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ARTISTS, AESTHETICS, AND ARTWORKS
FROM, AND IN CONVERSATION WITH, JAPAN
PART 2

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ISSUE 9 – AUTUMN 2020

MUTUAL IMAGES

A TRANSCULTURAL RESEARCH JOURNAL

FOUNDED BY

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ARTISTS, AESTHETICS, AND ARTWORKS
FROM, AND IN CONVERSATION WITH, JAPAN
PART 2

EDITED BY
MARCO PELLITTERI & JOSÉ ANDRÉS SANTIAGO IGLESIAS

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MUTUAL IMAGES

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Influence and success of the Arabic edition of *UFO Robo Grendizer*: Adoption of a Japanese icon in the Arabic-speaking world

Karim EL MUFTI | Saint Joseph University of Beirut, Lebanon

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ABSTRACT

UFO Robo Grendizer, a Japanese anime character produced in 1975, was immensely popular in Arab countries. Adapted into Arabic in Lebanon as it was enduring a devastating civil war, the program was broadcasted in 1979, then during the 1980s across many Arab audiences (mainly Syria, Jordan, Egypt and the Gulf). The cartoon's narrative of alien invasion and heroic resistance, using cutting-edge technology in the form of Grendizer the super-robot, mirrored the harsh reality of war and occupation that so many Arab populations endured during the same period. This paper aims at uncovering why Grendizer struck such a profound echo in the minds and hearts of the generation of children who found in the character a super hero figure as an escape route to their world's problems. It will also address the impact of this Japanese cultural reference onto Arabic audiences and highlight how the cartoon came to be domesticated for an Arab context, thus leaving its original universe and encompass the mindset, reflections and expectations of many Arab generations.

KEYWORDS

Grendizer; Anime; Japan; Lebanon; Palestine; Occupation; Peace; Resistance.

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1. Introduction

UFO Robo Grendizer is a Japanese anime series for television, produced in 1975 by the Tōei Dōga studios, with the creative contribution of Nagai Gō (born in 1945), who would reuse the character in various manga instalments (Pellitteri and Giacomantonio, 2017). This cartoon series came after the Tōei Dōga, interconnected science-fiction sagas *Mazinger Z* and *Great Mazinger*, and runs over 74 episodes. But only *UFO Robo Grendizer* would be met with gigantic success in the Arab world, as it was in Italy and France. Adapted and re-voiced in Lebanon by the Arts Federation (*Al Ittihad Al Fanni*], *UFO: Moughamarat Al Fada* ('*UFO: Space Adventures*', the title of the cartoon in Arabic) was first aired by Télé Liban in 1979, as war, invasions, and occupations were raging through the country and the region.

No one had anticipated such fascination with the show in Arab societies. Nagai Gō, often considered in the Arab world as the creator of the anime even though he is only the holder of the franchise through an arrangement with the animation studio, had not realised this success among Arab audiences before 2008. When he did, he requested from the Japanese Embassy in France to organise a visit to some Arabic-speaking countries, which he conducted in 2009, travelling to Jordan, Kuwait, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates (namely, Dubai) (Daily News Egypt, 2009).

Even Lebanese artists involved in the adaptation and localisation in Arabic were impressed with such captivation. Voice actor Jihad El Atrash (born in 1943) and singer of the opening and closing credits, Sammy Clark (born Hobeika), both prominent stars of the Arab edition of *UFO Robo Grendizer*, did not expect for the cartoon to gain such popularity. As put by journalist Hala Tashkandi, “*Grendizer* memorabilia still sell like hot cakes in the region, and its popularity has barely declined” (Tashkandi, 2019). The attraction to the Arabic version of the show can be measured on YouTube, where dubbed episodes amass millions of views. The videos from the opening theme by Sammy Clark also generate massive viewership on video sharing platforms. El Atrash, who gave his voice to the anime series’s hero Daisuke/Dayski¹ (Duke Fried/Doq Flead, *UFO Robo Grendizer’s* pilot), characterised the show as “anticipating our modern times” (Abbas: 2005). From a technological standpoint, he stressed on how “huge efforts were put in the production phase with limited means and resources” (Abbas, 2005), as the adaptation of this anime continues to be celebrated as a tribute to the Arabic language and culture.

Looking into the *UFO Robo Grendizer* phenomenon in the Arab world isn’t quite novel, as abundant media resources (press and television) have routinely covered the extent of this anime’s success as TV show in the region, namely Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Gulf States (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates). In addition to extensive media celebrations of involved artists, which will be used as a reference in this article, *Grendizer’s* fame escaped the narrowness of television to become an Arab cultural reference, speaking for the underdogs and denouncing oppression.

The main innovation of the present research is to introduce a sociological perspective behind what is recognised today as an Arab pop icon, given how little was actually written from the vantage point of this anime’s influence in the Arab world. As such, this essay will

¹ For the purpose of this article, the names of the cartoon’s characters will first be rendered in both the Japanese and Arabic versions, before being referred to in their Arabic names.

heavily rely on the extensive media sources that had given voice to those most active in commenting the Arab adaptation of this anime, whether from contributors to the production works or external commentators, in addition to the review of all 74 episodes of the series in Arabic.

This calls for a first round of limitations, as this article has not resorted to written and formal documentation relevant to the cartoon production (television archives, for instance). The research gathered analytical content from the anime's Arab script as developed by Lebanese and Palestinian producers and actors, sociological literature on the regional historical, geopolitical and social context, technical information from relevant broadcast online sources, in addition to different testimonies and analysis from multiple supports (television shows, documentaries, cultural events, festivals, press) from the past 15 years, namely between February 2005 and May 2020.

The article shall look into two essential questions when observing a Japanese cultural influence onto the chaotic Arab scene, one being how the cartoon *Grendizer* came to be purchased and adapted into Arabic in Lebanon and what were the success factors for the show to be much praised by Arab audiences. Then, the analysis will try to uncover, in a sociological perspective, why it became this contemporary "legend" and cultural icon in the Middle East, which influence escaped the Japanese original cultural set to encompass the reflections, dreams, and expectations of a cross-generational viewership, as the tale, characters, symbols, and values carried by the anime quickly enrooted in the Arab psyche.

As such, the story is pretty straight forward. El Atrash describes it as "the traditional battle between Good and Evil" (Future TV, 2018b), with each episode unfolding a perfectly sequenced plot: Duke Fried, Prince of Fried (in Arabic: Doq Fleed), arrived on Earth on board of a flying saucer carrying a giant super robot named Grendizer, after the aggressive and violent Forces of Vega ravaged his planet (Fried; in Arabic, Fleed). From his new home, he and his Earthling comrades shall quash the new invasion plans of the Armies of Vega to control the Earth and its resources.

The specific context of the Middle East is here key to grasp the cultural resonation of a cartoon about alien invasions against one's homeland. For adults living in the Middle East and their children in the 1970's, the anime story is closely connected with

the historical occurrence of the “*Nakba*”.² Between 1948 and 1973, Arab armies were defeated by Israel in different wars and battles trying to free Palestine from what was considered a foreign occupation. Israel actually succeeded in occupying further land from neighbouring countries, whether the Egyptian Sinai (1967-1978), Gaza (1967-2005), Southern Lebanon (1978-2000), the Syrian Golan, East Jerusalem and large parts of the West Bank (still occupied until this day).

From their side, Arab children came to deeply identify with the cartoon, its plot, the invasion of Earth, the gigantic battles and the superhero characters in *UFO Robo Grendizer*, whom they were looking up to in their daily ordeal as they could feel and observe how the adult generation was struggling to uphold the different Arab causes. And yet the cultural factors that influenced the original anime were very different. Nagai Gō is the only known contributor to the show among Arab audiences, even though, as said before, he is not the actual sole creator of *Grendizer*, which originates within the animation studio Tōei Dōga. Nonetheless, Nagai played an important creative role in suggesting several narrative elements. He was born the month after the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and grew up in Japan immediately after World War II. In an interview to *Egypt Today*, he specifies:

the reason why I depict the effects of war in my comics is because I strongly believe that a person should learn from childhood how war can be destructive and how much people and societies may suffer from it, just the same way I learned it from the stories of adults around me when I was a little child. (*Egypt Today*, 2009).

In the same way, the message carried by the cartoon against war and destruction found its way into the Arab context, offering an imaginary hero to those plunged in the daily ordeal of conflict. In that, the Arab adaptation of *UFO Robo Grendizer* somehow dispossessed the origins of the Japanese context inspired by the country’s war and history (such as considering planets Earth and Fried as representations of the contemporary Japanese and American alliance, as suggested in Pellitteri, 2009), to anchor it into the realm of more contemporary sufferings, such as the occupation of Palestine by Israel and the wars in Lebanon.

² *Nakba* means “disaster” in Arabic and refers to the military defeat of Arab armies against Israel and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians in the aftermath of the first Arab-Israeli war of 1948.

