



## Egyptian TV Show Aims to Control the Narrative in the Sinai

**OE Watch Commentary:** The month of Ramadan is high season for Arabic-language TV series. Alongside their entertainment value during the lengthy month-long fast, many of the programs have a specific political purpose, seeking to influence local and even regional perceptions on particular political issues of the day. Among the most successful shows this Ramadan, which ended on 23 May, was an Egyptian production called “The Choice.” The show was produced by a company owned by a quasi-government media conglomerate established in 2017 and that has since begun to dominate Egyptian television. As one of the excerpted passages suggest, the show aims to “restore the military’s respect and prestige, especially with regard to its ‘war on terror’ and the ongoing campaign against extremists in the Sinai since 2013...”

Based on true events, the show tells the life story of Col. Ahmed Mansi, the commander of a battalion in the Egyptian army’s elite “Thunderbolt” (al-Saika) special forces units, who was killed in an insurgent attack on a Sinai checkpoint in July 2017. An effective and charismatic leader in the show, “Mansi the Legend” is contrasted with Hisham Ashmawy, a Thunderbolt commando who defected from the military to lead a deadly militant insurgent group during the 2010s. Egypt’s most-wanted man for several years, Ashmawy was captured in Libya last year and executed in March after being sentenced to death by an Egyptian court.

Critics of the “The Choice” contend that it distorts history and presents Egyptians with a false choice between a negative caricature of Islamic radicalism and a positive one of the Egyptian military. Prominent Qatari-backed media outlets, such as *al-Jazeera*, published a bevy of stories and opinion pieces critical of the show. Nonetheless, “The Choice” represents a rare victory for the Egyptian military in its eight-year long Sinai campaign, which has been marred by strategic and tactical blunders that have arguably fueled the insurgency, produced thousands of casualties and provided never-ending fodder for critics of the Sisi-led government.

As audiences across Egypt tuned in to watch “The Choice” though, the Egyptian military reported 15 casualties in a late April attack in the Sinai. About a week after the end of Ramadan, another insurgent attack killed or injured five Egyptian soldiers. For critics of the Egyptian military, these incidents were proof that the picture portrayed in “The Choice” did not necessarily align with reality. The Egyptian government may be winning the information war in the Sinai, but the actual insurgency seems long from over. **End OE Watch Commentary (Winter)**



An Egyptian Special Forces commando signals for reinforcements during an Egyptian military demonstration for observers during Bright Star 2017, Sept. 19, 2017, at Mohamed Naguib Military Base, Egypt.

Source: U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Michael Battles, <https://www.dvidshub.net/image/3792360/egypt-hosts-14-nations-bright-star-17-military-demonstration>, Public Domain

***“The... [show] is an attempt to restore the military’s respect and prestige, especially with regard to its ‘war on terror’ and the ongoing campaign against extremists in the Sinai since 2013...”***

**Source:** “Ramadan Series 2020: Our Top 3 Must-Watch Ramadan Shows of the Year,” *Egyptian Streets*, 11 May 2020. <https://egyptianstreets.com/2020/05/11/ramadan-series-2020-our-top-3-must-watch-ramadan-shows-of-the-year/>

*Based on true events surrounding the life of Egyptian army commander Ahmed el Mansy (commander of the Sa’ka (Thunderbolt) Forces), El Ekhteyar (The Choice) is worth watching as it is both well-made and introduces audiences to a human side of the army – the people behind the camouflage attire.*



## Continued: Egyptian TV Show Aims to Control the Narrative in the Sinai

**Source:** “A Ramadan series brings Egypt’s fight against extremists to TV screens,” *The Arab Weekly*, 30 April 2020. <https://the arabweekly.com/ramadan-series-brings-egypts-fight-against-extremists-tv-screens>

*The series tries to frame the story as part of the eternal conflict between the forces of good, personified by the character of Mansi, and the forces of evil, embodied by Ashmawy. The story contrasts the life and personality of an officer who believes his mission in life is to love and protect his country with that of another former fellow army officer who is rude and violent to his military comrades. In one scene, Ashmawy is seen mistreating a soldier just because the latter was singing country songs with his companions instead of reading the Quran.*

**Source:** يؤس الاختيار بين العسكر والإسلاميين في مصر  
 “The Misery of ‘The Choice’ between the Military and Islamists in Egypt,” *al-Jazeera*, 7 May 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/y8akkcl5>

*The main goal of the series, in our view, is an attempt to restore the military’s respect and prestige, especially with regard to its “war on terror” and the ongoing campaign against extremists in the Sinai since 2013. The campaign does not seem to be bearing fruit, especially in light of the repeated attacks by the followers of the “Sinai Province” organization and its sympathizers and collaborators in the police and army there, especially in the cities of Rafah, al-Arish, Sheikh Zuweid and recently in Bir al-Abd. The most recent attacks, ironically, took place a few days ago, as the show began airing.*

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