

# The Egyptian Ramadan TV Series and National Fight with Drug Addiction<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** In 2019, half a million people all over the world died as a result of drug abuse. This topic is a very sensitive issue in a number of countries, including the Arab Republic of Egypt, where the government informs its citizens every few months about steps to take to combat this problem. Creating a TV series to be aired during Ramaḍān, the most important part of year from the Islamic point of view and also because of the media industry, is one of the tools to create awareness of the danger of drug addiction. In the article, the results of the research conducted on a very popular Ramaḍān TV series from 2015 entitled *Taḥt as-Sayṭara* are presented. The research focused on the presentation of this problem, in particular whether or not the problem was presented in a realistic way, thus aiding in the fight with drug addiction. This series was special, as it was the first and the only which was devoted so directly to the problem of drug addiction; the sickness covered about 89–90% of the plot.

**KEYWORDS:** Ramaḍān, Ramaḍān TV series, Egyptian TV series, drug addiction, media, Egypt

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<sup>1</sup> **Acknowledgements:** The author of the article would like to thank Mrs. Mariam Naoum, the scriptwriter of the analyzed series, for her time and fruitful conversation during which she learned a lot. The author really hopes to learn more from the scriptwriter's work, which inspires scholars but also, or even mainly, the Arab societies.

*Every day without drugs is successful.  
Every day of stopping [it] is a new birthday.  
(Taht as-Saytara, 2015, 14<sup>th</sup> episode)<sup>2</sup>*

## Introduction<sup>3</sup>

■ **Islam is a monotheistic religion based on five dogmas and five pillars. One of them is fasting, regulated by the Qur’ān, in the month of Ramaḍān, when Muslims must abstain from food, drink, smoking and sexual relations from sunrise to sunset. This time is also a special period when Muslims should pray and concentrate more on their relationship with God.**

Ramaḍān is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar<sup>4</sup> and is so important period in the Islamic religion because it is when the Qur’ān was revealed.

During this month, we can observe the special atmosphere which accompanies this time in Arab countries. The whole civil service changes the time of work, as people need to have an opportunity to finish earlier or have a break to eat iḥṭār (the first meal after breaking the fast; the last one is called – suḥūr); some people try to be better or nicer to others; some help others as much as they can, for example, by bringing water to drivers to help them once they are on the road and the time of drinking comes; or hosting the needy and poor by organizing large iḥṭār tables to feed them. Tarāwīḥ prayers<sup>5</sup> are heard from the mosques and many streets are colorfully decorated.

Ramaḍān has one more special meaning, which is also worth researching.

## Ramadan in contemporary Arab Television

Ramaḍān is special month in the media industry. Kraidy and Khalil (2009) mention “the most im-

portant season for Arab television when the industry shows its very best productions, viewership soars, advertising rates peak and television programmes become topics of daily conversation”. They add as well:

” Ramadan is do-or-die television season that shapes production, programming and acquisition trends for the entire year. During this high-stakes month, Arab television channels make unusual efforts to sustain existing audiences and attract new viewers, culminating in special programmes celebrating *‘Eid al-Fitr* (in the US this is comparable to special programming broadcast during the sweeps period or at year-end for Christmas and New Year) (Kraidy & Khalil, 2009).

This also includes Egypt, which the research presented in the article concerns and where they are extremely popular and followed by the majority of people – men, women, children, elderly people, farmers, housewives, businessmen, etc. This means that the topics which they transmit reach a large and varied audience. This is why it is important to carry out research about Ramaḍān TV series, and especially Egyptian ones, which have been very popular in the whole Arab world from the ‘60s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as Prof. Machut-Mendecka (2013, pp. 195–212) mentioned. People can follow their series not only at home with their families but also outside, e.g., in gyms, restaurants or coffee shops. This is what Abdennour (2007) also pointed out more than 10 years ago: “Some coffee houses offer a relatively recent activity during Ramadan–watching television. Apart from their usual clientele, who

<sup>2</sup> All the translations from Arabic and Egyptian dialect in the article are made by the author; all the names originally from Arabic or Egyptian dialect are written according to ISO (International Standardization Organization) rules with the exception of quotations and first names and family names, which are written according to their customary transcript.

<sup>3</sup> This part and the next have some fragments from the author’s article in Polish: Wolny-Abouelwafa, 2020, pp. 139–153.

<sup>4</sup> The Islamic calendar is a lunar one, consisting of 12 months, each of them having 29 or 30 days. The time is measured from 622 A.D., when the Prophet Muḥammad migrated from Mecca to Yatrib (later renamed and still known as Medina).

<sup>5</sup> Additional ritual prayers in Sunni Islam performed in a body after night prayer (ṣalāt al-‘aṣā’) in the time of Ramaḍān.

normally come to drink tea and play backgammon or dominoes, new patrons come to watch the special television serials and quizzes”.

