” in Hebrew. Farouk’s non-Arab characters usually conduct dialogue in sound Arabic, however they will almost always use the words of their respective languages for terms of address.

This is an extremely evocative and rare scene within the *Rajul al-Mustahîl* series. While the audience is assumed to be youth and the language never strays too far from formality and politeness, Adham’s Hitler joke is just about as antagonistic and offensive as anything he or anyone else says in the series. Adham Sabri shows tremendous boldness in his lack of respect for the Israeli guards despite his ostensibly perilous situation in a country where his presence is not welcome. This of course is also a complete challenge to the sovereignty of the Israeli state with the idea that tourists can behave however they wish to Israeli officers because of the country’s heavy reliance on tourism. A state that survives on tourism certainly is not the symbol of a thriving nation, and ironically it is Egypt that during the 1990s sought to greatly expand its tourist sector, particularly Israeli tourism to Egypt’s beach resorts.

When leaving the airport, Adham is approached by an Arab taxi driver who says in English, “Would you like visit the Wailing Wall, Sir?” Adham then replies in German, “Did they bring it here?” to which the driver replies, “rather, it was the one that came.” Farouk reveals that Adham and his accomplice used these cryptic words to identify each other. The driver allows Adham into the car saying in Arabic, “My name is Ziad…
Welcome to Palestine.” Of course, Ziad referring to Tel Aviv as Palestine reflects Farouk’s clear intent to deny Israel’s legitimacy. Ziad agrees to help Adham obtain the supercomputer called “Simulator,” which is considered a powerful piece of technology that, in the hands of the Israelis, could do tremendous harm to Egypt. Adham’s first course of action is to intentionally blow his cover as German tourist Rudolph Heinz in order to rent hotel rooms under this name and leave a false trail, only to assume another secret identity of Jean Raymond, a French tourist. This buys him some time, however, he is met with a surprise when he discovers that Mossad agent Moshe Chaim Disraeli, his former nemesis and male foil, is not dead on hot on his trail, even though Adham thought he had killed him. Moshe is equally surprised to find out that Adham Sabri is alive and in Israel. Their surprise encounter looks to be the first of many to come, as Adham somehow manages to escape. The final pages of the book depict Adham battling an Israeli helicopter, which he succeeds in defeating using only a gun.

The subsequent adventure, #92 entitled Danger (al-Khaṭar), features a very provocative cover, with Adham Sabri being pursued by a woman and a man wearing a hat featuring a Star of David, along with a large Star of David exploding forward from the background towards the reader. When Adham emerges for the first time in the story, it is in disguise as Israeli General Ben-Ezra, who has in fact died in a previous

162 Ibid 64-5.
163 Ibid 84-5.
164 Ibid 90-6.
165 Ibid 134-8.
skirmish. Adham’s ability to use disguise to a degree such that he might impersonate an Israeli general in Israel astounds even his companion Ziad. By dressing Adham in this Israeli uniform, Farouk performs an act of subversion using an opportunity created by the nature of espionage. Adham’s appropriation of a false Israeli identity and successful infiltration of the Israeli ranks as an Egyptian spy is a significant accomplishment and represents an ultimate form of violation in terms of Israeli sovereignty. He is able to move undetected, perfectly imitating General Ben-Ezra, until Moshe Disraeli once again catches up with him and uncovers his strategy. This leads to a heated confrontation between Adham, Moshe and Ziad, in which Moshe brags about his ability to operate on the level of Adham Sabri. He boasts, “You know that we are two giants in our world, Adham. It’s fun for giants to keep an eye on one another, isn’t that so?” This evokes a passionate response from Ziad who feels slighted by Moshe’s arrogant remarks. He says, “You forgot a third giant, you Israeli.” Moshe asks who that third giant is, and Ziad fires back saying, “my people.” This remark draws the admiration of Adham Sabri, but invites the scorn of Moshe who says mockingly, “Your people?! What is it that your people is capable of doing?” Ziad answers, “A lot, you Israeli.” A frustrated Moshe picks up an ashtray shouting, “Do you see this? With it my people could defeat yours” and throws it through the glass window shattering it adding, “like that.”