2. Factors of success for the “Arab Grendizer”

2.1. From a business transaction to a cultural myth

Following the success of the *Arabian Nights: Sindbad's Adventures* anime film (*Arabian Naito: Shindobatto no Bōken*, 1975) adapted to Arabic in 1976, Arab producers searching for animated cartoons at a low cost looked through the International Market of Television Programmes (*Miptv*), the “one and only market that is dedicated to Content Development & Distribution for Drama Series (Original and Scripted Formats), Kids Content (Animation & Live Action), Documentaries and Formats (Scripted & Non Scripted)”. At that time, it was considered as one of the greatest annual trade settings, held in the French town of Cannes.

It was Nicolas Abu Samah (1939-2016), a Lebanese director and actor, who brought *Sindbad* to the Arab World. Graduate of the Higher Institute for Cinema in Paris, he worked at Levant Tv³ in Lebanon, where TV production was much more advanced compared with the rest of Middle Eastern countries (Encyclopedia.com, 2020). Abu Samah had established his company Filmali in the late 1970s as the first dubbing company in the Middle East (Khoder, 2020), which dubbed films and series into Arabic, such as *Sindbad* (1976), *Jazirat Al Kanz* (“Treasure Island”, 1983, or *Takarajima* in the original Japanese version, 1978) and *Al Sanafer* (*The Smurfs*, 1981).

As pointed out by Wiam El Seaidi, director and later co-founder of Future TV in Lebanon in the beginning of the 1990s, “Nicolas Abu Samah was a real merchant: he brought *Sindbad* to Lebanon; hundreds of series were adapted thanks to him. He started this trend in the country” (Future Tv, 2018a). Later on, “many producers came to be interested in the foreign cartoon business, such as Wissam Ezzeddine, who is the main producer [of *UFO Robo Grendizer*], while also being among the founders of Télé Liban” (Future Tv, 2018a). The move was full of risk and challenges. If *Sindbad* appeared rather safe to spark interest among the Middle-Eastern audience given the corresponding features, importing different anime such as *UFO Robo Grendizer* wasn’t an obvious business transaction.

Producer Wissam Ezzeddine (passed away 2002, aged 73) jumped the gun and tried to reproduce Abu Samah’s success with new products coming from the Japanese field (Future Tv, 2018a). Ezzeddine was, back then, a close partner of businessman and billionaire Rafic Hariri (future Prime minister after the war and assassinated in February 2005). He was behind the first television channel in Arabic in Lebanon, Télé Liban, which

³ Levant Tv (*Telvizion Lubnan Wal Mashreq*) was established in 1961 and merged in 1977 with Télé Liban, the first TV channel in Lebanon, founded in 1956.

came to gain great experience in producing and distributing cultural programs and series in Lebanon in the 1970s, most of which could then be exported to the entire Arab region.

Classical Arabic, also known as Literacy Arabic, was the main language conveyor for the different shows produced, including foreign cartoons. Its uniformity throughout Arab countries comes from its Quranic origin, whose rhetoric can be very distinct from national Arabic dialects, shaped in mainly spoken forms. In that sense, the programs in Literacy Arabic could be understood, hence purchased, in the larger Arab markets throughout the region. As actor Jihad El Atrash recalls:

back then, there were only public and governmental [television] channels. Télé Liban was the main provider of cultural content on television, with documentaries, cultural shows, family series and educational programs, either directly in Arabic or dubbed into Arabic. And I had the great privilege of participating in this great work. Programs were exported from Télé Liban all the way to the Gulf countries [namely Kuwait, United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia] and their television channels. (Al Kout Tv, 2016)

In 1978, Ezzeddine takes hold of the *UFO Robo Grendizer* anime at the *Miptv*, inspired by its great success in France and Italy during the same year and sets to adapt it into Arabic, probably attracted by the alien invasion story, which resonated so closely with his own country, Lebanon. Back then, the dubbing production was still in its early stages and such technology was mainly being used for cinema, radio shows and television documentaries. To succeed in adapting *UFO Robo Grendizer* to an Arabic audience, Wissam Ezzeddine partnered with two important stakeholders of the cultural scene in Lebanon in that period.

First, the Arts Federation (*Al Ittihad Al Fanni*), a Palestinian-owned production group that specialised in Arabic adaptation of cultural programs. The group was commissioned to translate the anime's transcript from English into Arabic, based on Wiam El Seaidi's testimony stating that the scripts acquired for the anime were in English (Future Tv, 2018a), before proceeding with the dubbing process. The Arts Federation, which is mentioned in the series' opening credits, was owned by what the milieu called "the three knights" (*Al Fursan El Thalatha*), i.e. Palestinian artists Abdel Majid Abou Laban, Sobhi Abou Loghd, and Ghanem El Dejjani. They were the ones who gathered the greatest radio hosts and speakers back to adapt the show into Arabic, including themselves, as Loghd and Dejjani had endorsed for each of them a dubbing role in *UFO Robo Grendizer*. The first played evil characters Blaki (Blaki in the original

series) and Minister Zoril (Zouril in the original version) and the second the benevolent Dr Amoon (Umon in the original series), the director of the research centre and adoptive father of the hero figure Dayski/Doq Fleed, though not mentioned in the opening credits (see table 1 below).

Table 1 – List of Non-credited Voice Actors in *UFO Robo Grendizer's* Arabic Adaptation

ARABIC VOICE ACTOR	CHARACTER NAME IN ARABIC (TRANSCRIBED)	CHARACTER NAMES IN JAPANESE (TRANSCRIBED)
Sobhi Abou Loghd	Blaki Al Wazir Zoril	Blaki Zouril
Ghanem El Dejjani	Doctor Amoon	Shiyochiyo Genzo Umon

As a second step, Ezzeddine also relied on notorious director Wiam El Seaidi⁴ (born 1931), who had already worked on the *Sindbad* adaptation. As of 1978, the consortium started the adaptation of *UFO Robo Grendizer* and had recruited a number of dubbing artists, whose names appear in the opening credits of the show (see table 2), for a first season, namely the episodes from 1 to 26.

Table 2 – List of Voice Actors in *UFO Robo Grendizer's* Arabic Adaptation (by order of appearance in Season 1's opening credits)

ARABIC VOICE ACTOR	CHARACTER NAME IN ARABIC	CHARACTER NAMES (ORIGINAL JAPANESE)
Jihad El Atrache	Daisky Amoon Doq Fleed	Umon Daisuke Duke Fried
Abdallah Haddad	Kouji Kabuto	Kabuto Kōji
Aida Hilal	Al Sayyeda Gandal Nayda	Lady Gandal Naïda
Salah Mokhallalati	Vega Al Kabir	Vega Kyōsei Daiho
Nazih Qattan	Al Qa'id Gandal	Gandal
Nawal Hijazi	Hikaro Makiba	Makiba Hikaru
Marwan Haddad	Dambi Makiba	Makiba Danbei
Rima Salameh	Goro Makiba	Makiba Goro
Mohamad Hijazi	Al Qa'id Harok	Haruk [episode 29]
Ali Safa	Hayashi	Hayashi
Mohamad Haidar	Al Qa'id Yara	Lara [episode 15]

⁴ Who will later co-found aforementioned Future Tv, owned by former prime minister Rafic Hariri.

The initial broadcast started at the end of 1978 and beginning of 1979 on the Lebanese channel Télé Liban, before it was exported to the rest of the Arab world starting 1980. The immediate success of the show prompted the development of what is considered the second “season” of the show (episodes 27 to 74), with some slight changes in the dubbing artists and the joining of artists Omar El Chamamah, Sobhi Eit, and Sawsan Birkedar, who excelled, alongside veterans Jihad El Atrash, Abdallah Haddad, and Nawal Hijazi, in rendering the show’s depth and emotions to iconic levels (see table 3).

