Article

Building a national case in interwar Egypt: Raya and Sakina's crimes through the pages of *al-Ahrām* (Fall 1920)

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Abstract
In November 1920, the Alexandria police arrested two sisters, Raya and Sakina, along with their husbands and others, and charged them with the murder of seventeen women. At the end of a trial held in May 1921, the judges sentenced to death six members of the gang, yet it was Raya and Sakina who monopolized public attention as the first women sentenced to death in the Egyptian secular justice system. A century later, they are still alive in the Egyptian collective memory, which has turned them into a long-lasting criminal myth and remembers them as former prostitutes, madams, and female murderers. Previous studies seem to see the myth as resulting from the supposedly exceptional character of the case. This paper is a first step toward exploring how this exceptionality was constructed and how it took on a national dimension after the announcement of Raya and Sakina's arrest. The focus is on *al-Ahrām*, the main national daily newspaper at the time, which covered the issue systematically, providing information on the investigation while building the case in national terms. A micro-historic approach to *al-Ahrām* will enable a deconstruction of exceptionality through comparison with a precedent. An analysis incorporating both the precedent and Raya and Sakina's case will lead to a first hypothesis about the longevity of Raya and Sakina's case and the disappearance of the...
precedent from the Egyptian collective memory. This perspective offers insight into the connection between the press, public morality, and nation-building in interwar Egypt, linking textual and extra-textual realities and shedding light on the local aspects that make the nation. Indeed, the organization of *al-Ahrām* in the provinces may be seen as a key factor in revealing what attracts national attention and what remains confined to a local dimension.

1 | INTRODUCTION

In November 1920, in the Labban district of Alexandria, the police discovered the corpses of seventeen women. They arrested around twenty people, including two sisters, Rayyā and Sukayna ‘Alī Hamām (henceforth Raya and Sakina), and their husbands. Originally from Upper Egypt, Raya and Sakina had worked as prostitutes in Kafr Zayyat, in the Delta, before running clandestine brothels in Alexandria. The inquiry linked most of the Labban murders to illegal prostitution, while stating that money was the motive: Raya and Sakina invited every victim to one of their houses, under the pretext of meeting an affluent man or buying something, then the male members of the gang suffocated the woman, stripped her of her jewels, and buried her body under the floor. At the end of a trial held in Alexandria in May 1921, the judges sentenced to death Raya and Sakina, their husbands, and two other men. All were hanged the following December, yet it was Raya and Sakina who monopolized public attention, being the first women executed by the Egyptian secular justice system and, it seems, the first criminals to have their pictures published in the Egyptian press. Even today, Raya and Sakina are seen as the first female murderers driven by the desire for economic gain and not by emotional behaviour as in crimes of passion. Theatre, cinema, and TV appropriated the characters and people still talk about them. Yet this popularity has not inspired a deep academic interest. In 1997, the Egyptian journalist Yunan Labib Rizk regretted the lack of historical works on Raya and Sakina (Rizk, 1999). Twenty years later, the increase in quantity remains unimpressive. Moreover, the studies that do exist adopt an internal perspective. Apart from the notable work by Nefertiti Takla (2016), they place themselves within the case. While shedding light on important aspects of it—the role of men (‘Īsa, 2002), part of the press coverage (Lopez, 2005), or its negative aura (Boyle, 2016)—they seem to take its exceptional character for granted.

Instead of reading Raya and Sakina’s actual or supposed uniqueness as the effect of an inherent exceptionality, this paper seeks precedents for what seems unprecedented, before studying how this exceptionality was constructed. Drawing inspiration from Elliott Colla’s deconstruction of another notable “first time” (Colla, 2009), it takes exception as the result of a historical process. The question it raises is not why, but how Raya and Sakina attracted national attention. While a broader project will study the process up to the present day, the focus here is on the women’s encounter with the public before the May 1921 trial. This emerges through the pages of *al-Ahrām*, the main national newspaper at the time, which covered the case systematically starting with the discovery of a woman’s bones in Alexandria on 13 September 1920. For two months, the newspaper had no news to reveal. Between 17 November, when it announced Raya and Sakina’s arrest, and 11 December, when it gave a detailed summary of the case, *al-Ahrām* treated the subject extensively, sometimes with more than one article per day. Its reports were published as faits divers, along with marriages, thefts, and other crimes, but were announced three times on the front page, at a time when *al-Ahrām* comprised four pages in total. The space devoted to the story decreased afterwards, before reaching new peaks in May 1921, in connection with the trial, and in December 1921, with the execution. Most of the articles were written in Alexandria and sent to Cairo for publication. Although it was founded in Alexandria in 1875/1876, *al-Ahrām* moved its
main office to Cairo in 1899. In 1920, it was a Cairo-based newspaper, but it maintained a privileged link with Alexandria, where it had an office and permanent employees (Utmán, 1995). The prominence of Alexandrian articles within it points to a wave of national attention that lasted for months. Other periodicals focused on Raya and Sakina through scattered editorials, and even an interview with them, but they did not treat the case systematically. This paper focuses on al-Ahrām for it offers a daily coverage that stands out for its continuity and comprehensiveness from the time of Raya and Sakina’s arrest. Indeed, al-Ahrām provides information on the investigation while building the case in national terms, yet it has not been explored with these two perspectives in mind.

