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Fear and awe on the way to Baalbek

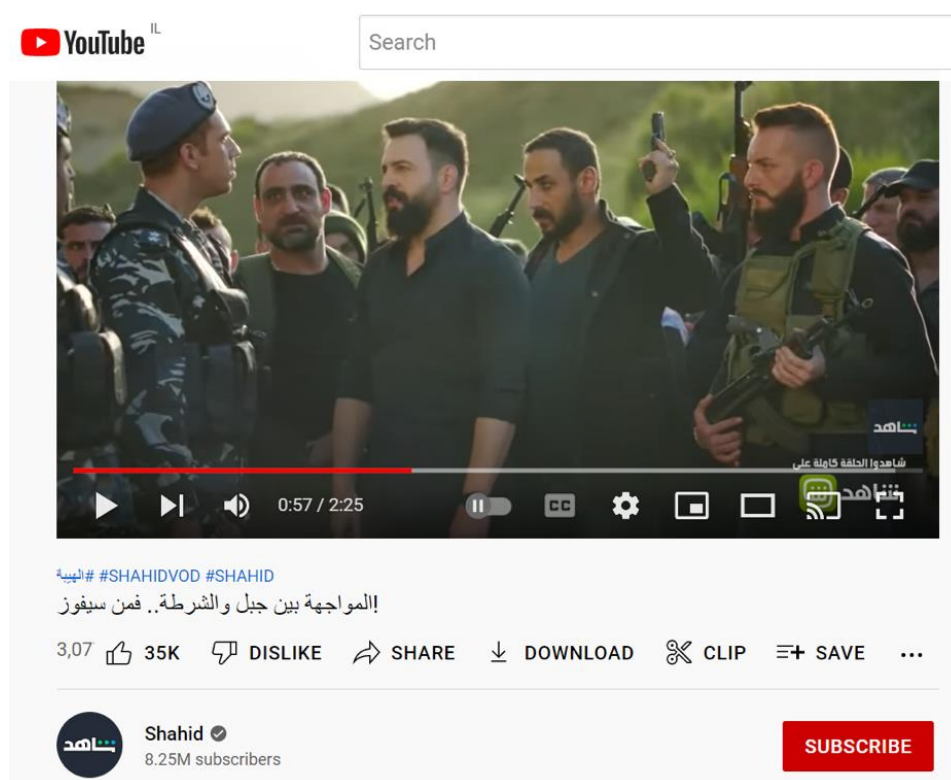
Moran Levanoni *

Recently, the Lebanese army tried to flex its muscles once more by carrying out an operation in the Lebanese Beqaa Valley against drug lords and smugglers.¹ The operation was directed mainly after Mundh'ar Za'itar, known as "Abu Salah", a Shi'ite, accused of trafficking drugs on the Syrian border.

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¹ [@kemle.noman.7](#), *Facebook*, 5 June 2022; posted on the group page [الجيش اللبناني العظيم](#) [The Mighty Lebanese Army], accessed 13 June 2022 [in Arabic].

But reality and fiction in Lebanon tend to resemble each other: for over five years, the drama series “Al-Hayba”,² about drug lords in the Beqa’a valley is one of the most successful television series all over the Middle East. Aired by the MBC channel throughout the Middle East and on social media, the five seasons have been released annually during the month of Ramadan since 2017.



*An episode from the series “Al-hayba” on YouTube.com .. المواجهة بين جبل والشرطة .. فمن سيفوز “The confrontation between Jabal and the police... and who is going to win?”.*³

The series is the result of a Syrian-Lebanese coproduction. The plot revolves around the life of Jabal Sheikh al-Jabal (Syrian actor Taim Hassan),⁴ leader of the Sheikh

² [@سنترا](#) [Sentra], Facebook, 28 December 2021, and the Facebook group page [@الهيئة جبل الجزء](#) 2021 الخامس; accessed 13 June 2022.

³ [@ShahidVOD](#), YouTube, 6 December 2017; accessed 13 June 2022.

⁴ [@actortaim](#), Twitter, accessed 13 June 2022.