That is why the author sees it as crucial to do research on contemporary Ramaḍān TV series, their topics and ways of presentation. In particular, when we take into account that, as El Ebiary (2018) realizes:

“Television drama, also, plays a role in changing behavior and modifying the values of viewers by presenting role models; they play an important role in the process of forming individual and social behavior in the society in which they were established, i.e., they seek to consolidate, cancel or modify the various values and concepts of society (pp. 700–735).

Finally, we cannot forget that “TV has been considered an essential member of every Egyptian family, and TV is an almost inevitable and taken for granted feature of daily life in every Egyptian house” (El Tarabishi & Galal, 2018, pp. 667–683).

As mentioned, contemporary Ramaḍān TV series are watched by the vast majority of Egyptian society. The chain of series starts after iḥṭār and finishes before suḥūr. Some series are repeated before suḥūr and all of them next day between suḥūr and the next iḥṭār. If a believer prefers to concentrate on the prayers during Ramaḍān and decides to not watch the episodes during this month, he does not need to worry – they will be repeated throughout the year before the next Ramaḍān. So, even if somebody did not watch them the first time, they can certainly watch them later (in the following days or months). And in the era of the Internet, it is much easier, as most of them can be found online. It is important to mention that some series can also appear on different TV channels (during Ramaḍān or after it). That is why it would be difficult to know absolutely nothing about the most popular series during any given Ramaḍān.

In terms of the issues addressed in Ramaḍān series, there is a great variety. Most of them do not concern religious issues and their plots do not even have to be connected with this month (which is totally different to most Christmas – previously compared – productions). It can be comedy, crime stories, historical proposals or concerning social

issues. Some of them mention, more or less, drug addiction problems. The analysis of one of them will be presented in the article.

## Drug addiction

Drug trafficking is the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest illegal trade in the world (El-Ghamry & Sayed, 2021). The Preface of World Drug Report (2021) cites the words of Ghada Waly<sup>6</sup> (2021) who claims:

“Drug use killed almost half a million people in 2019, while drug use disorders resulted in 18 million years of healthy life lost, mostly due to opioids. [...] Over the past year, around 275 million people have used drugs, up by 22 percent from 2010. By 2030, demographic factors project the number of people using drugs to rise by 11 percent around the world, and as much as 40 percent in Africa alone.

This topic is not unfamiliar to Egypt, where movies and campaigns against drug addiction have been visible for quite a few years and where the government frequently informs the population about the steps to combat this problem<sup>7</sup>. For example, in 2018, Egypt launched an initiative called *Egypt without Addiction*, providing awareness campaigns on the dangers of addiction and how to recover from it. This initiative was directed at all citizens in all governorates (Egypt Today staff, 2018, August 31). In the same year, the campaign *Inta aqwā min al-muḥaddarāt*<sup>8</sup> (‘You are stronger than drugs’; the English name of the campaign is *Say no to Drugs*) with its main hero – the international football star who plays for Liverpool United, Egyptian Mohamed Salah, was launched. This campaign’s video had more than 5 million views on the social platform Facebook in 72 hours. The former Minister of Social Solidarity stated that “Facebook, Instagram and YouTube videos have been watched 8 million and 400,000 times, shared 23,000 times and liked by 359,000 users” (Farid, 2018). To successfully win the war against drug addiction, in 2019, the Egyptian government approved a draft law allowing them to sentence drug dealers to death (Al-Masry Al-Youm, 2019).

In 2018, the rate of drug addiction in Egypt reached 10% and, as the authorities reported, were

<sup>6</sup> Ghada Waly – an Executive Director United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and former Egyptian Minister of Social Solidarity.

<sup>7</sup> To know more, see: *Egypt showcases national efforts to combat drug trafficking, abuse* at: <https://dailynewsegypt.com/2020/09/29/egypt-showcases-national-efforts-to-combat-drug-trafficking-abuse/>.

<sup>8</sup> To watch the promo, visit: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=36QkmtJfJSw>.

twice the global rates<sup>9</sup>. Amr Osman<sup>10</sup> said in 2021 that in

2014, 10 percent of the age group between 15 and 60 years old were estimated to use illegal drugs, and 3.3 percent of this group could be classified as addicts. [...] In 2020, as a result of anti-drug campaigns, drug abuse dropped to 5.9 percent and addiction to 2.3 percent. In March 2019, eight percent of state employees were drug abusers but by 2020 this figure had dropped to two percent. Campaigns targeting school bus drivers helped cut drug abuse among this group from 12 percent in 2017 to 1.8 percent in 2020. The average number of public employees tested for drugs daily is 2,000 (El-Ghamry & Sayed, 2021).