**Table 3 – List of Voice Actors in *UFO Robo Grendizer’s* Arabic Adaptation
(by order of appearance in Season’s 2 opening credits)**

ARABIC VOICE ACTOR	CHARACTER NAME IN ARABIC (TRANSCRIBED)	CHARACTER NAMES IN JAPANESE (TRANSCRIBED)
Jihad El Atrache	Daisy Amoon	Umon Daisuke
	Doq Fleed	Duke Fried
Abdallah Haddad	Kouji Kabuto	Kabuto Kōji
Marwan Haddad	Dambi Makiba	Makiba Danbei
Nawal Hijazi	Hikaro Makiba	Makiba Hikaru
Sobhi Eit	Vega Al Kabir	Vega Kyōsei Daiho
Omar El Chamamah	Al Qa’id Gandal	Gandal
	Ken	Ken [episode 68]
Rima Salameh-Haddad	Goro Makiba	Goro Makiba
	Roubina	Rubina
Sawsan Birkedar	Al Sayyeda Gandal	Lady Gandal
	Maria Fleed	Grace Maria Fried
Ismail Nahnouh	Boss	Boss
	Al Qa’id Boz	Ergos [episode 34]
Mohamad Hijazi	Secondary characters	N/A
Mohamad Haidar	Secondary characters	N/A
Riyad Yazbek	Al Wazir Dantos	Dantos
	Zoril Al Ibn	Zouril Ziya

Many of these artists, despite being very experienced in their different lines of work, whether in radio shows, theatre, or even cinema, were new to the voice-acting business, since there was little experience in Lebanon except for *Sindbad*, in which most of *UFO Robo Grendizer’s* voice actors were not associated. For instance, Hikaro’s voice (Hikaru in the Japanese version) was handed over to Nawal Hijazi, a first timer in dubbing,

discovered by Sobhi Abou Loghd. Lebanese artist Omar Chammah joined in the second season of the cartoon, passing from comedy roles for children to personifying the evil and iconic voice of Gandal, one of Vega's top lieutenants (Erhad Channel, 2017). Jihad El Atrach was recruited by Abdel Majeed Abou Laban for the role of the hero Dayski, who reveals himself as Doq Flead (the Prince of Fried) to fly the giant mechanical warrior/armour *Grendizer* against the invasion of Vega's armies. The late Aida Hilal (1925-1987), a very famous Egyptian actress who had performed in the well-known Lebanese motion picture movie *Mary the Sinner* in 1966, was also invited to the crew of the first season. Another important name was added to the list during the production phase: the collaboration with the famous singer Sammy Clark (Khalaf, 2017), who was chosen to be the lead performer for the credits songs (opening and closing). His fame grew even larger with his interpretation of the *UFO Robo Grendizer* lyrics, as he continues to perform the anime's songs, joining in celebrity the original performer Sasaki Isao in Japan.

The production team faced many challenges from a technical perspective, as the dubbing business was still in its early stages in Lebanon. Because of technological limitations, the voice-over technique involved the presence of all actors relevant to the same segment in the studio at the same time. Any mistake, mispronunciation, or slip-up by any of the voice actors would mean having to record the entire segment from the top once again. There was no computer or electronic assistance possible back then. Due to absences, sometimes because of shelling or security incidents in Beirut around the studio's neighbourhood, voice actors would be eventually replaced in a particular episode in order not to waste time in the production phase. This occurs in many segments for the characters of Vega, Gandal or Lady Gandal, for instance, whose voices vary in some episodes. In the early episodes, the voice-overs of the dubbing lack precision and accuracy and some clumsiness can be observed in a few dialogues and situations, before stronger consistency was observed over the course of the second season, as the producers noticed the huge success of the series.

Despite the shortcomings and the challenges of the production works, the show turned out to be a state-of-the-art adaptation, be it for the precision of the language conversion and the proficiency of the actors playing their characters.

2.2. A state-of-the-art “Arab” cartoon:

High proficiency of the adaptation into Arabic

According to El Atrash, “*Grendizer’s* creator [wrongfully referring to Nagai Gō in that capacity] told me personally that the Lebanese version of *Grendizer* is much better than the original Japanese version and the other dubbed versions” (KaizuLand, 2012). The dubbing work was actually taken very seriously by the producers and professional artists who joined the show. Director Wiam El Seaidi pointed to the fact that “Lebanese actors had this great ability of living the role. Other voice actors in other Arab countries tried to replicate our work but never succeeded. They were real actors playing their role fully” (Future Tv, 2018a). This, noticeably, stands among the success factors of the anime with the Lebanese audience, followed by the Arab viewership.

The high proficiency of the language conversion from English into Arabic is linked to the significant engagement of the Arts Federation, which managed the difficult tasks of translating the cartoon, matchmaking the characters and the artists’ voices and recording the dubbing of the original show in Arabic. As a result, the cartoon played a role in spreading what was considered as the “correct Arabic language” to the Arab audience throughout the region, according to journalist Faysal Abbas (Abbas, 2005). Ten years later, journalist Ahmad Adnan highlighted that “the level of the Arabic language in *Grendizer* is spot on and of high calibre, which provided richness to the cartoon series in that period, whereas we lack such proficiency today” (Adnan, 2015). According to Lebanese TV host Zaven Kouyoumdjian, the cartoon “helped bring the children of the Arab world closer to the classical Arabic language and helped them master it” (Future TV, 2018b). In multiple occasions, El Atrash expresses how very proud he is for his contribution to the educational purpose of the cartoon within Arab societies:

The *Grendizer* series was a great work in the Japanese cultural world, which was transmitted to us so that we could translate it into a well suited language to a very high degree. Both the language and the emotions were well framed, as well as the principles of fighting for the good against oppression, the enemy, and evil. These are values that we must root in the minds of children and citizens to make them human beings committed to their homeland, culture and values [...]. In addition to the entertainment and cultural aspects of the cartoon, it disseminated the beauty of the Arabic language, which could be engaged in by children and adolescents because it was used in an attractive and captivating way, while remaining fun. (Saudi Television Cultural Channel, 2015)

One example can be given in regards to the sophisticated resort to the Arabic lexicon in the very first episode:⁵ after Dayski uncovers the imminent attack of the Vega forces, he runs in the fields, shouting: “I refuse to accept this”. The Arabic adaptation used the expression “Arfoudou an Artadiya Hadha”, from the verb “Irtada” (‘to choose, embrace’), whereas much simpler linguistic formulas exist at the children level. We can present another example using a segment in episode 2,⁶ where Dr Amoon narrates to Kouji Kabuto the secret story of his adopted son Dayski, revealing that he is in fact the Prince of the planet Flead (Fried in Japanese). In Arabic, the performance of Palestinian producer Ghanem El Dejjani is outstanding and carries the *gravitas* of the tragedy, helped by the remarkably elaborated level of Arabic’s lexicon (for a children’s cartoon). The dubbing performance, in line with the tradition of the Arab *hakawati*,⁷ accentuates the rendering of the tragedy and accelerates the assimilation of the story by the audience, while projecting a colossal load of empathy to the plot (Alameddine, 2008).

The audience will further identify with the cartoon’s hero correlating his narrative line and role with the context of a tragic period during which the anime was initially broadcast. As the people of Lebanon were going through a destructive civil war, children watching the show would look up to a hero figure that had the power of restoring peace and justice onto his, and figuratively, their, shattered world.

3. Contextualising the arrival of *UFO Robo Grendizer* in 1978 Lebanon:

Real and imaginary wars and invasions

“*Grendizer* was very much appreciated in the region because it was a very credible program. It resonated so deeply with the context of the region”, said El Atrash in a 2016 television interview (MTV Lebanon, 2016). A decade earlier, the show’s star had pointed to the “context of the broadcast of the program, as we were enduring a war back then and the entire Arab world was suffering from the occupation of Palestinian territories. And suddenly comes along *Grendizer* and the values he represents relevant to peace seeking, the defence of one’s nation, and the resistance facing one’s enemies” (Abbas, 2005).

⁵ Episode 1, *Kouji Kabuto and Doq Flead* (same title for both Japanese and Arabic editions)

⁶ Episode 2, title in Japanese ‘Ah! My Land That Was So Green’; title in Arabic: *Ô Green Earth*.

⁷ The *hakawati* or storyteller derived from the Arabic word *hekaya* and literally means the one who tells stories. A *hakawati* is a teller of tales, myths and fables, a storyteller, an entertainer. In the old days, villages had their own *hakawatis*, but the great ones left their homes and travelled around the country to earn their living.

At the time this animation was broadcast in Lebanon before being exported to other Middle Eastern countries, Lebanon is in the middle of a bloody civil war. The conflict roots in how political forces consider the country's geopolitical role, whether it should support the Palestinian armed resistance⁸ standing up against Israel or maintaining Lebanon away from the Israeli-Arab conflict.⁹ As there is no formal history book in Lebanon covering this bloody period, each camp continues to cultivate and transmit its own narrative as representing the most patriotic and nationalist stand.

The Palestinian presence in Lebanon resulted from the Israeli occupation of Palestine (Morris, 1994) from both wars of 1948 (what Arabs call the *Nakba*; Barthe, 2018) and 1967, which is referred to in Arab culture as the *Naksa*¹⁰ (Nuseiba, 2017; Tahhan, 2018), and which both led to large displacements of populations, with Palestinian refugees ending up fleeing to neighbouring countries. The Israeli attack of June 1967 added up to the humiliation of the Arab armies, which lost the Syrian Golan, the Egyptian Sinai, East Jerusalem, Gaza, and the West Bank in just six days (Cypel, 2017). The Palestinian armed factions would later be expelled from Jordan during the Black September attack in 1970, leading most of the Palestinian paramilitary to relocate in Lebanon. From there, the Palestinian and pro-Palestinian groups intensified their attacks against Israeli-occupied territories, raising armed resistance as a strategy to demand Israel to withdraw from the occupied territories (UN Security Council Resolution 242, 1967)¹¹ and recognise the right to return¹² for all the refugees who were expelled by the several waves of conflict. Thus, Lebanon was ideally located and politically riped for a proxy war with Israel, fuelling a deep cleavage as to the Palestinian presence and action (Picard, 1988), in a context of heavy regional interference. Militiae eventually took the streets, defending each camp, and hell broke loose in Lebanon for 15 long years (Picard, 1988; Kassir, 1994), with its indiscriminate shelling, massacres of entire neighbourhoods or villages, ethnic cleansing, car bombs, and kidnappings (Ictj, 2013).