A micro-historic approach, through a close reading of al-Ahrām with its multiple layers and threads, will help move the case from exceptionality to exemplarity. While exceptionality takes a phenomenon out of its space and time, making it incomparable, exemplarity leads to reconstructing its socio-cultural environment. A sensational case, one which connects the judiciary realm with the broader public, can be seen as exemplifying processes that take place in the society. The reactions it provokes disclose a set of dynamics that come together with particular force. Historians such as Carlo Ginzburg, Giovanni Levi, Natalie Zemon Davis, and Partha Chatterjee have studied judiciary cases from different epochs and regions of the world, elucidating how the collective is embedded in individual—and supposedly exceptional—trajectories (Chatterjee, 2002; Ginzburg, 1976; Levi, 1985; Zemon Davis, 1983).

Chatterjee, in particular, provides insight into the local aspects that constitute or challenge the national during the transition between the colonial and the post-colonial state (Chatterjee, 1993). This dimension is central to Raya and Sakina. Indeed, by zooming out the case, I will deconstruct its exceptionality by comparing it with a precedent. By zooming in again, I will analyse the coverage of both the case and the precedent and propose a first hypothesis about the longevity of Raya and Sakina’s case and the disappearance of the precedent from the Egyptian collective memory.

2 | ZOOMING OUT, OR FINDING A PRECEDENT FOR THE UNPRECEDENTED

Despite common understanding, the case-study approach necessarily subsumes comparison. The term “case,” borrowed from medical or criminological literature, indicates a phenomenon whose features stand out. As a result, the experts tend to isolate it from the series of similar phenomena to which it belongs (Passeron & Revel, 2005). Isolating a case is recognizing that it can be (re)placed in a broader context, where it brings a rupture. Its treatment as a single unit implies a constant dialogue with neighbouring cases (Dumez, 2015). Raya and Sakina’s exceptionality turns on their being women perpetrators in crimes motivated by profit. This is considered a first time in Egyptian history. In reconstructing the cultural environment of the case, it is important to see whether similar cases were brought to the public eye before or during the coverage of this one. Finding precedents for what seems to be unprecedented is a crucial step in going beyond sensationalism (Chatterjee, 2002, pp. 97–114).

Reading al-Ahrām from this angle helps shed light on what surrounded Raya and Sakina’s case before it became the case. Indeed, a precedent appears, which also involved women perpetrators and an economic motive. It made the headlines in the spring and summer of 1920, not long before Raya and Sakina came to public attention in Alexandria. Along with his own wife and a third woman, one Maḥmūd ‘Allām, in the city of Tanta, was charged with the murder of women. The newspaper described the trio as acting together in a gang. The horrific character of their crimes, whose motive was linked to money and precisely to “spoliation of jewels,” was constantly underlined.

