

Valentine's Day

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In Egypt, January marks the beginning of the yearly appearance of Valentine's Day or the "Feast of Love" (*īd al-ḥubb*) on television and in the press. As for all evergreen content, discussions on this feast hardly change year in year out, and they always follow a similar progression. In January, there are the announcements for the newest concerts, films and songs about the upcoming Valentine's Day [[Pop Music](#); [Celebrities](#)]. Then, around the 14th of February itself, articles discussing the incomes of florists and teddy bear vendors, debates on the relevance of Valentine's Day celebrations, compilations of statements on the benefits of love, and vox pops carried out on the streets of Cairo, in which anonymous Egyptians are given the chance to express their opinion on the celebration, pour out in succession ('ABD AL-FADĪL; MUṢṬAFĀ ḤASAN; IBRĀHĪM; SA'D AL-DĪN; *MBC Miṣr*; *Al Jazeera Mubasher*; *Al-Ghad TV*; *Akhbārak*). Later on, the newspaper publish reports on famous people celebrating Valentine's Day ('ALAWĪ; ṢUBḤĪ). The same pattern repeats itself on the 4th of November, the date of "the Egyptian feast of love". The journalist Muṣṭafā Amīn invented this event in 1978. Yet, this celebration enjoys less success than its February equivalent (SHIHĀB; *Dream TV Egypt*).

Similarly, in Tunisia, as the 14th of February approaches, numerous shops, shopping centres, hotels, and restaurants are all ornated with the colours of love. In preparation for the feast, they are draped in red, and decorated with hearts or winged cupids. Notwithstanding some individuals' critiques and sometimes bitter condemnations, Valentine's Day is a profitable business. Whether engaged or married, many await this day to express the strength of their feelings through gift-giving. According to a survey conducted by Nadia Dejaoui for *L'Économiste maghrébin*, the profits are mostly distributed amongst florists, chocolatiers, perfume-makers, cosmetics shops, restaurants and even jewellers. In the same article, Sabrine, a salesgirl for a famous chocolatier, states that "it is during this time that we have more orders than any other day. It's Valentine's Day, the feast of love. (...) In business terms, it's even better than New Year's Day". Fatma, an advisor for a beauty parlour, confirms that "regardless of their age, the Tunisians have changed their habits. They love offering gifts" (DEJOU). According to shopkeepers, Valentine's Day has become a timely opportunity to revive their business figures which stagnate outside the holiday season. In order to increase their sales, some of them offer special discounts and make payments easier to carry out especially for the holiday. Travel agencies, airline companies, and hotels also try to take advantage of the moment to increase their profits by selling romantic escapades at a low price, and by organising special soirees featuring stars of Arabic chanson, such as Rāghib 'Allāma (Ragheb Alama) at the Golden Tulip Hotel Gammarth, and Ṣābir al-Ribā'ī (Sabir Rebaï) at the El Mouradi Hotel Club Kantaoui Sousse (*Tunisie Co Tourisme Culture*; *Weekend Tunisie.com*). Public service organisations also profit from the feast. For instance, an article on *Business News* published on the 13th of February by an anonymous journalist discusses the SNCFT (Société nationale des Chemins de fer tunisiens—Tunisian Nation Railway Company) and the Tunisian Post's initiatives for the feast of love: the SNCFT set up a stand selling flowers and gifts in Tunis Station, whereas the Tunisian Post announced a

special service for Sunday 14th February that would ensure the delivery of any bouquets of flowers ordered via Rapid-Poste agencies. The journalist welcomes these initiatives. For them, during this “morose economic period, it is good to take advantage of any and all opportunities” (I.N.; see also Y.N.).

Nevertheless, some people outright reject the feast of love, citing religious reasons. They argue that there are but two Eids in Islam; that which marks the conclusion of Ramadan; and the celebration of sacrifice, in remembrance of Abraham’s sacrifice (*ʿīd al-aḏḥā*). Celebrating love on the 14th of February, a celebration which even encourages illicit relationships, is seen as an imitation of an infidel (*al-kuffār*) custom [↗**In Islam, ...**]. Activists associated with the Daʿwā salafiyya and to the al-Nūr party tried to popularise the hashtag “I am Muslim, I do not celebrate Valentine’s Day”. Representatives of Al-Azhar opposed this approach in the Egyptian press, labelling these opinions as extremist, because the Islamic corpus does not implicitly condemn this feast (BELHATEM; ʿABD AL-HAFĪZ; GHARĪB, ANĪS and MAHRĀN). The former Mufti of the Republic ʿAlī Ġumʿa praises love on February 13 on TV quoting a hadith from the Prophet Muḥammad stating that “Who loved and abstained died as a martyr” to argue that Islam praises love. His critics mock him, presenting ironically the famous singer ʿAbd al-Ḥalīm Ḥafīz as his source, while others denounce the hadith he quoted as weak (*ʿArabī Būst*). Finally, others promote the idea that Egyptians were already celebrating love early in the year during the Pharaonic era (FĀRŪQ; BELHATEM) [↗**“The System” vs. “The People”, ↗Past vs. Present, ↗Clash**].