⁸ Present on Lebanese soil under the umbrella of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO), to which the 1969 Cairo Agreement granted the right to pursue armed struggle against Israel. The PLO was supported by Lebanese and Palestinian leftist, communist, Marxist, progressive, and pan-Arab formations, with the financial support of various Arab countries.

⁹ The position of mainly right-wing Christian formations, like the Kataeb/Phalanges Party and the National Liberal Party.

¹⁰ *Naksa* means 'setback' in Arabic and refers to the Arab defeat of the 1967 Six-Day War against Israel.

¹¹ UN Security Council Resolution 242, S/RES/242, 22 November 1967, expressed the "inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war" and demanded the "withdrawal of Israel's armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict" (Point 1§i).

¹² This right was enshrined in UN General Assembly Resolution 194, A/RES/194 (III), 11 December 1948.

In June 1982, in the middle of the Lebanese civil war, the Israeli army invaded Lebanon and reached Beirut, the capital, in a matter of days, aiming at weakening the Palestinian resistance and expelling the armed factions outside the country to take out the military threat from its northern border. The Palestinian *force de frappe* would eventually relocate to Tunis, but new local and regional paramilitary actors stepped in, such as Hizbullah, which formed in 1985 (Saad-Ghorayeb, 2002; Norton, 2007), keeping the idea of military resistance very much alive for the next decades.

The Israelis eventually withdrew from Beirut a few months later, but kept a strip in Southern Lebanon under occupation as a buffer zone (10% of the Lebanese territory) to protect northern settlements in Israel from attacks. The invasion was very destructive, with massive violations of international humanitarian law and the occurrence of war crimes and crimes against humanity, not to forget torture acts, inhuman and degrading treatments in the occupied territory, namely in the well known Khiam prison (Bechara, 2003) operated by Lebanese collaborators, under Israeli supervision. Israel would withdraw from Southern Lebanon in May 2000, maintaining an armed presence in some southern pockets claimed by the Lebanese authorities as falling under its sovereignty.

3.1. Embracing resistance

This rough history fostered and rooted the concept of armed resistance within the Lebanese and Palestinian psyche, in addition to other Arab societies sympathising with the cause in defending one's homeland against an armed invasion. In a 2018 interview, El Atrash stresses how his "generation inside universities was the generation of the *Nakba*. We were demonstrating and expressing our Arab nationalist views back then [...] For us, the *Nakba* of [the planet] Flead was itself the *Nakba* of Palestine" (Future Tv, 2018b). In this very particular landscape, the atomic mushrooms drawn by the artists of Tōei Dōga in *UFO Robo Grendizer* anime have a very different signification for Arab producers and artists, who incidentally conveyed it to the Arab audiences watching the show, thus embracing a particular sense of identification and appropriation.

The makers of the Arabic version of *UFO Robo Grendizer* clearly refer to the influence of this tragic local and regional context in how they proceeded to the conversion of the anime, thus actively participating in the identification process with the hero alien/robot and his fellow allies ready to sacrifice their lives to save Earth. While addressing *Grendizer* devotees in 2012, El Atrash remembers:

there was real work to adapt the content as well as the dubbing techniques as much as the prevailing conditions back then would allow us to do so. When we started dubbing *Grendizer*, Lebanon was in a civil war and we were very socially affected by this situation, just as we were affected by what was happening in other Arab societies such as Palestine. This impacted our work by which we sought the use of the right linguistic expressions [...] that characterized our daily lives and experience in a time of great suffering for the Lebanese society and its immediate surroundings (*True Gaming, 2012a*).

Speaking with an audience of *aficionados*, also in 2012, the artist explained how

at that time, Lebanon was undergoing a devastating civil war. And we were all in solidarity with our homeland that was bleeding and torn apart [...]. We were worried for our country and grateful to whoever would come to our rescue to try to stop this destructive conflict. Thus, my interpretation of *Grendizer* stemmed from my true love for my homeland and for my country, where I lived, thus projecting myself into the situation of Doq Flead who had just lost his homeland by an invasion from space (*KaizuLand, 2012*).

As such, El Atrash considers that “the story of *Grendizer* resembles our story” (MTV Lebanon, 2016). On a related note, performer Sammy Clark considers in a 2018 interview that this anime carries a “message”. “In that period”, he said, “the world was crumbling, people were living through periods of wars, and they needed a hero”, who eventually appeared to “express our rage in that particular context and to give us a glimpse of hope” (Future Tv, 2018c).

Hence, for a significant part of the Lebanese and Palestinian cultures,

Grendizer represented the struggle of the Arab people against colonialism and aggression, [as] the persons behind the Arabic text [of the anime] come from a background of those who fought for the independence and sovereignty of their homeland. Most of the Arab world was going through difficult circumstances. There were strong colonial powers that were eager to control the region [...] before it was met with revolutions and uprisings. So *Grendizer* became an integral part of this history and this heritage. The persons who fine-tuned the main lines of the story were aware that there is nothing more valuable to the heart of man than his homeland, his independence, and his freedom. Even as [part of] the story takes place in outer space, I still feel that the outer space in the cartoon has become part of our homeland [...] as you thrive to defend it and prevent it from being conquered by the enemy, either real or imaginary (*As Sabah Newspaper, 2013*).

For El Atrash, this cartoon is

a phenomenon that affects all generations and all social classes [...], who have identified

with *Grendizer* because its character represents the human condition in all of its aspects, and it is something really important. Doq Fleed and Dayski: they are us; people seeking freedom, people set on protecting their homeland and building their society” (*True Gaming*, 2012a).

3.2. Embracing sacrifice

This urge can come at a high cost, as the anime series doesn’t shy away from the idea of sacrifice in the realm of duty and war. In episode 49,¹³ Doq Fleed reunites with his sister Maria [Grace Maria in the original version] who, like him, survived the Vega attacks and ended up on Earth. A flashback takes the viewers back to the moment when Doq Fleed decides, in a split of a second, to abandon his sister calling for his help, as he rushes away planning to seize the super robot *Grendizer* from the hands of the Evil Vega, to prevent further destruction through this ultimate machine.

It is interesting to note an important amendment in the French version from the original version, in which Doq Fleed asks Maria forgiveness before running off. In the French version, the producers felt this act needed justification, as *le Prince d’Euphor* asks Maria (Phénicia in the French version) to “stay with the preceptor”. This posture of the French version radically downplays the sacrificial aspect of the situation, displaying a reassured hero who feels his sister is already in good hands and can focus on getting back into the ring of fire. In the Arabic version, Doq Fleed just utters the name “*Grendizer*”, concentrating all his energy, focus and intent on getting the robot, even if it means losing his sister, who’s just meters away.

In many of the anime’s episodes, the notion of self-sacrifice is invoked, whether the act is actually carried through or not. In episode 73,¹⁴ Doq Fleed decides to engage in a final battle alone after his comrades discovered where the Vega headquarters are located, in order to avoid putting his friends’ lives at risk. As he flies away from Earth, he enounces a poetic testimony praising the planet and his adoptive father: “the only way to thank you is to offer my life to this Earth”, announces Doq Fleed to his inner self.¹⁵ His self-sacrificial plan is ruined by Kouji Kabuto, who catches up with him, forcing him back to base, so they can plan the final attack “all together”.

¹³ Episode 49, titled in both Japanese and Arabic editions ‘I saw my brother in the red sunset’.

¹⁴ Episode 73, title of the episode in the Japanese edition: ‘In the name of the beautiful Earth’; title in Arabic: ‘Grateful to this wonderful Earth’.

¹⁵ Episode 73, at 18’29”.

The most poignant act of sacrifice of the series is Doq Fleed's former fiancée, Roubina, daughter of evil King Vega. Roubina discovers that Doq Fleed is still alive and joins him towards the end of the series, to take him back to his planet and fulfil a promise of peace. The happy ending does not occur; she is killed by Minister Zoril, as she was protecting Doq Fleed, dying in his arms.¹⁶

3.3. Embracing—not so imaginary—emotions

UFO Robo Grendizer series plays out the strong side of emotions, specifically in its Arabic adaptation, striking considerations related to real life for the generations watching it back then, such as the fear of occupation, the sense of loss, the mourning of parents and loved ones, the state of exile, etc. The Lebanese and Palestinian voice actors were successful in expressing the entire range of sentiments carried by the series. They were “sincere”, notes El Atrash in a 2012 interview (*True Gaming*, 2012a). Hence the show “entered the hearts of people”: “through *Grendizer*, everyone sides with the Good versus combating Evil”. For El Atrash, “our war memories remind us of the stubbornness of the Lebanese spirit, who never surrendered in the past and shall never surrender in the future” (Al Kout Tv, 2016), remembering the ordeal of troubled times.

