

# Renegotiation Nationalism in Arabic Songs: Depictions of the Country's Rulers

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| ARTICLE INFO          | ABSTRACT  |
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| Received: 12 Mar 2025 | Vast majority of the songs released all over the world are prepared to entertain the audiences. On can see thousands attending different concerts and following their favorite artists by the way they wear clothes, their interests, by their way of thinking etc. Songs are also created because of a different reasons. They are one of the important media that can impact people's thinking. The great example of it can be impacting citizens' sense of nationalism. Most of the countries have their own national songs that depict the strength of the country, its ruler, army, citizens and their loyalty to the country or the leadership itself.    |
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|                       | This study aims to compare and contrast how Saudi and Egyptian songs portray nationalism and the depiction of the ruler/leader in terms of three key images: strength, loyalty, and benevolence. The songs to be analyzed in this study include 12 Egyptian and Saudi Arabian arts. The study argues that national songs play a crucial role in shaping and reinforcing nationalist sentiments among citizens, both adults and children, as well as developing a shared national identity. Ultimately, this study aims to contribute to scholarly understandings of the complex relationship between music, nationalism, and political power in the Arab world. |
|                       | <b>Keywords:</b> Nationalism, music, national identity, Muḥammad Bin Salmān (MBS), 'Abd al-Fattāḥ as-Sīsī.  |

## INTRODUCTION

It cannot be denied that music plays a significant role in human lives and the collective human experience. Music encompasses many elements such as culture and history. This research will focus on the cultural representation of music. Additionally, music can reflect the status of both culture and society. Moslih Kanaaneh, Stig-Magnus Thorsén, Heather Bursheh, and David A. McDonald write in their book *Palestinian Music and Song: Expression and Resistance Since 1900* that “music represented cultures in two ways, as a form of expression common to humanity, and as one of the most extreme manifestations of differences” (2013). Thus, it is acknowledged that music is a means of expressing culture, which can be defined as the “overarching culture that exists within a country” (2013). As culture is linked to music, the term *cultural nationalism* has emerged since the early 1900s.

It is important to mention as well Maciej Białas's research. He divided the social communications which music takes part in for 3 cases. First, the situation of communing with music – “a musical work is a carrier of aesthetic values; there is a canonical model of music (...)” (2012, p. 11). Second, the situation of enjoyment of music – “a musical work is a carrier of ludic values; the music is an entertainment filling the free time (...)” (2012, p. 12). Third, the situation of political instrumentalization of music – “a musical work is a carrier of political values. The music is used to define and expose outlooks, ideological and political attitudes (...)” (2012, p. 12). For the conducted research, the second and third cases are crucial. Patriotic songs, more or less (it depends on the song), are used to fill free time, but mainly they define and show the political attitudes at a specific time in the countries' history.

This study examines two Arabic countries, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, to explore how their national songs represent, except of the strength of the country, its ruler, and the loyalty of citizens to the leadership.

## **METHODOLOGY**

To conduct the study, its authors had to know very well the modern history of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Arab Republic of Egypt and major social and political changes which happened there from the beginning of the XXI century. The resources used to analyze most of the changes and the results of their participant observations pointed out that in the last 15 years the history of both countries changed the courses of history.

After preparing the historical background, the authors collected more than 50 Saudi and Egyptian national songs released during the mentioned historical period (2009 – 2024) and chose those which are connected with the most important persons in both countries – Crown Prince Muḥammad Bin Salmān<sup>1</sup> and President ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ as-Sīsī. Then, they divided the songs according to countries and subcategories connected with the specific timelines presented in the below article.

### **CONTEMPORARY HISTORY OF SAUDI ARABIA (2015 – 2024)**

The period from 2015 to 2024 marks a new, transformative era in Saudi Arabia’s history, characterized by significant political, economic, and social reforms. This era began with the ascension of King Salman bin Abdulaziz to the throne in 2015, followed by the rise of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who has played a pivotal role in shaping the Kingdom’s contemporary vision. Key initiatives, such as *Vision 2030*, were introduced to diversify the economy, reduce reliance on oil, and promote sectors like tourism, entertainment, and technology. During this time, Saudi Arabia witnessed a remarkable cultural renaissance, including the lifting of restrictions on public entertainment, the empowerment of women through expanded rights and opportunities, and the integration of the country into the global cultural landscape.

Politically, the leadership emphasized strengthening national unity and loyalty to the state, using various mediums –including music and nationalistic songs – to bolster these sentiments. The songs produced during this period often highlight themes of progress, the strength of leadership, and the collective aspirations of the Saudi people under the guidance of their leaders. The period also saw Saudi Arabia asserting its regional and global influence through strategic diplomacy and economic initiatives, making it a crucial time for understanding the interplay between culture, nationalism, and governance.