166 Farouk, “al-Khaṭar,” Rajul al-Mustahīl No. 92 (Cairo: al-Mu’assasa al-Żarabiyya al-Ḥadīthā, 1995?) 28. The name I have rendered as “Ben Ezra” is transcribed by Farouk as “Bin Ẓāzīr.”

167 Ibid 60.
Moshe’s words prove to be a near fatal underestimation of Palestinians. Suddenly, the house is bombarded by bullets falling “like rain” from Palestinian gunmen summoned by Ziad.\textsuperscript{168} This provides Adham with the opportunity to escape at the urging of a courageous Ziad who shouts at Adham, “Run away, Adham… Run away or else we’ll lose everything.”\textsuperscript{169} Ziad pays dearly for his role in saving Adham after being apprehended and interrogated. Farouk describes the scene as Moshe enters the interrogation room to find Ziad has already undergone a difficult interrogation.

He opened the door of the vault and advanced slowly towards where Ziad was sitting in a miserable state with a broken nose, chipped teeth, and blood flowing from the tips of his fingers, and from his nose and mouth. The Mossad men had tied him to a metal chair connected to electrical wires, and one of the men had prepared to shock him with electricity. Moshe motioned to the man, and he rose from his place and left the vault, shutting it behind him. Then Moshe looked at Ziad and said with his usual coldness, “How long will you resist?” Ziad looked at him with swollen eyes without answering, and it seemed like Moshe really wasn’t waiting for an answer, because he immediately followed, “You won’t find there’s any use in resisting. We’ve already apprehended the man whom you sacrifice all of this in order to protect. We’ve caught Adham Sabri.”\textsuperscript{170}

Despite his battered state, Ziad is not demoralized by Moshe’s words; rather, he is emboldened by his captors failed attempts to extract information from him. Ziad replies “Everything is unimportant, for the sake of the cause.” Moshe replies, “What cause? It is only his cause… Adham Sabri’s cause… The cause for which he is making you all victims.” Ziad answers back, “Perhaps that’s true for you, but it’s not true for us. We fight together for the sake of one cause.” Upon hearing this, Moshe begins torturing Ziad with jolts of electricity.

\textsuperscript{168} Ibid 62-63.  
\textsuperscript{169} Ibid 66.  
\textsuperscript{170} Ibid 85-6.
He pressed one of the buttons of the apparatus and a strong electrical current flowed through the body of Ziad, who trembled violently as he released a terrible scream of pain before Moshe stopped the current and asked cruelly, “Where is Adham Sabri?” Ziad screamed, “Go to hell!” Moshe pushed the button another time, and for a longer period, and Ziad began trembling for a long time until Moshe raised his hand from the button and the young man completely collapsed as Moshe repeated his question, “Where did Adham Sabri go?” Ziad muttered, “I don’t know where he is, but I know where you will be going.” He continued with a sudden scream, “You will go to hell!” Moshe’s eyebrows narrowed and he pushed the button a third time, leaving Ziad screaming and trembling for an extremely long period before he collapsed unconscious.171

Ziad, the Palestinian ally of Adham Sabri, successfully endures torture at the hands of Israeli interrogators to the point that he loses consciousness. Ziad’s resilience places him above his Israeli torturer, thus putting Palestinians above Israelis.

Fortunately for Ziad, Adham is able to rescue him from prison and the mission ends in the successful recovery of the computer. As is evident from Adham’s adventures in Israel, Farouk tries to establish a superior position for Egyptians and the Arab allies the Palestinians over Israelis. In Rajul al-Mustaḥīl, Farouk writes with a clear sense of the portrayals of Arabs in modern Western literature and political discourse and an intention to subvert this discourse. Most central to this aim is his reversal of some typical generalizations made about Arabs by Israelis. This is most clear in his treatment of the issue of “terrorism,” and no episode more clearly reflects Farouk’s aims in this treatment than the aforementioned adventure entitled The Suicide Bombers.172 In this story, Adham