The attachment to the Grendizer figure is very present in the heart of many Arab societies. In Iraq, a statue of the super robot was erected in Bagdad in 2012: “there is not a single person in Iraq who does not know or love this anime”, said one of the artists who worked on the piece (*True Gaming*, 2012b). Similar testimonies are countless, and can be picked up across the media coverage of cultural events related to the anime universe throughout the Arab world. In Egypt, hundreds of the show's devotees attended in 2009 a gathering at the Cairo Opera House hosting for the first time Nagai Gō, while many were disappointed not to have been able to get in (Charbel, 2010). Interviewed by *Egypt Independent* newspaper, a 24-year-old fan, Alaa Eddin Abdallah, said: “My favourite [cartoon character] is Grendizer, because he's the most futuristic and powerful, I've been captivated by this cartoon since I was six years old” (Charbel, 2010). For Racha El-Saadaoui, who grew up in Lebanon during the civil war, “Grendizer shaped her entire childhood: ‘It was such a beautiful escape from a horrible childhood in terms of the

¹⁶ Episode 72, at 16'45”, title in the Japanese edition: ‘In the name of the beautiful Earth’; title in Arabic: ‘A citizen from another planet’.

insecurity of the war, and all the things that children don't really understand, but still feel impacted by" (Tashkandi, 2019).

Mirroring the depth of historic tragedies and ongoing slaughters within that specific period, *UFO Robo Grendizer* reflected a set of representations that constructed the image of an iconic, invincible, undefeated and just force, pushing back invaders and evilness. As Arab viewers endured the chronicles of defeat and humiliation in real life, they looked up to Grendizer, this imaginary ally, as they projected onto its fictional universe the antidotes of their frustrations, hopes, and dreams.

4. *Grendizer*, a lost "Arab" hero? Or, the icon defending the underdog

4.1. A figure of Humanity fighting for Peace

Unlike many other (classic) heroes, Dayski/Doq Fleed actually hates war and would rather live in peace caring for cows and horses on the ranch, playing guitar and contemplating his lost planet when looking up at the sky. In the first episode, Dayski is devastated by the news of the Vega Armies reaching his new homeland as he warns those around him that "they" have come to destroy us. He is torn between his urge to live peacefully and the need to resist the incoming invasion. As he realises that there is no other thing to do than unearthing the super robot, Dayski runs off through the fields and laments on his destiny.¹⁷ Despite not being from planet Earth in the formal sense in the anime, Dayski represents all the features and qualities of what a human being can achieve. Peace, tolerance, coexistence, and forgiveness are among the main features carried by the *UFO Robo Grendizer* anime, as the plot unfolds episode after episode. According to journalist Ahmad Adnan, the character of Doq Fleed represents "a unique tribute to humanity. He doesn't end up defending planet Earth from a vengeful perspective despite the killing of his parents by the Vega Armies and the destruction of his planet Fleed [Fried]. Rather, his action is fuelled by the desire of defending the good people of Earth" (Adnan, 2015), whom sheltered him and cared for him after his dramatic escape.

Adapted into Arabic by leftist artistic figures tied together by Arab nationalism and the Palestinian cause, they managed to preserve the anime's original features as an odyssey based on poetry, romance, bravery, courage, and heroism. Yet, *UFO Robo Grendizer* also contains, already in several episodes of the original Japanese version, religious references, namely to God and the Creator. These references, in the Arabic

¹⁷ Episode 1, *op. cit.*, sequence from 11'00" to 12'35".

version, were embraced and culturally readapted on the basis the cultural and religious education and context of the Lebanese and Palestinian figures (Muslim as well as Christian) behind the anime's adaptation. Theist references in the anime—even by Dayski the alien—celebrating the beauty of the universe endowed by the “Creator” were calibrated and aligned with the diversity and the plurality of Middle Eastern societies, home to a large scope of religious and sectarian communities. The fact that the show was adapted into Arabic in Lebanon, land of minorities in the Middle East with 18 communities officially recognised, must have accelerated the consensus-making process in the initial adaptation phases of the cartoon.

The place of religion, however, remains a footnote in the show, which highlighted much more salient features, such as friendship and comradeship. These qualities are celebrated as core values in the battle against the oppressors, starting with the long lasting friendship between Dayski and Kouji, despite rough and bumpy starts.

That said, it is interesting to see how the show introduces some nuances regarding those who side with Good or Evil. In *UFO Robo Grendizer*, the two factions are not hermetically shut from one another. Many Vega commanders are shown as fundamentally good persons and are welcomed benevolently at some point by the defenders of Earth. The tears of Vega's Minister of Science Zoril as he loses his son in battle¹⁸ actually “humanises” the character, as the show insists on the “good” in the universe. In episode 71,¹⁹ Vega Commander Moros from planet Moros turns out to be one of Dayski's best friends during his Fleeed (Fried) era, as Dayski had saved his life during Vega's attack against Planet Moros. Rather than finishing a weakened and wounded Doq Fleeed at the term of the battle, Moros heals him from a past wound and lifts off to blow himself away from Earth in a sacrificial move. Moreover, the rejection of revenge is a constant quality in the acts of Doq Fleeed in the anime. Many Vega commanders are treated as brethren as they are talked out of the absurdity of their actions. Commander Minao is sheltered, treated, and invited to stay at the Ranch for as long as she likes, before Vega general Blaki terminates her for treason.²⁰

If Dayski represents the humane conduct and behaviour, his adoptive father Dr Amoon symbolises Humanity's conscience. Amoon, who runs the space research centre, is a man of science and peace who nearly crumbles to Vega's robots attacks when he is

¹⁸ Episode 69, title in Japanese: ‘Father Offers an Aurora of Love’; title in Arabic: ‘The ordeal of Zoril’.

¹⁹ Episode 71, title in Japanese: ‘Tragedy of Elite Bodyguard Mors’; title in Arabic: ‘Goodbye, dearest of friends’.

²⁰ Episode 9, title in Japanese: ‘Beyond Unforgiven Anger’; title in Arabic: ‘Conquer the forbidden rage’.

reluctant in pressing a switch that would turn his research and scientific centre into a military base to safeguard the world against the invaders' armies: "I don't want the centre to become an instrument of war", laments Dr Amoon before eventually turning on the switch.²¹ Defeating the Vega armies commands that science and technology be developed in order to strike the final blow. For El Atrash, "Grendizer is the ultra-sophisticated robot that managed to escape. This concentration of technology represents the scientific progress, which brings an important dimension to this story" (*KaizuLand*, 2012), to be eventually invested in warfare and armed resistance for survival.

4.2. Armed resistance and restoring balance of power and justice

The centrality of the themes of invasion and external threats in *UFO Robo Grendizer* echoing the reality of the Palestinian and Lebanese ordeal established a mirroring effect, thus durably installing the program in the minds of younger generations watching the show back then. When TV host Zaven Kouyoumdjian asks El Atrash if *Grendizer* represents "an act of resistance", the actor cannot agree more: "there is absolutely no doubt in this, given the period we were living in back then" (Future Tv, 2018b), as the artist is very proud "to have contributed to the attachment of youth towards their homeland and country" (*Cinerama Ifilm*, 2011).

Facing military invasion and the threat to one's homeland, the sense of duty calls to defend it under a universally claimed principle. In the Middle East, this principle has historically taken the charged form of "armed resistance". Whether secular, national, Islamic, or Christian, the emergence of armed *militiae* or armed groups separate from States is a historic constant in contemporary Middle East.

Coming back to the anime, it is very interesting to notice that the main hero (Doq Fleed) and his pals (Kouji, Hikaro, Maria, Dr Amoon) have an unclear status, as viewers could assume that they do not belong to military personnel but form a sort of independent resistance group. In the first episode, as Dayski interprets the Red Moon in the night sky as being a sign of an imminent attack by Vega on Earth, he warns to "alert the armed forces to be ready for the attack" (ep. 1), not feeling initially involved in this fight, as explained in a previous section. The squad initiated at the space centre is actually formed of civilians caught up by war and who use advanced technology to defend their planet against invaders.

²¹ Episode 42, title in Japanese: "Crisis! The Research Institute To The Rescue!"; title in Arabic: "The Space Research Center".

Dayski and Maria are aliens who belonged to a peaceful planet. Kouji is a scientist who manufactured the T-FO, a rudimentary (and initially unarmed) flying saucer, and the son of a renown scientist.²² Hikaro is a farmer and the daughter of the ranch owner Dambi Makiba [Makiba Danbei in the original version], who insisted on stepping into the fight after she was trained to become the pilot of an aerial warcraft (see the next section).

Under a legal terminology, what the French version refers to as “La patrouille des aigles” (‘Squadron of Eagles’, all four heroes with their war aircrafts)²³ would be considered an armed resistance group, siding along the Japanese Armed Forces. They are independent and do not seem to be taking orders from any State or authority. In *UFO Robo Grendizer*, State authorities, the military and formal actors are side tracked and shown powerless facing the ufos and super robots sent to destroy Earth. They are seen in many episodes being wiped away while calling for Grendizer’s help and support. Hence, the anime perfectly mirrors, here again, a familiar situation in the Middle East, where States exist alongside local or regional *militiae* and armed groups that resort to armed violence for a specific cause.