The cases in Tanta and Alexandria share a similar context. Both series of murders came to public attention in the phase of turmoil that followed the Great War, with the economic crisis that hit Egypt and the massive protests against the British occupation that erupted in 1919 (Sālim, 2009; Chiti, 2017). Tanta and Alexandria, both located in the Delta, were undergoing rapid population growth with the arrival of immigrants from the impoverished countryside seeking jobs in urban manufacturing. The criminals and the crimes show common features as well. Both gangs were composed of men and women and connected with an underworld of sex workers that was at the same time
the target of the murders. All the victims were women, whose condition was particularly fragile in an epoch that saw a violent decrease of incomes and jobs (Beinin & Lockman, 1998), the splitting of many families with the migration from the countryside, and the proliferation of illegal prostitution (Hilal, 2001). At least one of the women murdered in Tanta was a sex worker herself, as were the majority of the victims in Alexandria, and their victim status did not prevent the newspaper from condemning their immoral behaviour. As for Alexandria, some Tanta articles recommended that the authorities ensure the safety of the country by neutralizing "this evil gang that spread moral corruption (fasadan) on earth and started committing murders after having satisfied satanic desires (tamattu’ bil-shahawat al-shayṭanīyya)." Coverage in both places put strong emphasis on the corrupt environment as a factor that predisposed people to break the law. It constantly linked public order to public morality, building on a deterministic view that accompanied the formation of modern nation-states (Foucault, 1975; Fahmy, 1999, p. 360).

Chronologically, Tanta came first. During the summer of 1920, it was labelled with the word qaḍiyya, which covers, like the English "case", both the judicial procedure and the judgement of public opinion. The complete formula was qaḍiyyat ikthifā’ al-nisā’, "the case of women's disappearance." It repeated itself in the headlines, suggesting a narrative in progress and a readership following it. At the beginning of September, while Tanta's defendants were on trial, an article read:

The public opinion (al-ra'y al-‘amm) in Tanta pays extreme attention to this case wishing that the judges will deliver a just verdict against this gang that makes a fool of the public order (al-amn al-‘amm) as big as Tanta.

Not only was the size of the city emphasized, but the word ‘āmm clarified the conception of public order and public opinion as general entities, which could be perceived in Tanta but were conceived as nationwide. The newspaper implicitly framed the case in national terms, as a local offence against the whole state apparatus, and called for a punishment to restore the state's material control and symbolic power. Both for Tanta and Alexandria, it claimed to speak on behalf of the public interest, emphasizing the social function of journalism as "the link between those who govern and the governed" (Hamzah, 2013, p. 100).

Al-Ahrām itself compared Alexandria to Tanta. On 18 November 1920, the account from Alexandria stated that "the days showed us an event (ḥāditha) even more atrocious than the killings of women in Tanta." In this way, it made Tanta the model. Before Alexandria became archetypical, its degree of atrocity was judged against the standard of Tanta. Later, the investigation linked the two cases. Some police officers conducted the inquiry in both cities, dealing in parallel with both threads and travelling to Cairo to report to national institutions. The main defendant in Tanta, Mahmūd ‘Allām, claimed that a certain Mustafa, from Alexandria, was in charge of fixing his weapons. The police brought ‘Allām to Alexandria to be further interrogated, accompanied by high-ranking representatives of Tanta's police. Why, then, did the Alexandria case turn into a national myth, while that of Tanta was forgotten, despite the common features and intertwined inquiries? An analysis of the coverage of each case will help answer this question.

3 | ZOOMING IN, OR AL-AHRĀM AS AN ARCHIVE

This paper highlights the multiple sources al-Ahrām relies upon by reading the threads it displays. Deeply rooted in Carlo Ginzburg's lesson (1994; 1986; 1976), this methodological frame is also indebted to Khaled Fahmy (1999) and Liat Kozma (2004). Both interrogated an allegedly uniform set of sources, such as the Egyptian police and court records of the late nineteenth century, to shed light on the police organization, the state apparatus, and the people's attitudes towards the two. Through a closer look at the different threads embodied in the same report, they could isolate different voices. The approach is similar here, but with a different purpose. This paper does not aim to give a
voice to Raya and Sakina, but to distinguish the voices that shaped their image as national "anti-icons." The temporal perspective is voluntarily limited, since the analysis of al-Ahrām suggests that Raya and Sakina’s negative aura had spread well before their trial began in May 1921.

Between the article of 13 September 1920, reporting that parts of a woman’s body had been found in the Labban district of Alexandria, and that of 11 December 1920, which summarizes the whole case, al-Ahrām presents two main sets of articles:

1. The dispatches of the newspaper’s main office in Cairo;
2. The accounts of the anonymous correspondent in Alexandria.

The main office's dispatches are not signed, as is the norm to this day. Generally short, sometimes very short, they do not always bear a headline. The style is that of a classic khābār, the Arabic news genre, a third-person description of the salient facts in a neutral tone, which seeks to inform and instruct (Mellor, 2005, pp. 104–107). This is how the readers came across a strange piece of news on 13 September 1920:

Labban's police found yesterday in Abīl-Dardā' Street pieces of a woman's body and a skull separated from it. They brought them to the hospital and reported to the public prosecutor. They started an inquiry, but so far, the truth around this horrific crime remains totally unknown.