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171 Ibid 87-8.
172 The word I am translating here as “suicide bomber” is intihāriyy, which of course is problematic because it means “suicidal.” As a noun this could be translated various ways, as “suicide attacker,” “suicidal person” or even as some online fans have translated it as “kamikaze.” However, I have chosen the term “suicide bomber” because it is most appropriate for explaining Farouk’s goal of putting forth a different portrayal of Arabs not to mention the fact that the characters in the story are in fact Israeli suicide bombers working for Mossad. Of course this issue of the Arab stereotype as suicide bomber did not arise until the Second Intifada, the September 11th 2001 attacks, and the Second US-Iraq war, all of which
travels to London and battles against the newly founded “Octopus Organization,” which is working as an extension of Mossad’s international operations against Egypt. This is not an unprecedented plot point in the series, however, the most striking image to come out of the story is the Mossad suicide attackers that try to kill Adham, one of whom does actually detonate himself in an unsuccessful attempt to kill Adham and Mona. This subversive image of Israeli, not Arab, as suicide attacker is a clear reversal of Western discourse on the “Arab-Israeli” conflict in the battle for legitimacy.

The topic of terrorism is discussed in a way that separates the issue of terrorism from Islamic and Arab identity. Many of the episodes of the series involve Adham battling terrorists of various nationalities, although not Arab, who are sometimes tied to Mossad and sometimes operating on their own. The most common goal of these terrorists is to obtain nuclear weapons or secret information on nuclear weapons from Western states, which can then be potentially sold to Israel. One such episode that follows this train of thought is #80 entitled The Den of Terrorism (Wakr al-Irhāb). This adventure bring Adham to Mexico in order to combat Pancho Salazar and aptly-named terrorist organization called “The Den of Terrorism.” Having obtained nuclear secrets with the cooperation of a traitorous American scientist, Pancho is arranging a deal to sell these secrets to Israel for one billion dollars. In addition, he has managed to kidnap Adham

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occurred in the 21st century and definitely after the publication of this particular book sometime in the mid-1990s. However, in absence of an exact publication date for the novel I submit to the reader this example bearing in my the historical context of the time.

Sabri’s partner Mona Tawfiq. Adham thus finds himself in a familiar role, fighting “for the sake of Mona and for the sake of the country (waṭan).” Terrorism is portrayed as a threat to Egypt and the world, however, unlike in the rhetoric of both the United States and Egyptian governments, this terror does not come from an Arab or Islamic source. Farouk does try to sweep the negative image of Islamic terrorism under the rug. He goes even further to reverse the roles and put Westerners in the position of terrorists who Egypt must work to defeat as a world power.

This becomes even more apparent in the later episodes of the series published after September 11th, which posses much stronger ideological overtones and attempts to comment on current events. They deal with the issue of American hegemony very directly. For example in episode #148 entitled Plan B (al-Khaṭṭa Bā’), an international terrorist named Mr. X brings America to its knees by successfully obtaining capabilities for biological warfare. Meanwhile, Adham Sabri and Egyptian intelligence are working to combat Mr. X even as the Americans acquiesce to him. This is a statement about the limits of American hegemony, which is most clearly expressed in a dialogue between the head of Egyptian intelligence and his assistant. The pair is discussing the threat of Mr. X, who seems on the verge of world domination, however, the director of Egyptian intelligence assures that no power has or ever will dominated the whole world,

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175 Ibid 9.
to which his assistant replies “what about America?” The director then becomes quite animated and begins to explain how America was strong but never hegemonic and is now losing its political capital with the rest of the world by cultivating anger over its unilateral military actions in Iraq in 2003 for example. He says that rather than being a sign of strength, the fact that the American government can no longer work in cooperation with the UN or find support around the world is a clear indication that their power is waning.\footnote{Ibid 113-4.}