For El Atrash, “Dayski finds on Earth his second home and was ready to sacrifice himself in order to defend it” (*KaizuLand*, 2012), which is aligned with the Lebanese and Palestinian narrative when defending Lebanon from Israel’s military invasions of 1978 and 1982. Before the invasion, Dayski’s real identity is kept secret, as he has settled as a ranchman in Dambi Makiba’s farm. But he is compelled to unearth *Grendizer* in the first episode and returns to his original identity of Doq Fleed, switching from the status of ranch civilian to the one of resistant, as evil super robots start attacking the planet. Hence, it is interesting to observe the relatively quick assimilation of the anime’s storyline into the heavy warring landscape in Lebanon and its surroundings in that particular period. According to El Atrash, Dayski

fled to Earth and meets its inhabitants. He finds important values such as efforts for peace, harmony, prosperity, scientific progress. [...] It is then that the invaders attack the Earth and Grendizer is in a position to defend it across the episodes throughout the different wars between the invaders and the resistance fighters [...]. So, Grendizer represents anyone who loves his homeland, whoever is willing to sacrifice himself for the defence of his nation. (*KaizuLand*, 2012)

²² It is to be added, though, that Kouji Kabuto had already been the hero of *Mazinger Z*, and the pilot of the super robot of this animated series, hence he was already trained to warfare.

²³ The concept was specifically coined for the French version and does not exist in the original Japanese version, nor in the Arabic edition.

In a 2015 interview, El Atrash addresses the issue of violence in emergency situations:

Grendizer was certainly violent, but he instilled the value of citizenship among the viewers, and attachment to homeland, to family. This family around Grendizer was united, its members were working together, resisting together against the enemy and the invader from outer space. It nurtured a very good spirit, a spirit that still continues today. (Saudi Television Cultural Channel, 2015)

Replying to a question on whether *Grendizer* was a show that “incited violence”, El Atrash answered:

on the contrary, Grendizer in fact fought against violence as it defended the Earth from invaders. It’s a show calling for peace. [...] No other cartoon holds so dearly the love of one’s country and homeland and calls for defending it such as *Grendizer*. (Al Arabiya Tv, 2017)

Another idea the show holds dearly is the notion of Justice. Sammy Clark declared in an interview in 2015: “my message through *Grendizer* to the world was to side with the weak” (Ben Rahmoun, 2015). From a military perspective, the disadvantage went clearly to the Palestinian factions and allied *militiae* in the face of Tsahal²⁴ weapons, tanks, and superior aerial firepower. Hence, the military characteristics of *UFO Robo Grendizer* nourished Arab dreams of holding such weaponry to balance the Israeli military superiority in order to restore some justice in the face of the invaders. In a 2018 interview, director Wiam El Seaidi stated: “Back then, one would look for heroes, for heroic acts, the super human, the one who beats up the bad guys. Along came *Grendizer* with this strength. His strength also came from the kids who loved him and loved his strong personality” (Future Tv, 2018a).

The forces of Vega represent the archetype of the peoples’ enemy, the archetype of colonialism seeking to control resources for the continuous expansion of its empire, a narrative that resonates intensively within Arab audiences. Without Grendizer, the peoples of Earth would have been crushed by the military and technological superiority of the Vega armies. In the first episode of the show, general Blaki sneers at the encountered T-FO piloted by Kouji as “an insignificant spacecraft”.²⁵ As the initial Vega attack is fended by Doq Flead who intervenes on board Grendizer, the balance of power is suddenly restored, so that Good can vanquish Evil. Hence, Grendizer’s weapons constitute a decisive factor as armed

²⁴ Tsahal is another denomination for the Israeli Army.

²⁵ Episode 1, *op. cit.*, sequence from 12’50” to 13’00”.

resistance is organised against Vega's offensives. The adaptation of the weapons' names and commands, not just in the Arabic version, greatly participated to the heroic posture of Doq Fleed as "the resistant", while the concept of resistance had come to follow a life of its own in the region. As reflected by TV host Zamen Kouyoumdjian, "this cartoon, which was born but then was forgotten in Japan, actually turned into a legend in the Middle East. Perhaps it is due to the need of this region for superheroes who would keep the bad guys off their land" (Future Tv, 2018c).

In addition to conveying the notions of fear, invasion, armed resistance, and justice, *UFO Robo Grendizer* can also be seen as an agent of modernisation. As the story unfolds and the characters evolve in their respective roles, a gender perspective can be identified at a time when equality between men and women was not a significant priority in the Middle East.

4.3. *Grendizer* as agent of modernisation: Early women's empowerment

The gender balance in the show does not go unnoticed as the strike team from *Grendizer's* side turns out to be formed of half men (Dayski and Kouji) and half women (Hikaro and Maria). The cartoon does not start in this format. The macho face-à-face between Dayski and Kouji in the initial episodes clearly hints at the patriarchal mentality still *en vogue* in the 1970s, not to mention that the scientists in the space research centre (and their director) are all men. Viewers can also remember the multiple times Dayski slapped women, whether a little disoriented girl²⁶ or even his friend Hikaro.²⁷

Maria, the sister of Doq Fleed, doesn't appear before episode 49 of the series, while Hikaro appears at first to viewers as a shy and submissive farm girl, attracted to (alpha male) Dayski (with classic jealousy moments involving Kouji) and obeying her tyrannical father. But as the plot develops, Hikaro's character will increasingly grow. As she enters a state of rebellion, she sets track to becoming a valuable and esteemed addition to the strike team against Vega's armies. "I want my life to have a value" she replies to Dayski when he tries to talk her out of putting herself in harm's way.²⁸ In episode 23, she discovers Dayski's identity as being Doq Fleed, the pilot of *Grendizer* and, a few episodes

²⁶ Episode 12, same title in Japanese and Arabic: 'A Girl crossing the Rainbow Bridge'.

²⁷ Episode 23, title in Japanese: 'Hikaru's Screaming Torrent'; title in Arabic: 'Hikaro is saved through the waterfalls'.

²⁸ Episode 37, title in Japanese: 'Bet Everything on The Wings of Life!'; in Arabic: 'Attach wings to your life', 7'28".

later, resiliently faces off general Blaki at the edge of a cliff (ep. 27),²⁹ before the evil Vega lieutenant is finally eliminated by Doq Fleed. Eventually, after a heroic act taking over the spaceship from wounded Kouji,³⁰ she will train and enrol in the anti-Vega squad alongside Grendizer, in charge of her own spaceship, the Marine Spacer or *Al Silah al Milahi*, in Arabic, in episode 41.³¹

The entrance of Maria in the last third of the saga balances out the gender aspect of the anti-Vega squad team. Very different from Hikaro, Maria is stubborn, combative, and independent, while making sure to project her femininity at all times. Kouji's character will learn this the hard way, as Maria will often humiliate him in sports like challenges or duels. In his analysis of the gender perspective in this anime series, journalist Ahmad Adnan writes:

"I think [the anime's producers and writers] wanted, through the creation of *Grendizer*, to apologise from the poor and stereotyped depiction of women in *Mazinger [Z]* [...] with the introduction of two new characters in *Grendizer* in the form of Hikaro, the daughter of Dambi the owner of the White Birch Ranch, and Maria the sister of Duke Fleed [...] the resilient and modern woman, but at the same time fully retaining her femininity as integral part of her character. (Adnan, 2015)

According to the journalist, the intent behind the rebellious Hikaro and the liberated Maria would have been to "undo the unfortunate link between femininity and weakness through the character of Faten [Sayaka] in the *Mazinger [Z]* anime and replace it with a link between femininity and strength and resilience" (Adnan, 2015).

Also from Evil's side, the viewer can notice many Vega women commanders, as strong-headed Lady Gandal, who plays a major role in strategising and planning a possible fate for Doq Fleed. Her character will prove even more prominent as she nearly ends the Great Vega himself by siding with Doq Fleed in exchange of a promise of asylum on Earth, where she seeks to live in peace.³²

Gender empowerment, though slow and partial, blended perfectly in the Arab context, which gave the series a modernist aspect on the place of women in society and served well

²⁹ Episode 27, title in Japanese: 'Onslaught! Grendizer'; in Arabic: "The counter attack of Grendizer", sequence from 18'05" to 18'10".

³⁰ Episode 37, *op. cit.*, sequence from 17'50" to 22'00".

³¹ Episode 41, title in Japanese: 'Marine Spazer, Intervene!'; in Arabic: 'Launch of Marine Spacer'.

³² Episode 73, *op. cit.*

what will develop into the gender balance issue in the decades following the initial airing of the program.