Of the categories of information, education, and entertainment that make up media coverage (Armbrust, 2009; Briggs & Burke, 2009), the main office's dispatches correspond to the first two. While their informational purpose seems dominant, value judgments appear, as in the term “horrific” (faẓīʿa), and take on broader significance when additional elements are discovered in November. This time, the news comes from "al-Ahrām’s special correspondent" (murāsīl al-Ahrām al-khusūsī). Following the custom of the time, his accounts are not signed. They bear the name of the city, Alexandria, and the date. They are generally long, complex, and multi-layered, in line with the style of a maqāl, the Arabic essay genre, a prose text providing opinions on societal issues (Ayalon, 1995, p. 180; Mellor, 2005, p. 105). However, they blur the boundaries between its subcategories, switching from editorial to news analysis to diary within the very same piece. They mention and sometimes directly quote different kinds of sources, which inform different threads:

1. a third-person narration;
2. a first-person narration; and
3. the police statements.

At some points, the third-person narration resembles the dispatches of the Cairo office. It privileges factual information in a neutral tone, yet it is more detailed, aiming to be complete. It refers to different informants, from members of the police to the public prosecutor and from city dwellers to victims' relatives. At other points, the style shifts to that of the omniscient narrator in a novel. Without acknowledging his sources, al-Ahrām's correspondent gives small details that only an eyewitness could have seen. This all-seeing perspective applies to pieces of information that are more entertaining than factual: “all the suspects were brought to the police station in chains and they all were weeping, women and men.” In this way, the correspondent builds up the atmosphere. Sometimes he addresses the reader in the second person, to highlight previous episodes or new findings. The third person may shift to the first without interruption, as if the omniscient narrator turned into the author of a diary, who is both an eyewitness and a participant-observer, if not a character in his own story. The eyewitness position guarantees the truthfulness of the whole account: "I went to the house where the corpses are and saw some policemen."
correspondent often uses the verb "to see" (ra'a) before he concludes that therefore he "can describe" (yumkinu- nä an nasifa) what he saw. At the same time, he positions himself as a reporter in the middle of the action, describing the phases of his own work:

In yesterday's account, I wrote all the news I collected before the last finding. Then I added that one, still vaguely seeing it as an ordinary event. Today I looked for further details and came across surprising information.19

He takes stands as someone who is both in touch with the city dwellers' feelings and capable of keeping a distance from them:

The public (al-jumhūr) accuses the secret police, and many people claim—yet, it is a groundless claim—that some of its members did know what was going on in Raya's houses and turned a blind eye in exchange for favours they obtained for covering things up. As for myself, I do not say anything like that. I simply say that the secret police showed an incredible weakness.20

While admitting an unintentional flaw in the performance of the police, the correspondent never questions their good faith. Among his sources, he privileges the police statements, which are not summarized, but directly cited. Recognizable through quotation marks, they are introduced by declarations such as "before I switch to my personal information, I transcribe hereafter the official police statement (balagh al-bulūs al-rasmi)." The first one is followed by a further reminder: "This is what was reported today by the police news bulletin (nashrat akhbaar al-bulūs)."21 Indeed, the police statements are written and official, conceived of as press releases. The correspondent's attention to avoiding any confusion between them and his own findings suggests the will to pay respect to the police as an institution. While the assertions of individuals within the police are parts of his narration, the police statements constitute a text within the text.

The self-posturing of the correspondent, as a mediator between the city dwellers and the authorities, may be seen as a marker of the institutionalization of journalism, which was gradually moving from individual endeavour to collective enterprise (Ayalon, 1995, p. 226). The emphasis on the new and the surprising in the news seems to justify scoop-hunting as a social task "to inform and mobilize" (Hamzah, 2013, p. 101). The stylistic features of the articles, where both information and opinion are given in a literary style, blur the distinction between khabar and maqāl, ultimately shifting toward taḥqīq, "journalistic investigation", seen as the practice of tracking the news on the ground, from more than one place and more than one source, verifying it, and relating it in an enjoyable manner (Adham, 1985). These aspects point to the emergence of an ethical and professional awareness that accompanied the evolution of journalism in interwar Egypt (Temimi, 2018).