### **CONTEMPORARY HISTORY OF EGYPT (2013-2019)**

The beginning of the past decade was very challenging for Egypt, its authorities and Egyptians. The highest year in term of the highest number of inbound tourists<sup>2</sup> – 2010 – gave hope for a lot of new businesses and projects. All the desires were impeded by the sudden outbreak of, so-called Arab Spring which affected Egypt as well. In the presidential elections in 2012 Muḥammad Mursī, the member of organization Muslim Brotherhood, was sworn as a president of the Arab Republic of Egypt. His term was not long – one year later, in 2013, not satisfied by his rules, Egyptians again decided on change.

Before explaining what has happened in 2013, we need to move back till 12<sup>th</sup> of August 2012, when Muḥammad Mursī appointed a new Minister of Defence and commander of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces – General ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ as-Sīsī.

On 30<sup>th</sup> of June 2013 Egyptians, by the truckload, again demanded change in the country. Millions of protesters took to the streets to call for Mursī’s resignation. Army informed politicians to make changes according to the people’s will. It didn’t happen, thus on 3<sup>rd</sup> of July 2013 ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ as-Sīsī, surrounded by representatives of most political and religious figures, announced the removal of Mursī from office. On 26<sup>th</sup> of March 2014, ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ as-Sīsī resigned from his all positions and decided to run for president in the coming elections. He won in

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<sup>1</sup> All the names originally from Arabic, Egyptian and Saudi dialects are written according to ISO (International Standardization Organization) rules with the exception of the names of authors of books where the name, written by them, is left.

<sup>2</sup> The record was broken in the year 2023 when the number of inbound tourists was almost 15.000 million, compared to 14.731 million in 2010 (El-Aref N.).

2014 and also next elections in 2018. In 2019, there was a constitutional referendum in which there were 14 amendments to the Constitution from 2014 and which – among others – allowed As-Sīsī to stay in power longer, until 2030 with next elections. Due to this, the constitutional referendum was very associated with the President's profile.

## **FINDINGS & RESULTS**

### **National Music in the Arab World – Study Case**

The beginning of Arabic pop music starts in twenties of 20<sup>th</sup> century. Egypt has been a leader of the Arab music industry. From this time the music was available in a more local way but as Michael Frishkopf wrote: “By the early 1960s, music from Egypt (and produced not only by Egyptians, but by musicians from throughout the Arab world who gravitated to Cairo as its musical media center) could be heard across a broad swathe of the Arab world via short and medium wave broadcasts, thus becoming the first true pan-Arab music, a category called into existence by mass media” (2010, p. 12).

Egypt has always been considered the cultural center of the Arab world. Nowadays, we can observe attempts of Saudi Arabia to obtain its status as leader in the Arabic media industry by a lot of their activities<sup>3</sup>. One should follow them to observe the changes happening not only inside the Kingdom but also to verify if the changes on the pop cultural map of the Arab World will genuinely happen, and if yes - when.

### **National Songs – Saudi Arabia**

Under Prince Muḥammad Bin Salmān's *Vision 2030* initiative, significant changes have occurred in various fields across the country. These positive transformations have gathered widespread satisfaction among Saudi citizens, regardless of gender or age. One prominent way citizens have expressed their satisfaction is through music, which reflects their nationalism. This cultural shift has led to a revival in the music scene, with artists now more openly expressing their views and emotions through their songs (Koelbl, 2020).

Songs praising the leadership and vision of Prince Muḥammad Bin Salmān (MBS) have become popular. For instance, songs like *Yā Muḥammad* is a song that exemplifies the portrayal of strength and loyalty towards Crown Prince Muḥammad Bin Salmān. This song, performed by 'Āyīd, Burhān, and Nāīf an-Nāīf, is a praise to the Crown Prince's leadership and vision for Saudi Arabia. The lyrics emphasize the strength of the nation under his guidance and the unwavering loyalty of the citizens (Arab News, 2022). The song's powerful and emotional melody further amplifies the message of national pride and unity. By celebrating the Crown Prince's achievements and vision, *Yā Muḥammad* reinforces the image of a strong and benevolent leader who is committed to the nation's progress.

Furthermore, *Wagfat Muḥammad bin Sulman* is another song that highlights the strength and benevolence of Crown Prince Muḥammad Bin Salmān. This song praises the Crown Prince's efforts to modernize Saudi Arabia through his *Vision 2030* initiative. The lyrics reflect the citizens' appreciation for the economic and social reforms introduced by the Crown Prince, which have significantly improved their quality of life. (Cioffoletti, 2019). The song also underscores the Crown Prince's commitment to ensuring the well-being of the nation, portraying him as a compassionate and benevolent leader. The combination of uplifting lyrics and a nationalistic melody makes *Wagfat Muḥammad bin Sulman* an effective medium for promoting nationalism and loyalty among Saudi citizens.