The issue of American hegemony is also dealt with in #154 entitled The War (al-\textit{Harb}). Published in 2006, the book features Adham Sabri at the center of an American proxy war in Colombia, which most likely stands as a metaphor for the Iraq War. Although they are not mentioned by name, the characters in the book include President George W. Bush, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. The three are picture in the background on the cover. Their role in the story is to be the helpless and bewildered leaders of the United States whose war has gotten out of control and provided a space for terrorists, the aforementioned Mister X and
his associates, to operate and threaten international security. It is Adham Sabri and Adham Sabri alone who is able to neutralize this threat.\textsuperscript{178} This struggle continues into issue #155 entitled \textit{Terrorism (al-Irhāb)}, in which Adham Sabri goes to New York to investigate a terrorist attack that undoubtedly refers to the September 11\textsuperscript{th} attacks.\textsuperscript{179} Although these adventures are among the last produced issues in the \textit{Rajul al-Mustahīl} series and come almost as interruptions to a plot that never quite ends, they represent Farouk’s continual engagement of the global political context and his attempt to portray in a powerful and prominent position.


\textsuperscript{179} \textit{Ibid}, “al-Irhāb,” \textit{Rajul al-Mustahīl} No. 155 (Cairo: al-Mu’assasa al-3arabīyya al-Ḥadītha, 2006?).
While I have already discussed thoroughly the intentions and ideas of *Rajul al-Mustahil* creator Nabil Farouk, it is worth examining the way in which readers interact with the series. In her study of Egyptian television, Lila Abu-Lughod stresses the importance of what she terms as a “multi-sited” approach to her scholarship, meaning that the study should not focus on only one segment of society when investigating large cultural and social phenomena. Instead, the researcher should consider society’s different levels and layers. For Abu-Lughod, this was essential because television programs were

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mostly produced by the Egyptian urban middle class, but were consumed by all, including the vast majority of Egyptians in the lower classes that live far away from big cities.\footnote{Lila Abu-Lughod, \textit{Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) 34-5.} Many of the television programs that Abu-Lughod watched with Upper Egyptian women during her research were imbued with strong moral and instructive messages designed to educate the viewer and impress upon him or her certain ideals that Abu-Lughod identifies as middle class. However, these values were not merely transmitted; rather, the viewers engaged the ideas presented and passed their own judgments, sometimes agreeing, sometimes disagreeing, and sometimes projecting their values and worldviews onto the characters and scenarios.\footnote{Ibid 37-43.} This dynamic is less complicated in my study Egyptian adventure literature, since the majority of readers must have a certain level of education and literacy to read the novels and would therefore be more likely to belong to the same middle class as Nabil Farouk; however, it will be extremely beneficial to consider this dialogue between author and audience and the further implications of this dynamic for the conclusions that can be drawn about nationalism and adventure literature in Egypt.

Although accessing reader reactions to the earlier issues of the series would require extensive interviews of people who are now surely adults, internet fan sites and message boards are a useful window into how fans of the \textit{Rajul al-Mustahīl} series are reacting today. In recent years, the internet has taken on an important role in the Arab
world. Discussion forums (muntadayāt) on almost every website allow readers and communicate and exchange ideas freely with relative ease. These forums serve several functions. First of all, they establish a location people of common interest to come together in order to discuss topics of common interest. In addition, many users take advantage of the ability to post anything freely and quickly in these forums in order to create make shift personal web pages and facilitate transfer of copied music, movies and other media including scanned copies of books such as the entire Rajul al-Mustaḥīl series. Thus forums and other open access web sites provide and area for discussion as well as a means of access to and transfer of information. Although this can take place entirely anonymously, there seems to be a tendency for participants in discussions to speak their true opinions, and to an extent, to project a fairly realistic identity. For the purposes of my research, I will accept self-provided user information about general identity-related information such as age, gender, and nationality to be true when there is no reason to doubt it. Also, while there is always the concern that users may produce not tell the truth in their expression of opinions and fact, this problem is just as pervasive for researchers dealing with texts of any kind and therefore shall not serve as a deterrent from my use of these forums for research.