4 | GOING NATIONAL IN ALEXANDRIA: THE CORRESPONDENT, THE STATE, AND THE PUBLIC

The accounts, multi-layered and multi-faceted, of the Alexandria correspondent are an archive within the archive, which reveals the construction of the case in national terms. The very existence of these accounts points to a connection between Alexandria and Cairo, where al-Ahram's main office was located in 1920. This connection took shape in institutional terms: The newspaper kept a distance from the people accusing the police and handled the police statements with care. Beyond the attitude of the correspondent, this points to a characteristic of al-Ahram itself. Since its launch, al-Ahram had been conceived as an official medium. Its founders, the Syro-Lebanese brothers Salim and Bishara Taqla, had not only obtained the Khedive's authorization to publish22 but had also built a network of contacts within Alexandrian and Cairene institutions, which lasted under the British occupation. On the other
hand, the bond between the police and al-Ahmām is a sign of the development of the press in the aftermath of the Great War (Armbrust, 2009). The police themselves opened up to the press. Their statements addressed an external readership that was composed of journalists and adopted their very language. Their informational goal was not divorced from a taste for entertainment, as evidenced by the small details that built suspense up until the denouement.

A notable example of this entertaining character is the description of an incense smell coming from Raya’s house, which arouses an officer’s suspicion and pushes him to dig under the floor until he finds the corpses. At the same time, olfactory perception points to hygiene and medicine (Corbin, 1986). It is science in the service of the nation, since it stands for the capacity of the well-trained officer to analyse his sensorial experience and display an arsenal of modern knowledge to ensure the public order (Fahmy, 1999). Al-Ahmām’s accounts from Alexandria bear frequent references to scientific methods so as to prove Egyptian institutions’ reliance on fact-based, empirical data. The account of 20 November shows two photographers taking pictures of the corpses (yusawwirī al-juthath bi’l-futūghrafi), while an architect draws the plans of the houses (al-muhāndīs yarsum al-manāzil) and the forensic doctor, coming from Cairo, will carry out the autopsy and medical check (al-tashrīḥ wa’l-kashf al-fībī).24

The representatives of the police and the judiciary also appear in the public space. They come from Cairo to inspect the crime scenes or interrogate the suspects, before going back to report to national institutions.25 When a criminal connection is found between Tanta and Alexandria, they start going back and forth. The nation-state powerfully stands in these accounts as an undisputed entity, whose territorial control is uniform all across the country, from the capital city to the most remote settlement in the countryside. The prosecutor sends the chief of the Labban police station (ma’mūr qism al-Labbān) to Kafr al-Zayyat, north of Tanta, to search the house of Raya and Sakina’s mother.26 He summons to Alexandria Sakina’s mother-in-law and her husband’s first wife from the village of Mushā, near Asyut in the South. Through this nationalization of space, time is also nationalized and made uniform. The references to clock time grow considerably in number when the correspondent talks about representatives of national institutions. Thus, the forensic doctor is expected from Cairo at exactly 11.30 a.m.,28 the public prosecutor leaves for Cairo on the train at 6.00 p.m.,29 and, after pursuing the inquiry in Alexandria, Tanta’s police officers go back on the 3.30 p.m. train.30 Accompanied by precise indications of time, the train appears as the modern transport par excellence: public, rapid, and reliable. Its constant presence makes it the obvious way to link institutions on the national scale, which it physically helps shape. In this uniform Egyptian space-time, the readers from different regions can recognize themselves as members of the national community (Anderson, 1983; Chiffolleau, 2014; Mitchell, 2000).