*Hāmit Ṭawīq* is a song that represents the themes of strength, loyalty, and benevolence in its depiction of Crown Prince Muḥammad Bin Salmān. The song celebrates the Crown Prince's leadership and his vision for a wealthy and modern Saudi Arabia. The lyrics emphasize the citizens' unwavering support and loyalty to the Crown Prince, highlighting their trust in his ability to lead the nation towards a brighter future (Alhussein, 2019). The song's powerful and inspiring melody further strengthens the message of national pride and unity. Through *Hāmit Ṭawīq*, the citizens express their gratitude for the Crown Prince's efforts to improve their lives and ensure the nation's progress.

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<sup>3</sup> For example, the Red Sea Film Festival, which has been taking place in Jeddah since 2019 or a lot of music events within Riyadh Seasons.

## National Songs – Egypt

As one could see from the above explanations, the Arab Republic of Egypt is a different country than the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in terms of state structure. From 2013, when ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ as-Sīsī started to be crucial for the Egyptian history, the country’s music-history concerning him can be divided for 5 stages. First, songs in which As-Sīsī was not a main hero but his presence and importance for the changes which happened in the country was recognized. Second, when As-Sīsī was officially the candidate for the presidency. The third, when he was already chosen as a president, fourth one – when he applied for re-election in 2018 and finally the last – fifth – when he was the symbol of changes during the constitutional referendum in 2019.

The article will present one, the most significant, example for the first stage, two for the second and one for the last one. From the fourth stage, three songs will be presented and two for the last one.

When president Muḥammad Mursī was moved from his position, a lot of people went out to celebrate it (the participant observation conducted in 2013 in different cities in Egypt). New songs for the army started to be released. Definitely, one song could be called “hit” among others – the Tislam il-ayādī (“God bless these hands”) song. It has basic lyrics and is energetic and catchy, praising the Egyptian army. In this song, there is a direct reference to ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ as-Sīsī:

*When we didn’t know what to do, the voice full of nostalgia sounded. He said: “our hand will be cut if they hurt Egyptians”. These words were said by real Egyptian: “For God’s sake! He promised and fulfilled a promise!” (Youtube F).*

The inspiration for that were words said by As-Sīsī during his speech at Future University (Youtube D).

*Millions of greetings to the soldier and marshal, for the greatest one, for those who draw for us the road. From me to you, the most basic present – greetings for the generous man! (Youtube F).*

Here, there is a reference to the “road map” for the country, which As-Sīsī proposed. There is also a part referring to his words about the army:

*(...) who said sharply: “be careful of the anger of the mountains!”. Egypt says to you today: bless the hero who said it” (Youtube F).*

The two examples of second – concerning time before elections in 2014 – stage are: ‘*Ayzīnak* (“We want you”) & *Al-Mufīd al-muḥtaṣar* (“To the point”). According to the lyrics of both songs – the whole country and all Egyptians want nobody other than As-Sīsī. These words “ayzīnak” are repeated many times in the first mentioned song (Youtube A). ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ as-Sīsī is the person thanks to whom Egyptians will live peacefully, happy and with a better future without fear, lies and injustice. *Al-Mufīd al-muḥtaṣar* claims that all Egyptians are with him, and it was he who protected them and the country from the danger (Youtube J). ‘*Ayzīnak* adds that if Egypt again were faced with problems and unrest, only As-Sīsī would be able to calm them. Both songs mention very important for Egyptian culture thing - “amāna” (Youtube A). It is something we can give to somebody to keep for us, protect and take responsibility for nothing bad happening to it. Egypt is presented in the songs As-Sīsī’s “amāna”. The singers in ‘*Ayzīnak* sing that actually this is his responsibility to the people and he has to do it – he should lead the country because this is the “people’s order” (Youtube A). The singers of both songs believe that God is with As-Sīsī and will protect him. In *Al-Mufīd al-muḥtaṣar* there is a statement: “with who the God is, he has to win” (Youtube J).

The third stage is represented with very important song – *Rabbīnā Wayyāk*, (“God is with you”) – which concentrates only on As-Sīsī. The lyrics, from early beginning, state that God and Egyptians’ hearts are with As-Sīsī (Youtube I). God made him strong and thanks to God’s permission, Egypt will grow, bloom and succeed. The singers sing that Egyptians have put the country into the hands of an experienced man who does not worry about his life. No one also should worry about Egyptians inside nor outside of the country – they are in the hands of a good and clever leader. The song is created in the form of congratulations for Egypt and Egyptians for the good decision which was made in choosing him. What is more, the author of lyrics sends congratulations also to the

“Arab homeland and to the whole Arabic nation” (Youtube I). It means that choosing As-Sīsī as president was good for all Arab countries.