He also finds campaigns successful as they widely reach young people through social media (El-Ghamry & Sayed, 2021) and he realizes the potential in the cooperation with those who prepare TV production. His words about the Ramaḍān series, in relation to the topic of the present article, are worth citing:

In 2014, the fund [Egyptian National Fund for Drug Control and Treatment of Addiction – author’s explanation] also began to monitor the treatment of recovery, addiction and smoking in Ramadan television dramas. We found the topics accounted for 13 percent of dramatic content. In Ramadan 2021, the figure dropped to four percent for smoking and one percent for addiction. It is important to engage in dialogue with drama creators: that was the focus of an initiative presented at a World Health Organization meeting in India and adopted in many countries (El-Ghamry & Sayed, 2021).

As we see, such an approach is common not only in Egypt but in other countries as well.

In June 2021, the Anti-Drug law (Law No. 73 for 2021) was ratified and gave as a deadline December, the possibility for employees to confidentially report their addiction problems to their employers and receive treatment (free of charge). As the newspaper *Ahram Online* (2022) reports, according to this Law:

Any state employee who tests positive for drugs will be suspended for more than three months or until the result of the second confirmatory analysis is provided. [...] If the second sample is also positive, the employee’s service is terminated. [...] The law stipulates that those who are seeking jobs in state authorities, state administrative units, public sector companies, public utility management companies, rehabilitation centers, kindergartens, schools and hospitals must also test negative for drugs.

The same year, there was also an interesting proposal at several Egyptian universities – “volunteer kiosks”, whose aim was to raise awareness among students about the harm of drug abuse (Sayed, 2021).

In 2022, Egypt launched a digital mental health and addiction treatment service, the first of its kind in the Eastern Mediterranean Region (for Egyptians and non-Egyptians that reside in Egypt) and free of charge. This platform is staffed by experts from the Egyptian Ministry of Health and Population, psychotherapists, and international experts for psychiatry and addiction treatment. This digital service provides, among others, educational, awareness and counseling services, as well as psychological support (Rafik, 2022).

As the website *Egyptian Streets* summarizes: “Egypt is known to be a smoking nation, with most opting to smoke cigarettes or hookah (water-pipe)”. The most common drugs in Egypt are: hashish (cannabis), the opioid-capsule Tramadol, Ecstasy, and cocaine (Ahmed, 2018). A doctor from the Egyptian Faculty of Medicine of Cairo University states that Egypt is among the countries with the highest drug abuse rates (Al-Ġa‘fari, 2019). The first meeting of the association *Narcotics Anonymous* in Egypt took place in 1989 (Şālih, 2017; *Taḥt as-Sayṭara*, 2015).

## Research question and methodology

The author of this article fully agrees with the Polish sociologist Beata Łaciak (2013, p. 57), who claims that “media scholars usually conduct research on series” and that the need to bring media studies

<sup>9</sup> In comparison, in 2007 8.5% of Egyptians were addicted to drugs (Al-Ġa‘fari, 2020).

<sup>10</sup> Amr Osman – a director of the Egyptian National Fund for Drug Control and Treatment of Addiction, and assistant to the Minister of Social Solidarity, former director of the Drug Prevention Programme at the UN Office on Drugs and Crime. He also worked on the Arab League’s Declaration for Combating Addiction.

and theories closer to other sciences is still not popular. This problem is especially clear to the author while talking about Arab series and, in particular, Ramaḍān ones. She believes this issue to certainly be interdisciplinary work, not a typical part of media studies. To analyze them we do not need only to understand the media systems in Arab countries, but primarily to know the Arab language (and here a scholar needs not only to know Modern Standard Arabic but at least one of the Arab dialects!). What is more, a scholar doing research about series does need to know history on a high level (if he or she does research about historical TV series) or contemporary Arab societies if he or she does research about contemporary TV series. This additionally involves the knowledge of contemporary social campaigns, internal and international politics. That is why the best would be to use Oriental studies methods of research, but something like this does not exist (see: Dziekan, 2014, pp. 3–14). We are forced to use methods from other disciplines.

For the reasons mentioned above, the research for this article on Arabic Ramaḍān TV series is not treated as typical research on media studies but rather as interdisciplinary studies. That is why not only one special method was chosen and presented. From the media studies, content analysis is used, which is generally very popular across the social and human sciences. In the case of this research, it was of course series analysis in the terms presented of social topics and issues. Then the analysis was compared with the author's knowledge about contemporary Egyptian society, its challenges, problems, changes and government policy. After that, the topics mentioned in the series were divided into a few different groups and one of them – drug addiction – was chosen to be presented in the article. The below-mentioned research questions were put forth in addition to a hypothesis to be examined.