Due to its great popularity, especially among youth, discussions of topics related to Rajul al-Mustahīl can be found on the forums of numerous websites. Without a doubt, the most popular discussion with regards to the series surrounds the identity of its protagonist Adham Sabri, namely whether or not Adham Sabri is or is based on an actual
person. In response to an article containing an interview between Nabil Farouk that appeared on the website *Diwan al Arab* in March of 2003, the one reader response takes up this question. The first response to this question by a user named F.S. reads, “I think from my point of view that Adham Sabri is 100% real,” referring to him as a “valiant son of the desert.”\(^{183}\) Another comment reads “I think that Adham Sabri is present within every Arab soul,”\(^ {184}\) and another reader responds in a similar vein writing, “Of course Adham Sabri is a 100% real personality, and totally Egyptian. With all certainty Adham Sabri is in every Egyptian and Arab and all of us.”\(^ {185}\) By contrast, another user states that while he enjoys the series he cannot ignore the amount of exaggeration found in Adham Sabri’s feats and the fact that he never fails.\(^ {186}\) This comment was addressed by fans claiming that if one were to read each story, he or she may find many points of vulnerability and failure, most notably when Adham Sabri lost his memory.\(^ {187}\) Another reader accuses he who questioned Adham Sabri’s authenticity saying, “you’re not reading the series with your heart.”\(^ {188}\) A reader responding in English best summarizes the general sentiment of readers saying, “Adham sbry (sic) is the best man I have ever heard


\(^{186}\)Yūsef Moḩī al-Dīn, 9 November 2003, in response to *Ibid*.


\(^{188}\)Masa, 30 August 2005, in response to *Ibid*. 101
about, but I don’t know if he is a true person but he learned me (sic) what is the meaning of misr (Egypt). I hope to meet a man like him.”

In other discussion forums similar comments are found, which usually affirm a belief in the authenticity of the *Rajul al-Mustaḥīl* series. In a thread entitled “The critical series… *Rajul al-Mustaḥīl*” in the forums of the site *Muntadayāt Fanāṭiq*, a regular user who gives his or her age as 24 writes,

The *Rajul al-Mustaḥīl* series… Adham Sabri… N-1. It is one of the most famous writings of Dr. Nabil Farouk. It is the dream of every Arab. An Arab-Egyptian intelligence officer that stuns all the world’s intelligence officers. Adham Sabri, the bold, courageous, gallant and cavalier (*fāris*) Arab officer. A real person that Dr. Nabil Farouk actually met after his tireless search for a hero that would make the youth leave James Bond and the like and gather around him.190

The user then goes on to describe some of the adventures of Adham Sabri. In the discussion forums of *rewayatmasreya.com*, a website devoted to short stories in Arabic, the question of Adham Sabri’s authenticity is also of great concern to readers, and once again the issue of his Egyptianness and Arabness comes into play. In a thread entitled “The probability of *Rajul al-Mustaḥīl*’s existence,” the prevailing opinion is that Adham Sabri is a real person. Users evoke the greatness of Egypt as their justification in this opinion saying, “A great country like Egypt must produce someone like Adham Sabri.”191 Another user writes “I would never think that Adham Sabri is an imaginary character. We don’t live in the world of intelligence and espionage to know what happens

in it. Maybe there was a professional intelligence office with even better skills than Adham Sabri. Why do we not have confidence in our country?”192 Another says that someone as impressive as Adham Sabri would not be impossible, citing the extraordinary skills of profession soccer players who trained from the time they were children as a comparable situation.193 Many of these comments are concerned with and in response to one particular user who expresses quite eloquently in Egyptian colloquial Arabic that, “Adham, you guys, is an imaginary character. Look at the reality we live in and you’ll know the truth is that Adham is a sweet illusion. Inside ourselves we wish that he was real, but we love him even if he is an illusion because he embodies our dreams and aspirations that we are not able to realize.”194 Most of the other posters are hesitant to use the word illusion (wahm) or imaginary (wahmiyy) to describe Adham Sabri, however, another user adds that “Rajul al-Mustaḥīl exists, not as his very same self (laysa bi-stasyihi), but inside of each person who serves Egypt.”195

In a related thread in the rewayatmasreya.com forums entitled “Does Adham really exist?,” readers tend to favor the idea that Adham Sabri probably is not real, but nonetheless, represents something significant. One user comments that “there are six billion people on planet Earth and more. One of them might be like (Adham) out of the

