Abstract:

This paper discusses a popular Syrian television drama series, Bab al-Hara (the Gate of the Neighborhood), that ran for five seasons (2005 – 2010). The series is part of a genre of drama called the ‘Damascene milieu,’ which tells stories about residents of imagined neighborhoods in Damascus in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The narrative of Bab al-Hara nostalgically constructs how a Syrian community lived under and resisted French colonial rule and its local collaborators. It seeks to depict a simplistic yet authentic performance of nationalism. The article argues that the strategic imagination of the past in the series reflected the state’s project of national consolidation in Syria, a country sharply divided by class, sect, and location and desperately seeking to bridge the gap between state authority and a national sense of belonging. Within the context of the 2011 Syrian uprising, regime and opposition discourses echoed themes and symbols from the series - demonstrating its political relevance. The paper concludes that the series is a spectacular example of how popular culture shapes public memory in ways that are used by different national groups to bolster and contest political identities, particularly in postcolonial and authoritarian contexts.