The analyzed series is called *Taḥt as-Sayṭara* (“Under control”) and was released during Ramaḍān in 2015. As there are other Ramaḍān series which mention, more or less directly, different addiction problems (*Qamar Hādī*, 2019; *Arḍ Gaww*, 2017; *Lā Tuḥfi' aš-Šams*, 2017; *Al-Mizān*, 2016; and others), this one is remarkable as a full 30 episodes were devoted explicitly to the problem of drug addiction. It proves that the originators of Ramaḍān TV series concentrate not only on providing amusement to the Egyptian (or wider: Arab) societies up but also using the fact that television, during this period of time, gathers the masses to disseminate important messages. The author of the article sees that this Ramaḍān series is exceptional in

comparison with other above-mentioned, as it was a first and the only one which was devoted so directly to the problem of drug addiction. This sickness covered about 89–90% of the plot. Even if there were also other topics covered in the series, drug addiction was certainly the main one and related – more or less – to the others.

The main research problem was the role of this production – whether it can be an important tool in creating awareness among Egyptian society and can help the government in its activities or whether it is just a production which generally presents the topic mentioned above. The hypothesis reads: “The purpose of realizing the series *Taḥt as-Sayṭara* was to make people aware of the wide danger of drug addiction and its consequences for the whole society”.

To prove or deny the hypothesis, it was necessary to ask a few research questions:

1. Which social groups are presented as those who can suffer from drug addiction?
2. What, according to the series, can the addiction lead to?
3. Is this disorder shown in a realistic way or underestimated?
4. Do the originators of the series present the consequences only for the addicted people or also for the whole society?
5. What do all these consequences look like?

## Research material

The series *Taḥt as-Sayṭara* contains a number of social issues, but drug addiction is its main focus and that is what the article concerns.

The series starts when the main hero of the series – Maryam (played by popular Egyptian-Russian actress – Nillī Karīm) – comes back with her husband from Dubai to Egypt, where they have decided to live. They are both Egyptians who met each other and got married in the United Arab Emirates. Both the actors are very popular, so their presence in the series is a guarantee of success and... a guarantee that the message will be received by a great many viewers.

The migration brings her back not only to her country but to difficult memories – the death of her friend and addiction. From early on in the series, she searches for help in a pharmacy but she cannot receive strong medicines without a medical prescription. Her friend warns her about taking this step, as it could lead her back to addiction. The whole series spins around Maryam, her friends, their families and problems.

Maryam has been happily married for 5 years, her husband loves her and dreams of having a child with her – he fulfills all her dreams. They do not have any financial problems, as her husband has a good job in Cairo. Despite all that, something happens inside her. She is scared – scared of everything around her and – mostly – of herself, even though her husband gives her a feeling of safety and he is her whole life. But in the last six months, she has changed. She has a problem, but she cannot talk about it and at the same time she does not want to hide it. During the first episodes, we can observe her internal fight after coming back to Cairo. It seems that her calm, safe and well-organized life stopped existing, but only inside her. From the outside, when somebody observes her, no changes can be discerned. The style and level of their life did not change; she still has her beloved man close to her. What is more, it should be even better and easier for her – she came back to her homeland, she has her cousin and best friend closer. But the viewer discovers that not only they are closer. Her ‘past’ life is closer as well, which she does not want to remember and which she ran away from to Dubai. This ‘past life’ reaches her from early on when she arrives back in Egypt. On the second day, she visits the tomb of the man who died close to her 9 years previously. This death changed everything in her life – “sometimes I feel that he died because of me and sometimes I feel that he died for me to be alive” (*Taht as-Saytara*, 2015, 2<sup>nd</sup> episode). This incident seemed to be the beginning of her rehabilitation, but then she went with her father to Dubai to change her environment and start a ‘new’ life. What is important to underline is the fact that while watching the series the viewer is presented many times with information that addiction is a sickness. So, they do not treat it as something like an inhuman affliction or something that can happen only to a bad person or those from ‘worse houses’. They explain that this is a sickness and a person who is addicted should be treated as a sick person. It helps the viewer understand that they should not be ashamed if some member of the family has an addiction. They simply have to search for help and firstly do everything to let them be better, not be embarrassed in front of society<sup>11</sup>. The words ‘let them be better’ were used here intentionally. The series teaches the viewer as