192 Malāk al-Nūr, 19 November 2007, reply to Ibid.
193 LOCALIZER, 8 November 2007, reply to Ibid.
194 Adham Shākir, 12 September 2007, reply to Ibid.
195 blue, 2 September 2007, reply to Ibid.
six billion.”196 The follow-up comment to this post asserts that “the world that we live in”
could not ever create such a man.197 One user tries to bridge the gap between those who
believe that Adham Sabri could be real and those who do not saying that it is possible
that his character is a mixture of a real personality with the imagination of author Nabil
Farouk.198 Finally, one of the more active members in the thread gives his take on Adham
Sabri’s saying,

I would first like to make clear the reason for the people and all readers’ love for Adham
Sabri. The reason is clear and it is that he is an Arab character and Muslim, and besides
that all his incredible skills that he possesses... and his oppressive handsomeness (al-
wasâma al-tâghiya) that all of the women in the series love and fall in love with...
Second, does he exist? I say no but maybe there is someone who has one of his many
characteristics, I mean one who is good at disguise, one who is good at speaking many
languages, and one who is good at martial arts you know.199

While opinion varies as to how realistic the charter of Adham Sabri really is, there is
clear consensus that he is a beloved figure because of what he embodies and represents,
which is a model hero that is Egyptian and Arab.

This returns the discussion to why readers identify with Adham Sabri. It would be
absurd to argue that each reader that enjoys the Rajul al-Mustahîl series is a proponent of
some kind of Nasserist Egyptian secular nationalism. Each reader may have his or her
own reasons for their love of Adham Sabri. Thus, one reader comments that what they
like about Adham Sabri is that he is a model of masculinity that has been lacking in the

196 RoZaN, 19 July 2007, reply to thread: “Hal Adham mawjûd fî zlan??!!” in rewayatmasreya.com forums
197 loollo, 20 July 2007, reply to Ibid.
198 Al-Amîra al-Jamîla, 23 July 2007, reply to Ibid.
199 t.3la_a, 6 August 2007, reply to Ibid.
present, but was found in the knights of ancient times in their religion and values. This comment relates Adham to preexisting cultural precedent, and in this contextualization ascribes a certain morality and religiosity to his character. If we may momentarily revisit a previous comment, it is worth noting that the poster in addition to commenting on Adham Sabri’s handsomeness, his skills, and his Arabness, refers to Adham being a Muslim. These comments are noteworthy because there is no indicator in the series whether or not Adham Sabri is at all religious. However, readers interact with the series in other ways that the author may not have intended, which reflects an active attempt to identify with the hero of Adham Sabri and project onto him their own concerns regardless of whether his characterization truly embodies them. To find an even clearer example of this pattern of projecting religious values onto Adham Sabri, one must scarcely search farther than the article written about the character of Adham Sabri on wikipedia.org. As is becoming increasingly known, Wikipedia is a free online encyclopedia that allows any user to create and edit entries. The user who has written and edited most of the entry for “Adham Sabri” lists that he lives in Alexandria, Egypt and is “proud to be Egyptian”. His description of Adham Sabri is as follows,

Unlike western models, i.e. Ian Fleming’s Bond, Adham Sabri is a model of a man with religious and ethical system combination, where some certain situations being dealt with in a total different manner than usual. Sabri never drinks, never involves in sexual relationships outside the border of marriage; not a sodomite, and committed to prayer times.

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The author is correct in stating that Adham never drinks or has extra-marital sexual relationships in the series, but there is no discussion of his religion, certainly no definitive statement on whether he is a “sodomite” or not, and there are no real instances of Adham Sabri praying regularly if at all. In all likelihood, the author of this comment has projected his own value system on Adham Sabri, with whom he feels he shares an identity, thereby assuming that Adham prays regularly despite myriad evidence indicating otherwise.