The fourth stage is also connected with elections, but this time in 2018, when ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ as-Sīsī was applying for re-election. This phase will represent three songs. The first one – *Ṣawṭunā ma ‘āk*, (“Our voice is with you”) – concentrates clearly on the declaration that all Egyptians’ hearts are with As-Sīsī, that whatever he would do, he will receive the support from citizens of his homeland. Finally, he is a person who loves his country from the bottom of his heart, he caused that the citizens feel safe and he is the only one who can change people’s lives. His activities were so important and good for the country that he left his “historical imprint” (Youtube G). Second song, *Abū ar-Ruḡūla* (“Reliable man”), also praises the president, mentions that he was available for the country in difficult times and protects Egypt. Nevertheless, the most emphasis in this song is to encourage all Egyptians to vote for him As-Sīsī.

The third song, *Masā’ al-Ḥayr*, (“Good afternoon”) was presented by an Emirati artist who is very prolific in Egyptian patriotic songs. The persona, according to lyrics, expresses his words toward the President. He speaks in the name of all Egyptian citizens, because all of them want Egypt to be cleaner, safer and more beautiful. As-Sīsī supports poor people and thanks to him in Egypt there is justice. The citizens encourage him, as well, to continue building fabrics and hospitals. Under his rules people wish to have well-being. It is mentioned – as well – very important, generally in the Egyptian patriotic songs (examples were mentioned as well here, in the article), motif – God protecting Egypt and Egyptians.

The last, fifth stage, concerns 2019 and preparations in Egypt for a constitutional referendum. Due to the fact that one of the changes was directly connected with the president ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ as-Sīsī and length of his term, his photos and presence in the media was much more visible. That is why there is an example of two songs which were very popular at that time. First one was created by Lebanese singer, very popular among Egyptians (Wolny-Abouelwafa, 2022) and creating a lot of songs for this country. In *Rāḡil Ibn Rāḡil* (“Real man”) she describes how the real Egyptian man should be / behave. The One who protects and develop his country. The One who supported his homeland, wants just wealth to his citizens makes Egypt to be proud. It is not said directly, but after analyzing the words of the song and watching its video clip, it is obvious that the singer sings about The President and also, all Egyptian men.

The next song, *Maṣr Ḥilwa* (“Beautiful Egypt”) describes the beauty of Egypt and its citizens who are all tired to make Egypt better but Egypt deserves people’s tiredness. Finally, what is the one day of tiredness, if citizens will do everything for their children? The future will be simply more beautiful. Its citizens will live in Egyptian wealth till their death. This song also mentions God's protection over this country.

## CONCLUSION

Saudi national songs such as *Ya Mohammed*, *Wagfat Muḥammad Bin Salmān*, and *Hāmit Ṭawīq* play nowadays a crucial role in shaping or/and reinforcing nationalist sentiments among Saudi citizens. These songs help the citizens to celebrate and support the strength, loyalty, and benevolence of Crown Prince Muḥammad Bin Salmān, highlighting his efforts to modernize the nation and improve the quality of life for its citizens. By promoting themes of national pride and unity, these songs contribute to the development of a shared national identity among Saudi citizens what is crucial to build the united country following the same road map for coming years. It is especially important while talking about the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia which has been working – as mentioned – on developing national identity which is a combination of different identities connected with various places of living in this huge country but also of its tribal history. This study underscores the importance of music as a medium for expressing and reinforcing nationalism, as well as the complex relationship between music, nationalism, and political power in the Arab world in general.

As proved, Egyptian patriotic songs also can influence building or expressing the national identity which will be understood differently than the Saudi one, due to the differences in the rules and the country’s history. There are numerous Egyptian songs that were dedicated to the army, homeland and leaders, but for this research only those



praising current president of this country—‘Abd al-Fattāḥ as-Sīsī – were chosen. In the presented songs, Egypt still is the most important thing for its citizens, but they need to find, or already found (depending on the timing of launching the songs) a person who will care about their homeland and protect it from any danger. There is such a man - ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ as-Sīsī – a strong, independent leader, who will do everything to protect his homeland, who has been supported by the citizens and who God supports. He was also the one who “felt” the needs of Egyptians during difficult times (2012-2013). No one can forget – Egypt is “amāna” given to As-Sīsī to keep and protect the country and grow and develop it for future generations.

It is recommended to continue started research to define more “national identity” in both case studies and also to see how the lyrics of the different songs dedicated to the countries’ leaders change over the few years. Their topics and what they will put influence will show the researchers not only the societies’ feelings but also, somehow, how the authorities themselves wish to be seen.

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