well that this sickness always stays with its carrier. One cannot recover from addiction. Once a person has been addicted, they will always be addicted. They can stop taking drugs (or any other form of addiction), but they have to be careful all their lives because once they try it again they will not be able to stop it till the next recovery period. It is a vicious circle. And this is what happened with the main hero of the series. The series shows that Maryam, even with her great fears, was a very strong person. She was fighting everything that could bring her back to addiction. She was trying to win over her fear, continued going to the meetings for addicts (after her husband found out the truth about her problem – which happened accidentally because she had hidden the truth from him) and was doing her best to avoid any contact with the past – her old flat and friends who she supposed were still addicted. Apart from her husband, she had two people closest to her in Egypt – her cousin and her friend Širif, who earlier was addicted but started helping others recover from addiction. They are her anchor. Everything got worse when her father begged her to visit her old house. All memories came flooding back. She called her old friend and received information that she had died. Then she made another call to a person who was still addicted and was close to meeting with her. At that moment the viewers see a very touching scene – Maryam calls Širif and informs him of what she had done. He gives her direct instructions – to close herself inside the house, go to the terrace and throw the key down to the garden. That was the way to protect her. The viewers can observe her internal fight with herself, with addiction and see just how easy it is to make a mistake. But this ‘one’ mistake can destroy everything which the addicted person had done up until that moment. This scene explained as well that it is very difficult to not fall under the influence of ‘old friends’ who we had taken drugs with previously.

The viewers can observe how fear is dangerous while talking about addicted people. They are scared and when they cannot fight it, they run back to the drugs and the circle is closed again.

Somebody could think that Maryam had no problems, had an easy and good life, a husband who loved her and whom she loved. From ‘outside’ she seemed to be a normal, young woman with a comfortable life – just like one of us. And yes, she is one

<sup>11</sup> One cannot forget that the opinion of society, the closest neighbours, the area where people live, is very important in Middle Eastern societies, much more than in Europe where everybody ‘lives his life’. In Arab countries, this ‘social opinion’ can determine the life of the whole family. Even if one does not agree with some issues, he or she needs to follow ‘customary rules’ and ‘traditions’ because if one does differently ‘what will people say’...

of us, but the series explains also that there may be things which we are not able to see in the person in front of us. The psyche is something that can greatly affect our lives and until we share our feelings with somebody we can simply not receive his help. Maryam also felt very bad. One time she said some important words: “Every person wants something. And he wants it now. And nobody thinks if what he wants is suitable for me or not. [...] And nobody understands that especially now I need to concentrate on Maryam for me to know how to protect her” (*Taht as-Saytara*, 2015, 6<sup>th</sup> episode).

Different circumstances (among others, previous concealment of the truth about the addiction and her old love) caused her husband to believe that she was in a relationship with another man and he leaves her. That was too much for Maryam and pushed her to come back again to drugs. She was not happy with it – totally the opposite. She regretted it but could not stop. It was stronger than her. She even came to the point that she was searching desperately for drugs inside the rubbish on the street. Maryam found a way back when she learned that she was pregnant – it gave her the power to go to the hospital. There she received help and after leaving she headed over to an unofficial home for a few months where other addicted girls were living. This time was important for her not just because she was inside a ‘safe place’ where she could receive help but she also became a guardian for others. Maryam is an example of a woman who won back ‘her life’ two times – two times she found in herself the power to stop taking drugs and also help others. The girl who she was trying to help was Hānyā.

Hānyā was a young girl from a ‘good home’. While observing her, one could say that she was not missing anything in her life. Her family was comfortable financially, she was going to a good international school (as we can deduce from her way of talking), she had friends, went to parties, to clubs and had fun. But in reality, the girl was not getting enough care from her father, who was never available. Is this what nudged her to cigarettes and drugs? Or a boy who she met and fell in love with? Or maybe simply she wanted to feel that she was ‘old enough’? Or perhaps generally she was not getting enough attention from her family? As we heard in the series, her mother was not thinking about what the young girl wanted but was mainly determined for her to study. Was it the reason why Hānyā tried drugs? Or maybe because she felt that her mother loved another man than her father? ‘Ali once said that she was lonely (*Taht as-Saytara*,

2015, 12<sup>th</sup> episode). There is no clear answer, but what is important is the fact that the day she met ‘Ali was the day which set her on a path down a very dangerous road full of pain and problems. ‘Ali was a man who had already been addicted. We could observe a few scenes where he was stealing from people just to get money, even from his best friend and mother during the funeral reception for his uncle, and from those inside the mosque who had helped him before. It shows that for an addicted person there is no sanctity. He or she could steal from anybody and anywhere just to get the money they needed for drugs. Then ‘Ali moved ‘forward’ – he was not only taking drugs but decided to work as a dealer and distribute them.

Hānyā started lying to her mother; she ran away from home, started living with ‘Ali, got pregnant and lost her child. Even this fact did not change her. Her mother took her to the hospital and after all this she stole from her again and went back to drugs. Her mother was not the only person she stole from. And here there is need to mention that the girl did not have problems receiving money. If she had not come to addiction and drugs, she would have been able to live a good life without any financial problems, but the drugs pushed her to steal from people. ‘Ali and Hānyā were not the only examples of people who stole to get drugs. The author of the series shows that such behavior is very common with addicts. Others were stealing from their kids (taking the gold from their daughter’s ears) or bringing back their mother’s medicines back to the pharmacy.

