

Shock! Horror! Arab TV Series Shows a Jewish Woman as Admirable

by Hugh Fitzgerald



The story is from GulfNews.com:

Hayat Al Fahad has stirred up controversy once again – this time for her latest role as a Jewish woman living in Kuwait in the TV show, ‘Um Haroon’...

Now the Kuwaiti actress is back in the news, but this time, it’s for her role as Um Haroon in a new Ramadan TV series appearing on MBC1.

The drama series tells the story of a “wise and popular physician in the 1940s, and her role in a Kuwaiti village that was home to a community of different religious sects,” according to an official description.

'Um Haroon' has been hugely polarising, with some viewers finding it to be a new type of historical story in the region, and others taking issue with the show's focus, as well as Al Fahad's involvement.

"One of the best Ramadan TV shows in Khalijya (Gulf) drama. Bravo," one Twitter user wrote, while another said it's the first show of its kind they have watched in a long time.

"It's actually not that bad," another user wrote on social media. "Except for a few cringy scenes here & there."

"I expect 'Um Haroon' to be the first series in Ramadan in terms of ongoing viewership," another Twitter user wrote. "It takes you inside a new world, a broader awareness of Jews, coexistence and how intolerance can divide people."

Meanwhile, many social media users criticised the choice of storyline and the purpose of the series.

"For what purpose did they choose Jews? Why not the Christians, who are still living in Kuwait? The female lead actress will not accept foreign brothers, but she wants to accept the Jews."

"Hayat Al Fahad is showing us the suffering of Jews in Kuwait. Poor them. We will also wait for her to show us the suffering of Palestinians in Palestine," another user wrote.

The Arab media is already full of stories, and has been for more than 70 years, about "the suffering of Palestinians in Palestine." Why should Hayat Al Fahad be condemned for not adding one more example of "Palestinian suffering" to that mountain? Al-Fahad instead offers something distinctly new: the depiction of a Jewish woman, living in Kuwait in the 1940s, who is, amazingly, depicted as thoroughly admirable. Don't the Jews who once lived in Arab lands by the hundreds of thousands deserve some kind of recognition of their existence?

Doesn't their history, before it becomes entirely effaced from memory, deserve to be remembered? Hayat Al-Fahad thinks so. And so, apparently, do some other Arabs.

"The purpose of the series 'Um Haroon' became clear from the first episode, when one of the actresses says in Hebrew: 'Before our impact is erased, and our lives are turned into a memory and we get lost in the crowdedness of life ... I have decided to write about us and what pertains to us: we are the Jews of the Gulf,'" one user wrote.

Another person pointed to the hypocrisy in "portraying the Arab Gulf Muslim mother, sister, wife, and girl next door as gossiping, envious, hurtful, lazy and malevolent, stamping them with all the characteristics of evil, and with Um Haroon, [portraying] the good, tolerant Jewish woman, who is chaste and virtuous, and stamped with all the qualities of human perfection."

Such a portrayal is not "hypocrisy." It is simply not what was expected and desired by this particular social media poster. In his world, Arabs cannot possibly be "gossiping, envious, hurtful, lazy and malevolent." Of course, had the series portrayed the *Jewish* woman and her relatives as "gossiping, envious, hurtful, lazy and malevolent," as Arab propaganda has been doing nonstop for more than seventy years, that would – for that blogger – have been fine. And nothing new would have been presented to enrich the understanding, or enlarge the human sympathies, of the Arab television audience. It would have been the same mixture as before, the one that Arabs have been fed ever since the creation of the state of Israel. Hayat Al-Fahad and her colleagues were determined to do something different.

One YouTuber, Abdul Aziz Al Saif, posted a Snapchat clip defending the series.

"Two years ago, I spoke about this exact subject and I put

the video on my YouTube channel, titled 'The history of Jews in Kuwait and the Gulf,'" said Aziz Saif. "The same comments that are being said about 'Um Haroon' are the ones I see on my YouTube video. For this reason, I want to clarify a few things. The first thing is that history is not up to you, whether you like it or not," he said. "Of course, we have to differentiate between Judaism as a religion, and Zionism as an extremist political movement, and this show has nothing to do with normalisation of Zionism," he said.