Yet the state, with its institutional apparatus, is not the only actor of the emerging Egyptian nation. The general public (al-jumhūr) and public opinion (al-ra’y al-‘āmm) are also part of the game. Both the Alexandria correspondent and the Cairo office take them into account. The dialogue between the press and these external voices is close and complex and should not be portrayed as a dichotomy. This emerges in particular from the accounts of the Alexandria correspondent. While treating public opinion as an enlightened actor with a positive influence on society, he sees the public as a collection of individuals whose action may be futile or chaotic and even dangerous. He seems to equate the public (al-jumhūr) that blame the police21 with the city dwellers that spread rumours about the crimes:32 “in Alexandria different stories (qīsās) are told [...], but many of them are pure speculations and some involve a lot of talking (kathīrān min al-mulāhāzāt wa’l-riwāyāt).” In several cases, he states that, despite the rumours, nothing new has emerged based on reliable sources. He even reports a short statement from the Alexandria Governorate inviting people to keep calm, since “the inquiry did not reveal anything new on the women’s killings that the public (al-jumhūr) should know,” both regulating and acknowledging the power of the public. The public emerges in this way as a body to be guided, monitored, and controlled, one whose groundless talking is opposed to the scientific results of the inquiry.

However, scientification does not seem to apply to all rumours. While downplaying rumours about the police, the correspondent publishes those regarding the suspects and builds on them. He even speculates about the total number of victims based on the number of women missing in Alexandria.36 Despite the arrest of both men and women,
he focuses on the latter, in particular Sakina and Raya ‘Alī Hamām. While the first police statements mention their full names, as tenants of the houses where the corpses were buried, the correspondent opts for the form “Raya and Sakina” and talks about their partners as “Raya’s husband” or “Sakina’s husband”. Raya and Sakina become central in every account, not only linked to prostitution and murder in an impersonal way, but to the scary “dark” rooms, similar to “graves” or “caverns”, where they accomplished their “satanic acts.” Well before the end of the police inquiry, let alone the court case, Raya and Sakina are presented as the chiefs of the cruel gang that murdered Alexandrian women. Their fame grows with every new detail, whether proven or not. On 22 November, not even a week after their arrest, the correspondent reports that “some dwellers (ḥabna al-balad) circulated a song about Raya and Sakina and some printed another local chant (nashif baladi), sold for 5 millim per copy.” Like the feuilleton novels published in the Egyptian newspapers, including al-Ahram, Raya and Sakina’s feuilleton captivates the public, both educating and entertaining them through accounts of the crime.

5 | STAYING LOCAL IN TANTA: THE NEWSPAPER’S AGENT, THE STATE, AND PUBLIC OPINION

The police and the judiciary also appear in al-Ahram’s coverage of the Tanta case, yet the public is hardly perceptible. No rumours or songs are mentioned, no voices of city dwellers as individuals, so that we only find remarks on public opinion (al-ra’ay al-‘amm). We know—from the Alexandria correspondent—that Tanta was the standard against which Alexandrian crimes were measured at the beginning. We see the same correspondent shifting the standard to Alexandria one week later. After the discovery of elements potentially linking Tanta and Alexandria, we follow the developments from the Alexandrian perspective. On the one hand, this is due to a hierarchy between the two cities on a national scale. Tanta goes to Alexandria and not the opposite. Both the officials and the officers move to Alexandria when they investigate the two cases side by side. Alexandria is the main city after Cairo, while Tanta is one big city among others.

However, the distinction between local and national is also an ideological construct. While Alexandria was considered a sensitive site by Egyptian nationalism, due to its high number of European residents, Tanta was less exposed to foreign penetration. As Hanan Hammad shows, the struggle over women’s virtue was put forward as a nationalist manifesto, in opposition to the moral decadence of colonial occupation, which allegedly brought alcohol, gambling, and brothels to Egypt. At the same time, in cities like al-Mahalla al-Kubra, where Egyptian clients were the first and almost the only consumers of prostitution, the condemnation was more nuanced, for the issue never took on the dimension of a clash between colonial influence and national interests (Hammad, 2011; Hammad, 2014).

The same can be said of Tanta in comparison with Alexandria. “National purity” was at stake in Alexandria, while “local flexibility” could apply to Tanta. In the former, Raya and Sakina appeared as the perfect representation of the anti-women raised under colonial occupation, at ease in an underworld of hashish, alcohol, and prostitution that was seen as criminogenic. In Tanta, the women of the gang, who were rarely mentioned by their own names, appeared as the man’s accomplices and were acquitted. As Nefertiti Takla shows (2016), the judges in Alexandria also thought that Raya and Sakina were mere accomplices, not the main perpetrators. But the court trial was held in May 1921, while daily press coverage demonizing Raya and Sakina had started in November 1920; this is a factor that could have affected the verdict.