Hānyā’s mother tried to help her many times – by asking and by force – but she refused this help each time, running away and going back to ‘Ali and drugs. Even such a terrible experience as rape did not take her away from this ‘life’, moreover that it did not happen ‘by mistake’. ‘Ali sold Hānyā to receive drugs – he left her with a man and knew exactly what would happen to his beloved. Maybe even later he had some remorse but the compulsion to take drugs was stronger than anything else. ‘Ali sold Hānyā’s body and there was another hero – Inġi – who sold herself just to get drugs.

Finally, Maryam became Hānyā’s guardian and did her best to convince her that she was addicted, that she could stop taking drugs when she wanted and that drugs were destroying her life. But it did not help. The addicted person needs to want to get better. Nobody can force another person into it. The same happened with other heroes presented in the series (for example Ṭāriq). One woman in the series said important words:

”I don’t want to stop [taking drugs] because of somebody. Actually, I don’t have anybody. All of them left me. Or maybe I left them. I want to stop because of myself. If I don’t stop, I will die. And I don’t want to die. Or I don’t want to die here [...] (*Taht as-Saytara*, 2015, 12<sup>th</sup> episode).

Finally, even Hānyā decided to get treatment and it was not easy. Firstly, she felt remorse towards Maryam (she felt that she had lost the possibility to attend an important court case because she was trying to help Hānyā), then she saw that ‘Ali had lost his mind (as we can expect – it was likely connected with this addiction) and attacked her. After that, she reminded herself of the beginning of their relationship – happiness, parties, a good and easy life – and in the end she became paralyzed after trying to get drugs. All these difficult and terrible things had to happen to a young girl for her to understand that she wanted to recover. The viewers do not know what happened with ‘Ali in the end. He still believed that nobody could stop taking drugs. As can be seen from other examples, he was wrong. The most terrible part of his story is not only the fact that he was addicted, but that Hānyā was important to him, maybe he even truly loved her. Firstly, he was trying to protect her from ‘heavy’ drugs and took care of her in the hospital, but in the end the addiction was much stronger than any human emotion.

The next important hero of the series is the previously mentioned Tāriq. He was a friend of Maryam and Širif. At the beginning, we get to know him as an ex-addicted person who was helping Širif in Recovery House. He was the one who was bringing others there, checking that they had no drugs and helping them to recover. Everything changed when he got a call from Inġi – his old friend who had still not recovered. He was not strong enough to not meet with her. And this is the next thing which the series warns of – old friends who still have not recovered are one of the most dangerous. It takes very strong willpower not to be influenced by them and finally to not try drugs (or anything we are addicted to) again. The examples of heroes who made this mistake are Maryam and Tāriq.

What is more, he betrayed his wife (who stood behind him every time before, when he was in the throes of addiction and trying to recover) and went back to drugs. He is the prime example of a person who did not have enough strength and went through recovery again and again. He showed the viewers how addicted people can cover up their addiction – he was, for example, lying or hiding syringes inside the toilet cistern. The viewers can

see that his whole life was destroyed because of drugs. He lost his wife (who loved him and tried to help him many times) and then his mother threw him out of the house. He was also the reason for the death of his younger brother. Firstly, he was helping him, bringing food (which Tāriq brought back to get money for drugs) and later drugs. One day, after Tāriq gave his younger brother drugs, he died. This tragedy pushed him to enter the hospital and try to recover one more time.

With Tāriq and Inġi, there is one more story in the series which should be a warning for everyone who even thinks for one second about doing drugs. The husband of Inġi (also addicted) learns that he is sick with HIV, meaning that Inġi could also be sick, and after her – Tāriq. So, if Tāriq could be sick, his non-addicted wife Salmà as well. This story teaches the viewers a few lessons. First of all, addicts can easily get infected with very dangerous illnesses if they use the same needle. Second of all, addiction leads people to think only about the ‘addiction hunger’ and nothing else (for example protection). Third of all, the family of the addicted person can be vulnerable to many illnesses because of their addicted loved ones. Fourth of all, sexual relations without protection (Tāriq wanted to buy condoms but Inġi refused) may lead to sexually transmitted diseases.

The series shows heroes who won against addiction (with more or fewer bumps), e.g., Širif, Maryam, Hānyā, those who finished tragically, e.g., Inġi (who committed suicide after she found out that she had AIDS), Tāriq’s brother. There are also other heroes who we are not sure how their life will go on.

The series also portrays how difficult it is for families of addicted people to help them or even to understand firstly that their beloved ones are sick. The authors of the series demonstrate how family support is important in recovery, as well as how the families have to be careful. Of course they always want to believe those who they love, but they cannot forget that the addiction is a dangerous sickness which can lead to lying. The addicted person can destroy his or her family in a number of ways – by lying, stealing, by leading some other member of family to become addicted or to become infected with a sickness, but also they can lead members of family to suffer in different ways. For example, Maryam’s addiction endangered her child who was born in the 7<sup>th</sup> month. On the other hand, Salmà who wanted so much to become a mother, settled on abortion because she did not want her child to grow up with an addicted father.