What these comments and others like them indicate is that while religion may not be an important element of the *Rajul al-Mustahīl* series, it is an extremely important element of life for its Egyptian audience. Despite this disconnect, devoutly religious readers seem to have no problem making Adham Sabri their own; there is scarcely a trace of complaints that Adham Sabri is too secular or needs to be a better Muslim. In fact, the audience is even able to engage in discussion with the text on points that may conflict directly with their own values. In the *rewayatmasreya.com* forums one reader who calls herself “the Egyptian girl” raised the issue of whether or not it would be a good idea for Adham’s partner Mona to start covering her head (*ittihāj*)

al-Mustaḥīl’s current female audience probably do cover their heads. One user responds by saying “In my opinion, any young woman can be covered (muḥajjaba),” only to submit an additional comment saying that since Mona must use disguises for covert operations, the hijab may betray her identity.204 This reflects the initial reaction of most of the posters in this thread, although one girl writes, “I could see Mona covering her head, resigning, marrying Adham and staying in the house.”205 One person writes, for example, that he agrees with the concern that any women who could be taken as a role model (qudwa) by girls should be covered, however, the extenuating circumstances of Mona’s particular profession exempt her from this duty since it could potentially endanger her.206 This perspective comes despite the fact that the readers seem to deem covering one’s head to be a positive behavior, although one reader does comment that he does not think it would be useful for Mona to “cover, join the Muslim Brotherhood and hold her head high” because of her extensive travels in the West.207

This discussion of the Rajul al-Mustaḥīl online fan community is undoubtedly preliminary and cannot be used to draw any larger conclusions about overall reactions to the series, much less about the attitudes of Egyptian youth; however, what this discussion does reflect is that rather than simply reading the books as mindless entertainment or meaningless suspense filled plot as one might, many of the readers of the books do

204 Nūr, 20 December 2007, in reply to Ibid.
205 farahmh, 17 February 2008, in reply to Ibid.
206 Rūshān, 16 February 2008, in reply to Ibid.
207 Kota_hell, 4 February 2008, in reply to Ibid.
seriously engage the ideas and the messages being put forth by Nabil Farouk in his characterization of Adham Sabri and construction of his world. Much like television does in Lila Abu-Lughod’s, adventure literature proves a useful point of analysis in investigating Egyptian nationalism. The allow the researcher to successfully access multiple layers of the cultural phenomenon of *Rajul al-Mustaḥil*. 
According to an article that appeared on BBC.com in November of 2006, 92% of Egyptians agree that Israel is a nation hostile towards Egypt. Although a staggering figure, it is hardly surprising. Many Egyptians continue to hold the same sentiments toward Israel after decades of peace between the two governments. The 2005 film starring famed Egyptian comedic actor Adel Imam entitled *The Embassy is in the Building* (al-Safāra fī al-Ẓumāra) highlights this tension and the disconnect between Egyptian state policy and popular public opinion. The film centers on an apolitical Egyptian’s journey to political consciousness in the shadow of Egypt’s normalization of relations with Israel. Imam’s character Sherif Khairi is an Egyptian engineer who has been working in the UAE for over twenty years, paying so little attention to politics that he is unaware of who Kofi Anan is. However, his life changes when his affair with his British boss’ wife is revealed and he must return to Egypt. Upon his return, he finds his apartment building has become the home of the Israeli Embassy, leaving him stuck with this unsalable real estate. His personal inconvenience from living in the Israeli Embassy along with his attraction to a young female activist arouse his interest in politics, particularly the issues of normalization with Israel and Israel’s occupation of Palestine. Through his political activism, Sherif, who has no real political leanings, comes into contact with Egyptians from across the political spectrum, who all share a common

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opposition to Israel. Ultimately, he sides against Israel for the sake of the plight of Palestinians, which he comes to understand through seeing the killing of the son of a former Palestinian colleague on television.