Al-Jabal clan, a drug and weapon dealer at the border with Syria in the fictional village “Al-Hayba” in eastern Lebanon.

The Sheikh Al-Jabal family is involved in a bloody struggle against the Said family who lives in the same village. The first season narrates the relations between Jabal and Alia (Lebanese actress Nadine Nassib Njeim), his sister-in-law⁵, who was married to his brother Adel and lived abroad. After Adel’s death, Alia returned to Lebanon to bury him, accompanied by her eldest son. From this point onwards the plot develops and evolves.

Immediately after it was first televised, “Al-Hayba” gained ratings of over 116 million viewers throughout the Middle East, beating even the famous Syrian series “Bab al-Hara” from Damascus.

The stars of “Al-Hayba” speak mainly in a rural East Lebanese dialect and the series depicts the violence and chaos on the Syrian-Lebanese border. It went on air while fighting in Syria was underway, seemingly almost describing the reality on the ground.

A number of elements of Al-Hayba’s plots deserve special attention and attest to the *Zeitgeist* prevailing in the Arab world lately.

The plot takes place in the rural area of the Beqaa valley, a long way from the large city of Beirut, and a great deal of emphasis is placed on the preference for rural, tribal, and traditional values, which also include deep-rooted violence, over the capital city that represents progress, refinement, and even Westernism and hypocrisy. State representatives, officials and police officers are often portrayed as lazy, simpleminded, and corrupt.

The series celebrates the return to tribal justice and law, the importance of blood-bonds and loyalty, the role of the man as the provider, and the role of women as nurturers and housewife. The hero, Jabal Sheikh Jabal, like most of the men, always carries a weapon and uses it frequently. He is shrewd and violent, but generous; a

⁵ [@nadinenjeim](#), *Twitter*, accessed 13 June 2022.

commander and warrior, for whom the family's wellbeing, purity, and honor are of utmost importance.

An important role is also played by the matriarch of the family, the elderly widowed Nahad (Syrian actress Mona Wassef), mockingly referred to as "The Syrian", who is immersed in her past, sewing seeds of evil, and pulling the plot strings behind the scenes – to some extent similar to the way the mother-state Syria is perceived by the Lebanese.

Alongside the great popularity of the series, there was also some criticism of the content. In May 2018, twenty-two lawyers from the Beqaa valley filed a lawsuit to prevent the presentation of "Al-Hayba – The Return", the sequel season, claiming that the series: "Negatively presents life in the Baalbek District... describes the way of life in the area and its residents as violating law and order and their culture as being one of widespread drug consumption, use of weapons and violence".

The lawsuit was dismissed, and an article published in Beirut's al-Nahar newspaper noted that only recently there had been violent encounters in the Baalbek area between the Jaafar and Miqddad families and the al-Dandash and al-Masri families over drug dealing.⁶

When the 13th episode of the second season was aired, a wave of protest evolved on social media, triggered especially by women, and calling to boycott the series perceived to normalize abusive relationships and violence against women. This episode included a scene in which the hero Jabal punishes his wife Sumia (Lebanese actress Nicole Sabbah) and mercilessly hitting her with a belt.⁷

Following the popularity of the series, Jabal's character became a role model among young people in the Arab society. His looks, including hairstyle and meticulous beard, speech mannerisms and fondness for weapons made him an iconic figure among many young people.

⁶ Annahar Staff, "[Lawyers seek to block popular TV show 'Al Hayba El Awda'](#)", *An-Nahar*, 28 May 2018; accessed 13 June 2022.

⁷Amani Itani, "[This Ramadan series encourages domestic abuse, and people are furious](#)", *Stepfeed*, 12 June 2018; accessed 13 June 2022.

For the Lebanese, the series symbolizes the nation's fatigue from the chaos and hopelessness as well as the yearning for a strong leader, which embodies the return to tribal roots against modernism and westernism that characterize the core of urban Lebanon.

Is the "Fear and Awe" of "Al-Hayba" highlighting violence and crime, tribalism, and ethnic sectarianism as the preferred model for the Lebanese over that of the State? On the background of the collapsing state of Lebanon, and, in general, of statehood all over the Middle East, it might be just so.

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