Very difficult and thought-provoking scenes are those where the viewer can observe the moments when the addicted characters start their recovery. The first moments and days when they feel the withdrawal are extremely difficult. They feel terrible pain. Some of these people do it by themselves, others are forced by their families. Anyhow, in both situations, the beginning is severe. All of them had to be thoroughly checked – not only their clothes but also hair and other parts of the body to be sure that they did not cover up or smuggle anything. After the recovery period, the addicted individuals are advised to attend meetings to support each other, talk about their everyday problems, successes and issues. Finally, they cannot forget that this sickness will stay with them always and they need to be careful and never forget that they are sick – they are addicted. The help of a psychologist is also important. Especially for those who need firstly to understand that they have a problem. The series shows as well that God and places of worship, as well as other coreligionists, can also be helpful in the recovering time.

It has to be mentioned as well that the Egyptian police are presented as trying to fight addiction by checking and arresting those who are carrying drugs.

Even if *Taḥt as-Sayṭara* concentrates mainly on drug addiction, the viewers can see that there are different drugs and other addictions, for example, plastic surgery. We could also see Maryam trying to buy strong medicines. The viewers additionally observe people drinking alcohol, but this series did not mention this kind of addiction.

Sometimes, while watching the series, viewers can hear a sound as if they were to find themselves in the jungle. And these sounds are what enhances the experience of watching and they can let the viewer guess that the connection is not random – the addicted people can one day behave like wild animals just to get the source of their addiction. This kind of sound happens, for example, when the addicted person starts their recovery and fights with the terrible pain of withdrawal and ‘addiction hunger’.

## Summary

As was mentioned above, the series is full of different social situations, but the topic of every one of the 30 episodes is drugs – their sale, addiction, attempting to give them up, the approach of those hooked on them and their families to these

problems. The viewer can observe the analysis of different kinds of addictions, e.g., heroin and hashish. They learn not only the danger of ‘only’ trying drugs – for fun or to impress somebody. They get to know not only the danger of taking drugs but also addiction, which can lead to lying, fetal issues, nerve diseases, AIDS, death or dehumanization of a person through stealing from the closest ones (even during a funeral reception), selling one’s wife’s or one’s own body to get small amount of drugs, relinquishing medicines of a sick mother to the pharmacy or betraying someone. A huge advantage of the series is the fact that it is shown very naturalistically; it is not too cloying and not too harsh. The series is very realistic.

This television work explains that every single person can get lost in addiction. Addiction is presented as a sickness which can affect anyone, not only people from lower classes of society or the dregs of society. And this is, in the opinion of the author of the article, one of the most important lessons from the series. Nobody can say ‘I brought up my daughter to be good and she would never try drugs’ or ‘no, of course my son does not take drugs’ or any other thing which one can be addicted to. Every – simply every – person, not only somebody poor or from the lower class, not only somebody with upbringing and educational problems but every person can get into any addiction. A person from the middle class (like Maryam and others) or the high life, those educated, with many successes, older or younger, an intelligent girl, who does not lack anything at first glance (like Hānyā) or a handsome boy with lots of friends. The series teaches the viewers that every person can become addicted, can take drugs and every one of them for a different reason. One can abuse drugs because of the influence of his friends or family (as Ṭāriq’s brother), one to impress others, one just out of curiosity, another to forget his problems or fears. These examples are shown and analyzed in this Ramaḍān series as well as how later it is difficult to live after the recovery period and to understand that this person is ill forever. The series underlines the importance of therapeutic sessions, psychologists and family, but what is the most important is the fact that a person has to truly believe that they are addicted and want to stop being so. And they have to fight through the first terrible moments of recovery. Viewers who have never been addicted could find it hard to imagine, but thanks to the series they can understand it a bit better. They also come to know that not every member of the family is ready to accept somebody who is addicted.

A few of the episodes show as well that attempts to deal with addiction may involve not only therapists, psychiatric hospitals or so-called 'Recovery Houses', but also co-believers in the place of worship, the Qur'an (or in general – Holy Books) and faith. Faith can help as people connect together in the prayer, support each other and believe the Higher Power will help them.

This series can be treated not only as the analysis of the addiction problem but a portrayal of potential reasons which people try drugs and their possible consequences. The series 'opens viewer's eyes' and draws attention to this major social problem present all over the world.

It is crucial to understand that the stories, examples and actors mentioned above present situations which many viewers may experience on a daily basis, somewhere in Cairo, Qena, Alexandria, Aswan, and other Egyptian cities (and not only Egyptian). What is more, showing these examples using popular actors is more meaningful and will remain in people's minds longer than any lecture or social campaign, as the power of Ramaḍān TV series is truly great.