With the relationship between Israel and Egypt as well as Egypt’s place in the world still being of such concern, it is no wonder that *Rajul al-Mustahīl* continues to resonate and be carried in bookstores across the Middle East. The stories, which are now be read by younger generations of Egyptians, may indeed be entering of the realm of “classic” youth fiction, as early issues written more than twenty years ago are still readily available in bookshops throughout Egypt and the Arab world. Meanwhile, Adham Sabri’s adventures have expanded beyond the *Rajul al-Mustahīl* books themselves. In 2001, a cartoon featuring some of the adventures of Adham Sabri was released, meaning that the character’s appeal may have begun to transcend the novels of Nabil Farouk themselves. At the same time, the selection of adventure literature available for young people has greatly increased since the first publication of *Rajul al-Mustahīl* and other original Egyptian series during the 1980s. In the past few years, a comic book series published by Egyptian/American company AK Comics as “The Arab Super Heroes (*Abṭāl al-Ẓarab al-Jabābira*)” modeled after Western comic book series but featuring such characters as Zein the Last Pharaoh and Jalila, a young woman who inherits superpowers from a nuclear blast, has grown in distribution and popularity both in Arabic and English.
language editions.  

Even more recently a rival comic called *The 99* featuring superheroes deriving their power from the knowledge of Islamic civilization has begun publication through Kuwaiti Teshkeel Comics. Meanwhile, *Les Aventures de Tintin* have ceased to be published in Arabic translation, although French and English copies remain available and enjoy continued popularity.  

While there is undoubtedly a greater volume of native and foreign literature available for youth in the Arabic-speaking world, the two aforementioned comic book series indicate that the messages may be becoming more mixed. The Middle East Superheroes are stripped of any strong markers of Arab and Islamic identity, beyond names and skin color. The plotlines are similar to Western comics, and the costumes are likewise similar. At the same time, the chief rival of this series, the 99, stresses an Islamic identity that may not relate as well to non-Muslims and secular minded Arabs. Neither is imbued with the strong Arab nationalist values of *Rajul al-Mustaḥil*, nor are they as inclusive like Adham Sabri’s heroism that was born out of the 1980s. What this may indicate is that there is greater diversity in representations of heroism in the Arab world, but what it may also reflect is emerging divisions expanding to the point that even the most popular forms of entertainment have become the battleground for increasingly incompatible ideologies. What is clear is that many of the problems and anxieties that

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209 The English language version is known as “The Middle East Superheroes” as opposed to “Arab Superheroes.”

Egyptians and much of the Arab world experienced in the 1980s have not been alleviated or resolved. Thus, it is yet to be seen whether the pop culture phenomenon will continue to resonate with the Egyptian public for decades to come, or whether it belongs to a specific moment in the national past when Ra’fat al-Hagān graced the screens and the memory of Egypt’s years of growth and hope was still fresh. If the Turkish example provides any clues, it says that the new mythologies of tenuous nationalisms are always as delicate as the social order itself. The 1980 military coup led to harsh censorship in Turkey and prevented cartoonists, many of whom were political, from continuing their craft. By the time the bans on cartooning were lifted, Turkey’s native graphic fiction industry had suffered, and now Turkey, like many other countries of the world, imports much of its graphic fiction and animated television programming from the United States and the Japanese anime industry.

Through this investigation of Rajul al-Mustahīl, I hope to have further complicated the picture of Egyptian nationalism in order to add complexity and nuance to the understanding of its development and progression. The series reflects the continuity of the Egyptian nationalist movement, and I would contend, the relative solidarity among its different factions. Nasser and his successors may have tried to suppress the Muslim Brotherhood, a religious political party, as political rivals; however, one should not assume that the ideological rift between these factions, especially on the popular level, is so wide. Adham Sabri comes as an Egyptian hero with the potential for mass appeal regardless of political leanings, and for solidarity of Egyptian nationalism this is certainly
positive indicator not to be ignored. At the very least, the endurance and popularity of
Rajul al-Mustahīl points to the fact that while trends may shift in Egyptian nationalism,
multiple layers persist and the remnants of past ideologies do not simply disappear.

In the global genre of adventure literature, Rajul al-Mustahīl is certainly not
alone. Similar phenomena in other countries with similar colonial pasts like Egypt must
have occurred, but they have not yet been examined because these countries have been
understudied or popular culture has not been critically analyzed because it either takes a
backseat to scholarship on high culture or has simply been overlooked as imitation and
replication of Western pop culture. I hope that through this study I have further
established the adventure literature of graphic fiction, spy novels and the like as excellent
sources for popular yet intellectual discussions of nationalism, identity and modernity.
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