In fine, the futuristic aspect of this anime wasn't just limited to the technology and the weaponry, but also encapsulated what can be considered inescapable social evolutions today, in particular when looking at the combat for equality between men and women. It is the heavy concentration of social messages in *UFO Robo Grendizer* that eventually forged a name of legend and, for the Arab region, a cultural icon.

5. *Grendizer*, a contemporary legend and an “Arab” icon

Despite being one of the earliest Japanese anime imported after *Sindbad*, *UFO Robo Grendizer* “overshadowed the other cartoons of the same period” (Future Tv, 2018a). Literally hundreds of other Japanese anime flooded Arab television in the 1980's with some levels of success (Reddit, 2018). But no other than *Grendizer* will become an Arab pop culture reference. As Ahmad Adnan explains,

Grendizer isn't just a regular cartoon series, even when comparing it to [other similar shows] that rely on the same very simple narrative: bad guys coming from outer space to invade Earth or destroy it, or an evil figure wanting to control the world. The story in *UFO Robo Grendizer* is much more sophisticated and appears much richer and more realistic. (Adnan, 2015)

“We have sowed a very deep and specific culture” (Al Arabiya Tv, 2017), professes El Atrash, as Zaven Kouyoumdjian pointed to the fact that *Grendizer* “is still celebrated as a rooted symbol for culture, education, and entertainment, that is being transmitted from generation to generation” (Future Tv, 2018c).

As such, this section will highlight two of the stars—still among us today—who contributed in forging the Grendizer myth. It will also feature a few of the artists who perpetuate the cult of this iconic robot throughout the Arab cultural scene.

5.1. Clark and El Atrash, the myth conveyors

Among the figures related to the iconic *Grendizer* is the singer and phenomenon Sammy Clark (born in 1948), who managed to assimilate the opening and closing themes of Kikuchi Shunsuke, the original composer of *UFO Robo Grendizer's* soundtrack. Unlike other versions (i.e. the Italian and French adaptations), the Arabic edition kept the

original music from the Japanese composer at all times and even maintained segments in some episodes in the original Japanese lyrics.

Holding a repertoire of 832 songs thanks to his chorister and opera voice, Clark had started to become famous based on his songs in foreign languages from the 1970s and also through anime credits such as *UFO Robo Grendizer*, *Treasure Island* anime series (1983) or *Takarajima* in the original Japanese version (1978), which was also adapted into Arabic, as mentioned before. When he was initially presented with the idea of performing the *UFO Robo Grendizer* theme, he hesitated, since he was mainly known for singing in English, French, and Italian and not particularly in Arabic (Ben Rahmoun, 2015). After he was invited to watch two episodes of the show, he was convinced he had to take on the challenge, and succeeded where three song performers had failed before him (Future Tv, 2018c).

The translation of the song's lyrics is different from the original Japanese, despite keeping the initial melodies from Kikuchi Shunsuke. Clark nailed the vocalising of the song in the Arabic rhythm, a performance that made the lyrics resonate with the stakes and contextual factors of the Arab world. "It's a song about Humanity and Civilisation", Clark explains in a 2015 interview (Ben Rahmoun, 2015).

Adding to that success was "the remarkable dubbing work and the powerful song" (Future Tv, 2018c) as expressed by the artist. Today, there is no festival or concert in which Sammy Clark performs where he is not requested to sing the *UFO Robo Grendizer* themes. "I now systematically start my shows with this song", admitted the celebrity singer to his TV interviewer in 2018 (Future tv, 2018c), as he is constantly invited to anime festivals and anime exhibitions throughout the Arab world. Like Sasaki Isao (born in 1942) in Japan,³³ the Lebanese artist has a special costume for when he performs the *UFO Robo Grendizer* melodies on stage, in order to please his huge fan base.

Another figure constantly celebrated for taking part in the Arabic adaptation of this anime series is the Lebanese artist, actor and director Jihad El Atrash (born in 1943). In 1978, at the time of the adaptation phase of *UFO Robo Grendizer*, he was already a senior collaborator within the local audio-visual scene, namely at the national Lebanese television channel, Télé Liban. He was invited to the dubbing works of *UFO Robo*

³³ Aside singing famous anime opening themes, Sasaki was/is at the same time a voice actor and, in those very years, he was the dubbing performer in Japanese of Hollywood stars such as Christopher Reeve (the protagonist of Richard Donner's *Superman*, 1978) and Sylvester Stallone (*Rocky* and *First Blood*).

Grendizer by Abdel Majid Abou Laban, with whom he had worked in previous radio programs. El Atrash was handed the main character and central hero of the show, the pilot of *Grendizer: Doq Fleed*, who arrived on Earth with his spaceship after his own planet was attacked and taken over by the armies of Vega.

His voice totally personified the deep emotions carried in the storyline, be they grief on the account of the character's personal tragedies (loss of his parents, his planet, his rank, being forced to fly *Grendizer* and defend the Earth against Vega) or joy (reuniting with his sister, long time childhood friends, a former lover, a former fiancée). But the main sensation El Atrash was able to project through his vocal skills, which struck a particular cord in the show's audience, was the rage he would throw at the alien assailants, namely when Doq Fleed would solicit *Grendizer's* weapons by voice command. El Atrash expressed many times how he had directly requested to specifically underline the attack mottos during the production phase.

The central message of the show, defending one's homeland, was further amplified with the use of an impeccable Arab lexicon and specific tag lines, most of which were added in the domestication process of the cartoon, as they were not included in the Japanese version. During the battles, El Atrash's voice would convey Doq Fleed's tenacity and determination against the Vega invaders with specific and unique war mottos. Among those, the famous "Al Laanatou Aalal Ghouzat", translated into 'Curse be upon the invaders'; "Al Waylou lil Mou'tadeen" ('Calamity be upon the aggressors'), "Al Waylou lil Ashrar" ('Calamity be on evil') or "Suhqan lil Ghuzat" ('Let's crush the invaders'), and other tag lines that conferred a particular and genuine signature to the hero character personified by El Atrash. In a shattered Middle Eastern context, the chosen lexicon and phrasing, though foreign to the anime's original spirit and therefore quite problematical in terms of respecting or neglecting the original values and formal aspects of the Japanese work, was consistent with the glorification of armed resistance against real life occupation.

According to television host Zaven Kouyoumdjian, El Atrash is the person "whose voice embodied the figure of the supernatural hero and granted him an authentic Arab spirit" (Future tv, 2018b). In many media occasions and cultural appearances, El Atrash would recount the anecdote of the Kuwaiti child he had welcomed with his family in his Lebanese village of Ras El Matn in the 1980s. The 6-year-old child, expecting to meet with *Grendizer*, or Dayski his pilot, was greeted by El Atrash the person, not the anime character. "His disappointment was so intense he started weeping and crying. When I

started to speak to him and inviting him into my home to watch some Grendizer episodes, the boy started to calm down. At the sound of my voice, he looked up at me and murmured with sudden brightness in his eyes: Dayski!?!?, before hugging me” (As Sabah Newspaper, 2013; Future Tv, 2018b). He had recognised the anime character voice and let his imagination do the rest.

“We took over Grendizer, his heroism, his superpowers. In each human being lies a Grendizer” (Al Kout Tv, 2016), explains El Atrash in a 2016 interview. A couple of years later, he pointed out to the fact that the battle embodied by the anime carried many layers of understanding, “especially with regard to Earth, to our planet. It carried many directions, both for the children and for adults, such as loving one’s homeland” (Future Tv, 2018b). The show echoed directly into the heart and minds of the Arab world plunged in conflicts: “with the Lebanese war, we were afraid for our country, no doubt in that. In days, we’d arrive at the studio with shelling not so far away” (Future Tv, 2018b).

The cartoon’s aura continues to resonate even today, as the drums of war are still active in the region. El Atrash expressed perplexity as to not knowing

where the Arab nation is heading. It seems that it is heading towards the abyss, which saddens us all and makes us all suffer. Lebanon itself has suffered from 25-30 years of violence, not to mention the destructive civil war [...] and that is what is happening in other Arab countries and in our immediate environment, which saddens me deeply. I am appalled by the fact that we are destroying our homelands, our culture, our language, our thinking, we are in the process of shattering everything in our Arab nation (Saudi Television Cultural Channel, 2015).

Jihad El Atrash and Sammy Clark continue to be invited by anime/manga and *UFO Robo Grendizer* fans in the Arab world, in particular in the Gulf countries, such as in Kuwait or Dubai (UAE), where active fan communities organise regular festivals and shows (*KaizuLand*,³⁴ *Comic Con Kuwait*,³⁵ *True Gaming*,³⁶ *First Saudi Comic Con*³⁷) to celebrate the super robot hero. Through them, the legend of *UFO Robo Grendizer* lives on in the minds of today’s adults who were watching the show in the 1980s and who are introducing the cartoon to their children, as, in different ways, also happens in other national contexts where this anime gained wide and deep success, especially in

³⁴ Instagram.com/kaizuland.

³⁵ Facebook.com/comicconkuwait.

³⁶ True-gaming.net/home.