### Conversation with the scriptwriter

In April 2019, the author of the article had the pleasure and honor to talk with the scriptwriter of this series, Mrs. Mariam Naoum. During the research interview, she got to know from Mrs. Naoum that all the stories which were mentioned in the series were inspired by true life events. She had been working on the series for 5 years, talking with addicts, learning about their feelings, attempts to recover – their whole story. All this information she mixed together to create the series which shows that anyone can be affected by addiction. Mariam Naoum said that after the appearance of the series, anti-drug campaigns began in Egypt. The series itself was not a part of them but it was a kind of precursor.

The author of the article strongly believes that the series *Taht as-Saytara* can be considered educational. Naoum does not agree with this. "You work on changing concepts, not the educational role", she said<sup>12</sup>. She explained that she wants to change the thinking of people. For her, the world is not black and white, and the series does not only show a particular story. She believes that every problem has to be well thought out and its result viewers can

clearly see in the series *Taht as-Saytara*. She wants society to think, talk, discuss, and change. This is her goal.

The author of the article fully understands the scriptwriter's point of view but in her opinion the series *Taht as-Saytara* provides a number of lessons for different viewers (those who have never experienced addiction, the families of addicted people, families who rear children and want to protect them, etc.) that she will continue to believe that the series *Taht as-Saytara* can be treated as an educational one. She will even go further (even if it is not her task as a scholar) and recommend this series to be translated to all languages and transmitted in every country, just for people to understand what a difficult and terrible sickness addiction is.

### Conclusion

The series *Taht as-Saytara* raises a very important (worldwide) social problem – drug addiction. Although it may be one of many series, there is no doubt that *Taht as-Saytara* is a special one. Şalih (2017) also agrees with this point of view. She wrote: 'This drama series represented a new step in curing drug addiction, which was raised in a few forms in the cinema and television [...].'

To sum up the research results, there is a need to clearly answer the research questions. The social groups presented in the previously mentioned series are mainly typical people from the middle class. There were no representatives of low-class society. On the contrary, the series shows that every 'normal' person, like our friend, neighbor, or even we can one day be addicted to drugs, and that drugs are a danger for everybody – high-class people, middle-class people, those who have money and those who have people who love them – not only those who we see as 'losers' in life.

In short, addiction leads to tragedies. It can cause health problems (to the person addicted and those whom the addicted person loves), problems with families, with the law, even dehumanization. The mentioned disorder is shown fully in a realistic way – not underestimated and not overdone.

A great advantage of this series is the fact that its creators concentrate not only on the broad depiction of the topic (drug addiction) but also on its consequences for the addicted person or their family but also for others – for society itself. We get to know about the possible family tragedies (death,

<sup>12</sup> Words said by Mrs. Mariam Naoum during her meeting with the author of the article on 8<sup>th</sup> April 2019 in Cairo and authorized on 27<sup>th</sup> April 2022.

rearing a child in a broken home, sicknesses of unborn babies, sexual partners, deterioration of health, etc.).

The results of the research confirm the validity of the hypothesis that the purpose of realizing the series *Taḥt as-Sayṭara* was to create awareness of the wide danger of drug addiction and its consequences for the whole society. It clearly sends the message that drug addiction is a sickness and shows the whole spectrum of its dangers, consequences and how to build one's life up again from the beginning. The fact that the series was a precursor to further social campaigns against using drugs indicates that the researched series can, indeed, help governments in the fight with drug addiction and can open society's eyes. What is more, the author of the article believes that somehow it can be an even stronger message than through the official ways because the Egyptians watch every day, throughout the month, what happens in the series and can discuss more about the problem itself. Perhaps even the series will open them up to ideas they had never considered before.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when television is an essential part of Egyptian (and generally Arabic) culture, and when series overhaul books in appeal, it is crucial to create series which touch on urgent, worldwide issues. Such series have the potential to open viewers' eyes, explaining problems which they may not be fully aware of or teaching something totally new.

## Post Scriptum

It is necessary to explain one thing. After the opening credits of the series, before the viewer sees every episode, the following information is given: "The association of Narcotics Anonymous (NA) did not take part in the production of this series and is not related to it. We assure you that it is not affiliated to any institutions or hospitals for the treatment of addiction or any other institution. This is an independent association by its nature. And its program is to abstain from all [kind of – explanation of the author of the article] drugs. There are no subscription fees and cure by them is not a subject of sales" (*Taḥt as-Sayṭara*, 2015).

Under this information, there are phone numbers and the website of the association of Narcotics Anonymous Egypt<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> To discover more, see: <https://naegypt.org/about/?lang=en>.

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