In addition to the administrative and ideological hierarchy between Alexandria and Tanta, a professional aspect must be considered, both through and beyond textual analysis. Al-Ahram’s articles from Tanta immediately reveal a distinct kind of figure in the newspaper’s ranks. No correspondent writes from Tanta but a wakil, an “agent” or “representative” of the newspaper. He reports to the Cairo office, in a style similar to that of the Cairo office. Short and neutral, written in the third person, his dispatches privilege factual information over entertaining details. The reader can hardly feel any suspense, even before salient events.
Lacking the atmosphere, the Tanta dispatches stand as a story without a plot. Moral remarks are there, but they are explicitly formulated, sometimes by addressing directly the judges or the police on behalf of public opinion. Not only the style, but the self-posturing differs. While the Alexandria correspondent went, saw, searched, and verified, the agent in Tanta does not use any of these verbs. He simply reports, treating the news as a one-dimensional feature, without mentioning its sources and questioning its truthfulness. This attitude may be seen as a marker of a different organization within the newspaper. Whereas we do not have enough clues to infer the identity of this agent, the sources allow us to formulate a hypothesis about how he worked. He was probably not in charge of tracking the news on the ground by going around in person and even less of following a thread, as that of a specific crime case. As Ami Ayalon (personal communication, 14 October 2017) points out, the Tanta agent could have been a bookshop owner or a businessman who also happened to serve as the newspaper’s agent. He may have written from his workplace or reported what he had found because he happened to be around. While al-Ahram’s office in Alexandria was big enough to appoint correspondents specializing in different topics, specialization could hardly have been present in Tanta. Most likely, its agent was in charge of multiple tasks, from reporting to distributing the newspaper, or collecting the subscriptions.

In the aftermath of the Great War, the status of journalist underwent substantial change (Armbrust, 2009), such as its transition from intellectual (adīb) to professional (Temimi, 2018). Journalistic writing was gradually becoming a task performed by individuals paid to do it, rather than an amateur occupation. Like every transformation, this was not linear over time or uniform nationwide. A national newspaper such as al-Ahram was not equally organized, managed, and written across the entire country. The lesser impact of the Tanta case on the Egyptian collective memory may also be due to this practical aspect. The organization of the coverage in Tanta produced short dispatches that were less apt to feed a national myth than the rich Alexandria accounts. Moreover, the lack of specialization of al-Ahram in Tanta may have been among the reasons that made the newspaper weaker when facing institutional pressure than it was in Alexandria. Several articles, for both cities, mention the requests of the police to keep secret some developments in need of further verification. While this seems to have had a huge effect on Tanta dispatches, which are almost cut after such requests, the Alexandria accounts keep their length and style. They build on sources outside the police and the institutions, exploiting the network of the correspondent, who kept tracking information and rumours and combining them into a literary plot. This was not possible for the agent in Tanta, who most likely had to deal not only with other news, but with several other tasks at the same time. While going national in Alexandria, al-Ahram stayed local in Tanta.

6 | CONCLUSION

Studying two French criminal cases sharing the same features, Yvan Jablonka asks himself why one was forgotten while the other had a huge national impact. He realizes that in the first case the victim was found “at the wrong place”, in an area falling in-between two media-coverage zones of neighbouring regions (Jablonka, 2016). The news, though briefly reported by some journalists, never became a case, yet no intrinsic feature prevented it from being seen as a disrupting element in a series of more ordinary murders. Coincidences, often a blank space in historical research, should be taken into account as much as possible, for they constitute an integral part of historical reality (Esch, 2002). By asking ourselves how—more than why—we came to see a given case the way we do, we may uncover important elements of it and its environment.

Jablonka’s view applies to Tanta. Its murders, similar to those of Alexandria in many respects, occurred at the wrong place. In 1920, a national newspaper such as al-Ahram continued to be written, in some provinces, by people who had several responsibilities besides reporting. As a result, the Tanta agent covered the murders through short dispatches that gave general information in an impersonal tone. In contrast, the Alexandria correspondent wrote, day after day, Raya and Sakina’s feuillete: a multi-faceted, entertaining story that plays with the suspense in a literary style. Indeed, in interwar Egypt, the journalist was becoming a professional figure. Yet this change did not happen at
the same time and in the same way nationwide. Localizing the national, apprehending it in its provincial dimensions, is a necessary step in historically grounding the study of national phenomena. It may unveil the persistence of old practices where we tend to emphasize the new ones, enabling a deeper understanding of the continuities that lie behind any rupture and a useful shift from exceptionality to exemplarity.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST
The author declares that there is no conflict of interest that could be perceived as prejudicing the impartiality of the research reported.