³⁷ Facebook.com/events/jeddah-saudi-arabia/saudi-comic-con/1089259037886122.

Italy and France (Pellitteri, 2018 [1999]). It is also interesting to observe the nostalgia conveyed through this anime, whereas for the viewers from Lebanon, the broadcast was concomitant with shelling, war, and destruction. As such, one should not underestimate the strong sensations brought by the hero defender of the galaxies in the crucial period of a torn childhood.

5.2. Artists' depiction: an icon with a social agenda

This iconic phenomenon found its way in the arts and cultural scene, with activists resorting to the Grendizer figure to highlight the values of the cartoon and advocate for them in real life. In 2009, for the 30 years of the Arabic version of the show, an anime festival (*Beirut Animated*) was held in Lebanon with *UFO Robo Grendizer* as “the unifying figure for an entire generation of Lebanese who grew up during the country's bitter 15-year civil war” (Lutz, 2009). The poster for *Beirut Animated* featuring the iconic Grendizer (Lutz, 2009) was created by Samandal,³⁸ a volunteer-based non-profit organisation dedicated to the advancement of the art of comics in Lebanon and the rest of the world.

Taking action through arts and culture, younger Arab fellows and artists have used and continue to use to this day this anime character as a means to project the symbol of those defending the weak, the unprivileged, and the underdogs, despite basic copyrights infringements that are common in this part of the world. Within the underground artistic scene in Lebanon, we can refer to the group “Ashekman”, which is the Lebanese dialect for the French word “échappement” referring to cars' exhaust pipes. Born in 1983, Omar and Mohamad Kabbani, the twin brothers who founded the group, had watched *Grendizer* for the first time “in the mid-end 80s in shelters underground during the Lebanese civil war” (*Ale Montosi Blog*, 2016). As such, they resort to street graffiti, painting, rap and arts craft to express their thrive for social justice and denounce inequality and injustice in Lebanon and the world since 2003.

They justified the reference to the *UFO Robo Grendizer* character on the capital's large wall stressing on the fact that

during the Lebanese civil war in the late 1980s, we used to come out from the underground shelter just to watch the 5pm episode of *Grendizer* on the local TV station. He saved our planet from the evil powers and we used to look up to him as the people's champ. Nowadays we travel the world to paint our childhood hero, giving hope for the underdogs, in a world full of injustice (Ashekman, 2018).

³⁸ Samandalcomics.org.

According to the Kabbani brothers, “Lebanon is deeply corrupt and suffers from conflict and war. Grendizer gives hope. During the civil war, the children watched Grendizer on television and became attached to this character. Many youngsters today consider he is more important than Lebanese politicians” (Vincent, 2017). Quickly, the anime character became the twins’ mascot symbolising leadership and the people’s champion, and even appears in a mock shadow government project gathering all pop icon cartoons, with Grendizer in the centre of the Cabinet line-up (Ashekman, 2016).

A known graffiti from the twins stands in the streets of Beirut stating: “Lan Yamouta Shaabon Ladayhi Grendizer”, ‘A Nation that has Grendizer by its side cannot die’ (*Ale Montosi Blog*, 2016). Another, this time in Birmingham (UK), quotes a famous line from the Arabic opening credits of the anime performed by Sammy Clark: “Min Ajli Salamin Alal Ardi”, which celebrates Peace on Earth (*Ale Montosi Blog*, 2016). In 2016, they uncovered a new artistic addition of Grendizer to Arab street art in Kuwait (Streetartnews.com, 2016). The most recent Grendizer-related creation from Ashekman dates from 26 August 2019 in the form of a “*LeoDizer*”, Da Vinci’s Vitruvian man replaced with the super robot (Ashekman, 2019).

The twins also worked on a gigantic art project beaming a deep political and social message in Tripoli, a torn city in the past decade with clashes affecting two neighbourhoods, pro-Syrian regime Jabal Mohsen and anti-Assad quarter Bab Tebbene. Ashekman’s Peace Project in Tripoli was achieved in 2017, which involved painting the word “As Salam” or ‘Peace’ over 123 roofs across both neighbourhoods as a gesture to celebrate coexistence, peace, and security in the aftermath of the armed clashes (Ashekman, 2017; Daily Mail, 2017; Cnn, 2017).

In Jordan, Tamer Al Masri and Michael Makdah founded “Jo Bedu” (in reference to the spirit of the Bedouins)³⁹ in Amman, a “brand that captures the positive energy, voice, and spirit on their Arab culture”. Their agency has designed many items based on the popular Grendizer icon, which are sold in their store, from key chains, t-shirts, mugs and sketchbooks.⁴⁰ They were hugely successful and, as indicated on their website, all *UFO Robo Grendizer* elements are today out of stock. This group later joined graphic designer Mothanna Hussein (followed by Hadi Alaeddin) to open “Warsheh” (literally ‘workshop’ in Arabic) in 2011, a branding agency also based in Amman. The group’s aim is to “deal with political and social topics in their works and [...] also take a critical look at commerce

³⁹ <https://jobedu.com/pages/jobedu-faqs>.

⁴⁰ <https://jobedu.com/search?q=grendizer>.

[...] to send out messages to the world and spur new ideas”.⁴¹ Many of the graphic works carrying the message of those artists pass through the iconic Grendizer figure, among which the very popular “Grendizer Poster” (Warsheh, 2014).

Peace-building, social justice and other sociopolitical mottos hence continue to be relayed through the *Grendizer* reference, which continues to be very much alive to this day.

Conclusion

In a famous Egyptian television show celebrating Jihad El Atrash, the host considered that *UFO Robo Grendizer* “has changed the lives of millions of people in the Arab world” (Cbc Egypt, 2018). According to El Atrash, the anime character “represents Arab Culture today, where it is now an icon, even though it was a non-Arab creation” (*True Gaming*, 2012).

In its Arabic adaptation, *UFO Robo Grendizer* has surpassed the initial expectations of its producers. Although the conversion works of the original Japanese version into Arabic had kept the Japanese phonetics, sites and cultural references, the cartoon has actually blossomed into a life of its own. As such, the domestication process of this character and of its whole narrative set was intimately connected to the Arab context and politics at the inception moment of the series, thus mirroring the deep preoccupations of the generations of that time. High exposure to violence, aggression, and injustice in the Middle East had established a hospitable environment for the super-powerful resistance figure and pro-justice hero.

Celebrated still, the Grendizer icon has been concentrating a true power of evocation related to specific Arab issues under the generic and universal themes of peace, war, occupation, and heroism. “When we see what we are enduring today, we can’t help but thinking of Grendizer”, highlights El Atrash (*Cinerama Ifilm*, 2011), reflecting the fears, worries but also hopes of overcoming these challenges the way Doq Fleed could. According to art critic Ali Souly, the iconic character “accompanied many generations, and left an indelible imprint in the memory of the figure who filled their childhood and most beautiful years of their lives, at a time when they are developing courage, integrity, strength and self-confidence within the souls of those who will form the future generation” (Souly, 2018).

This show’s power of evocation also echoes the nostalgia for an Arab unity through its language. The generation that enjoyed the hit anime lament today as to relinquishing

⁴¹ Warsheh’s website, <https://everydayrebellion.net/warsheh>.

classical Arabic to the benefit of national dialects that are today used in today's dubbing work. Turkish series are adapted in Syrian dialect, Disney productions are rendered in Egyptian dialect, as cultural programs, shows, and performances are also growingly resorting to national dialects instead of classical Arabic. This deep trend is concomitant with the dismay in Arab nationalism as an ideology throughout the Arab world, in which the highlight on one's specific "dialect/language" is fuelling new patterns of narrow patriotism, whereas *UFO Robo Grendizer* was depicted as a defender of the Earth, hence engulfing all populations, religions, and cultures.

This contribution on the *UFO Robo Grendizer* phenomenon has its limitations and shortcomings, namely on the level of formal historic documentation. Unknown elements and even controversies continue to shake the narrow universe of the artists who took part in the show's adaptation into Arabic: how were decisions made?, who was the formal editor of the show?,⁴² who wrote the anime's Arabic song (Future Tv, 2018c)?,⁴³ why isn't Sammy Clarke credited in the anime's introduction? As such, the present work spurs a need to pursue further research relative to the Arabic adaptation era, accessing its official archives with the relevant stakeholders (Télé Liban, Arts Federation, etc.). Additional testimonies with eventually a deeper sociological insight into the anime's viewership could also form the next milestones for better understanding the *Grendizer* phenomenon, which still carries significance in relation to the quest for a better future in the Arab world.

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⁴² The question relevant to the actual role of Wiam El Seaidi in the production phase buzzed over social media and fan forums. This controversy forced many of the anime's artists to issue clarification statements, but this issue remains unclear.

⁴³ It is thought that M. Joseph Fakhoury (today deceased) initiated the song's lyrics, but a TV show uncovered the supposed role of M. Maarouf Sheikh El Ard (Syrian poet, born in 1918) as potentially the real author.

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