Abdul Aziz Al Saif is, comparatively, a voice of sanity among the many who have damned the series. He wants to make clear that neither he, nor the actress Hayat Al Fahad, are endorsing Zionism. That, of course, would be unthinkable. Or at least, even if thought, would be unsayable. No one should ascribe to Al Saif the belief that Jews deserve a state of their own. But he also shares Al-Fahad's view that not all Jews are the instruments of Shaytan, nor "the most vile of created beings." To depict a Jewish woman not as a monster, but as an admirable human being, for many Kuwaitis and other Arabs, is intolerable. And of course there is the Qur'an to consider. The favorable depiction of Um Haroon (mother of Aaron) contradicts the Qur'an, which depicts the Jews – in Robert Spencer's useful compendium – "as inveterately evil and bent on destroying the wellbeing of the Muslims. They are the strongest of all people in enmity toward the Muslims (5:82); as fabricating things and falsely ascribing them to Allah (2:79; 3:75, 3:181); claiming that Allah's power is limited (5:64); loving to listen to lies (5:41); disobeying Allah and never observing his commands (5:13); disputing and quarreling (2:247); hiding the truth and misleading people (3:78); staging rebellion against the prophets and rejecting their guidance (2:55); being hypocritical (2:14, 2:44); giving preference to their own interests over the teachings of Muhammad (2:87); wishing evil for people and trying to mislead them (2:109); feeling pain when others are happy or fortunate

(3:120); being arrogant about their being Allah's beloved people (5:18); devouring people's wealth by subterfuge (4:161); slandering the true religion and being cursed by Allah (4:46); killing the prophets (2:61); being merciless and heartless (2:74); never keeping their promises or fulfilling their words (2:100); being unrestrained in committing sins (5:79); being cowardly (59:13-14); being miserly (4:53); being transformed into apes and pigs for breaking the Sabbath (2:63-65; 5:59-60; 7:166); and more" The answer is clear: it doesn't. It is curious that none of those who condemned the program on social media referred to these Qur'anic passages as the authority for that condemnation.

"The presence of Jewish characters in this work in and of itself is something that hasn't been done before in Gulf dramas, which makes this a completely new kind of work for viewers," said Al Fahad.

Exactly right. The Jews of Arab countries have been largely written out of Arab history. When they do appear in television dramas, it is usually in stories that take place in Egypt, or Syria – never in the Gulf. And the other great difference is some television programs in the Arab world contain "Jewish characters," but never before has a Jewish character been presented favorably. That is what makes this a "completely new kind of work for viewers."

The lead actress stressed that her character, who is a nurse, is fictional and that this is not a documentary.

"...This is [a] drama, primarily, and it presents the character Um Haroon as a peaceful and kind human being who lived in this geographical area, and learned from a young age all that has to do with medicine and obstetrics in the hospital she worked in," continued Al Fahad.

She added: "Um Haroon possesses characteristics such as kindness, charisma and love of people, which makes her enter

the heart and the home, encouraging the village people to put their trust in her..."

The actress, Al Fahad, is not the least bit defensive. She describes the Jewish woman she portrays as demonstrating "kindness, charisma and love of people," and offers no apology for taking on such a role.

For that, Hayat Al Fahad deserves our praise. One more sign of intelligent life among the Gulf Arabs. It now reflects the recognition that Israel is no longer the enemy: Iran is. And it reflects, too, the general exhaustion among Gulf Arabs with the Palestinian cause that, after so many years, and with so much else going on, no longer seems that important. But the proximate cause doesn't matter. A Jewish woman is being presented, in a series on the most popular pan-Arab television channel, as completely admirable. For the fanatical faith-based haters, the damage to their view has been done. And that is cause for celebration.

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