In Tunisia, on the other hand, according to numerous media-cited sociologists in 2016, the celebration of Valentine’s Day reflects broader social developments, especially amongst the youth. University professor Ulfa Yūsuf (Olfa Youssef), for example, explains on Jawhara FM that the celebration of Valentine’s Day in Tunisia is more widely celebrated than it was ten years ago. She adds that this celebration, in spite of all controversies, has gained a certain place in the habits and collective imaginations of Tunisians (*Jawhara FM*). This evolution could be an indicator of the role that the intergenerational gap has played in the success of Valentine’s Day. Indeed, for many youths, this celebration appears to be an important occasion to express their feelings, as well as a way of displaying their modernity and fashion taste. On the other hand, for the majority of older people, this celebration is judged as “foreign to local customs (*mūsh min ʿādātina*)”. Additionally, for many of them, love should be celebrated every day. Therefore, this emotion should not be reduced to a single day, nor be limited simply to romantic love. However, even among those who support Valentine’s Day, many call for a celebration of love in its broadest sense, including for instance parental love, or patriotic love (*Capfm Tunisie; Jawhara FM*; see also *RTCI*).

In Egypt too, many encourage people to broaden their scope regarding the type of love that this feast should honour, without necessarily opposing its celebration outright. It doesn’t only concern couples, but also the family, the nation and even the president. Parliamentary representative for Egyptians abroad, Ghāda Gharīb ʿAḡamī, elected on the political alliance “For the Love of Egypt” (*Fī ḥubb Miṣr*), dedicates Valentine’s Day “to President Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi, to Egypt, and to its great people” [↗**Father Figures**]. Newspaper *Al-Ahram Hebdo* also reports on the initiative of the National Centre for Child Culture, which has decided to centre its festive activities around love for the country, with children being invited to paint a fresco expressing their attachment to Egypt, whilst also

learning patriotic songs (BELHATEM). In an article from *al-Maṣrī al-yawm* on the “Valentine’s Day,” portfolios by the Béla photography studio, which housed the photographers of the Egyptian Royal Court, Ashraf Muḥyī al-Dīn, heir to the owners of the studio, stresses the importance of celebrating family during the celebration in the past. Nowadays, however, it seems to him that young people centre it on themselves, and on consumerist desires (MUṢṬAFĀ) [↗**Past vs. Present**; ↗**Young vs. Settled**]. Yet, in the vox pops too, the gifts given to one’s family come often to the fore (*Al Jazeera Mubasher*; *Al-Ghad TV*, NADER). Likewise, *albawaba* relates of a man who spent Valentine’s Day with his daughter (*albawaba* a).

The comparisons between Valentine’s Day and the Egyptian Celebration of Love specifically highlight the difference between the global celebration, which focusses on those in love (*al-‘ushshāq*), and the Egyptian one, which makes families the central focus, or at least it was intended as such. As Muṣṭafā Amīn’s daughter explains in *al-Waṭan*, her father’s initiative was

to encourage people to love the homeland, to love one another, and to love [one’s] family. It was a general invitation to love... It had nothing to do with the strongly intimate American sense of love, nor of its “Valentine’s Day” which only celebrates the love between a man and a woman.

She sees it as a way of “reconstructing the Egyptian human being”, distinct by its “chivalric (*murū’a*) character, its sense of fraternity, and sacrifice” (AMĪN) [↗**Inferiority vs. Superiority**].

On the day of this same celebration, psychologist Muḥammad Raġā’ī explains in *Al-Ahrām* that “the feeling of belonging, faithfulness and the dedication to one’s work are the most important tools in building and pushing nations forward, and are the most beautiful gifts for the Egyptian Feast of Love. For love is not a feeling between a man and a woman, but is something deeper, more general, and more comprehensive. Someone who is a traitor to his country is a felon and is insincere in his feelings for others” (SHĀKIR) [↗**Psychiatrists**].