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ENDNOTES
1 Tawfiq Mufarraj, “Fi sīn Rayyā wa-Sukayna,” Al-Muqtaṭṭaf, 1 December 1921.
2 The analysis of Al-Ahrām is meant to be the first step in the study of Raya and Sakina's mythologization. According to the Egyptians whom I questioned between 2015 and 2016, in Cairo and Alexandria, the longevity of the myth nationwide is mainly due to the cinema. After a few decades during which the story was transmitted through local or family networks, the cinema restored its national prominence. Naguib Mahfouz co-wrote a movie entitled Raya w-Sakina (1953), which is still mentioned as the trigger of Raya and Sakina’s revival. Despite the freedom it takes with historical facts, the movie claims to be based upon Al-Ahrām's accounts of the epoch.
3 Al-Ahrām, 6 June 1920.
4 Cf. also Lopez, 2004.
5 Al-Ahrām, 20 November 1920.
6 Cf. Al-Ahrām, 5 June 1920; 16 June 1920; 1 September 1920.
7 Al-Ahrām, 3 September 1920.
8 Al-Ahrām, 18 November 1920.
9 Cf. also Takla, 2016.
10 Al-Ahrām, 23 November 1920; 25 November 1920.
11 Al-Ahrām, 7 December 1920.
12 Al-Ahrām, 8 December 1920.
13 For a similar method applied to literary sources, cf. Marilyn Booth (2007).
14 The expression is taken from Shaun Lopez (2005).
15 From 30 November on, Al-Ahrām published editorials on Raya and Sakina written by Egyptian intellectuals. These were signed, for the identity of the authors was important, as prominent voices on the national scene. They provided not information but moral guidance, and the presence of their pieces testifies to the national attention the case had already attracted.
16 Al-Ahrām, 13 September 1920.
17 Al-Ahrām, 17 November 1920; the italics are mine.
18 Al-Ahrām, 18 November 1920.
19 Al-Ahrām, 17 November 1920.
Acquiring the official permit was not an obvious procedure (Ayalon, 1995, p. 42–43). In the period which saw the growth of both colonial penetration and Egyptian nationalism, intellectuals issued clandestine periodicals, such as Al-Tankīt wa’l-tabkīt, launched in Alexandria by ‘Abdallah al-Nadim in June 1881.

Cf. Al-Ahrām, 20 November 1920.

Cf. Al-Ahrām, 25 November 1920.

Cf. Al-Ahrām, 19 November; 20 November 2020.

Cf. Al-Ahrām, 25 November 2020.

Cf. Al-Ahrām, 18 November 2020.

Cf. Al-Ahrām, 22 November 2020.

Cf. Al-Ahrām, 25 November 1920.

Cf. Al-Ahrām, 20 November 1920.

Cf. Al-Ahrām, 1 December 1920.

Cf. Al-Ahrām, 20 November; 22 November 1920.

Cf. Al-Ahrām, 18 November 2020.

Cf. Al-Ahrām, 25 November 1920.

Cf. Al-Ahrām, 20 November 1920.

Cf. Al-Ahrām, 25 November 1920.

Cf. Al-Ahrām, 22 November 1920.

Cf. Al-Ahrām, 25 November 1920.

Cf. Al-Ahrām, 1 December 1920.

Cf. Al-Ahrām, 20 November; 22 November 1920.

Cf. Al-Ahrām, 19 November; 20 November 2020.

Cf. Al-Ahrām, 25 November 2020.

Cf. Al-Ahrām, 18 November 2020.

Cf. Al-Ahrām, 25 November 1920.

Cf. Al-Ahrām, 18 November 2020.

I took the expression "national purity" and "local flexibility" from Hanan Hammad (2011).

Al-Ahrām mentions its agents (wukalā‘) in its very first issue on 5 August 1876. Over the time, they are encouraged not to be lax in sending reports of the events that take place in their vicinity. On the agents, cf. also Ayalon, 2016: pp. 123-153.

Cf. for Tanta: Al-Ahrām, 20 November; 30 November; 1 December 1920; for Alexandria: Al-Ahrām, 26 November; 1 December 1920.

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