During vox pops in Egypt, many respondents cited their being single as the driving reason behind why they do not celebrate Valentine’s Day, oftentimes using the anglicism “single” or its derivative neologism in the Egyptian dialect “*sangala*” (*Al Jazeera Mubasher*; *Dream TV Egypt*; *Al-Ghad TV*; see also ‘IMĀD; ḤAMDĪ). Both of these factors demonstrate the importance being in a relationship has for the respondents, who would otherwise celebrate the holiday, as well as the American influence on romantic fantasies. English words are therefore used to label one’s own relationship status. On Twitter, the hashtag that dominates during Valentine’s Day in Egypt is “to make the girl love you (*‘ashān il-bint tiḥibbak*), an indication of the pervasiveness of love in an era deemed loveless (ṢALĀḤ) [↗**Beautiful vs. Ugly**]. One of the respondents to a vox pop even explains when asked if he supports or opposes Valentine’s Day: “When I am in a relation, I am for it, and when I am not, I am against it” (NADER). Egyptian newspapers also refer the spectacular expressions of love that Valentine’s Day brings. One paper reported on the case of a man from Tanta who unveiled a huge banner on his street on which he had written “my beloved wife” and “I adore your mother”, without a doubt his way of counteracting the proverbial clash between sons-in-law

and their mothers-in-law (SHIBL). Similarly, a police chief in Kafr al-Shaykh put up a banner upon which was written “I love you Samar, and I don’t hold a grudge against you” (BELHATEM; *albawaba* b). Finally, the website *Zahma* translated an article from the *Washington Post* reporting that the husband of Āya Ḥiḡāzī, an activist and the founder of the NGO *Bilādī* which takes care of children whose parents are in prison, presented a red bouquet of flowers to his wife who sat in the defendants’ chair during the trial against the organisation they were leading (*Zahma*) [[↗Prison](#), [↗Court Trials](#)].

Indeed, it is often repeated that love is flawed in Egypt. For instance, in an article in the Cairene weekly newspaper *Yawm al-sābi‘* from the 1st of November relates the words of psychologist Shaymā’ ‘Arafa, lamenting that an education teaching that love between a boy and a girl is forbidden results in

love [losing] its sense, and it is transformed into a crime. (...) Either we hide it, or we subconsciously try to imitate the West, as a result, [love is seen as] teddy bears, wearing red, and harassment on the streets. (AL-DĪNĀRĪ)

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Similarly, newspapers report on a discussion on social media regarding a post a wife addressed to her husband, in which she gives “twenty reasons why I no longer love you” [[↗Male vs. Female](#)]. She lists them on rolls of pink paper, the colour associated with Valentine’s Day, complaining of his negligence towards her, which led her to stop loving him (*DūtMṣr*). The blame for the lack of love, or at least the lack of enthusiasm for celebrating Valentine’s Day, is also attributed to the difficult material conditions faced by Egyptians, which echoes the economic concerns reported by Tunisian media. As stated above, in the media coverage of the event in Tunisia, it is indeed that a general economic crisis dominates the country, and that Valentine’s Day appears as an important commercial opportunity to generate income [[↗Dollar Crisis](#)]. Facebook jokes—which are also shown in newspapers—circulate Egypt, portraying men offering jerrycans of petrol or gas canisters to their beloved, bearing in mind just how precious they have become (‘IMĀD; ḤAMDĪ). These are echoed by articles giving advice on how to make your own cheap gifts (‘ĀRIF).

There are various differences between Egypt and Tunisia, especially when it comes to the general political context, gender relations, and history. However, Valentine’s Day has a similar aspect in these two countries. This is a sign of transnational circulation of celebratory models promoted by commerce, and by the ubiquity of fantasies tying happiness to romantic love, which are further brought out by the important vectors of cinematic fictions and song. Resistance to Valentine’s Day therefore seems to be an essential part of the challenge in preserving religious and national exceptionalism for many people. Nevertheless, the promoters of Valentine’s Day have succeeded in instilling a desire to a large number of Egyptians and Tunisians to celebrate the event, and, in so doing, have made the inability to participate an indicator of the economic crisis in both countries. There remains a certain ambivalence, though, about the main addressees of Valentine’s Day, with a focus on couples on the one hand, and gifts to other members of the family and friends on the other. However, it is perhaps precisely this ambiguity which allows so many people to find a connection to the celebration.

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CODES – Beautiful vs. Ugly ♦ Inferiority vs. Superiority ♦ Male vs. Female ♦ Past vs. Present ♦ “The System” vs. “The People” ♦ Young vs. Settled

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