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Reality TV rivals divide the Arab world

By Hugh Miles in Doha

ALGERIA has banned as "immoral" a reality television show that has become so popular in the Arab world that restaurants in the region are empty during its broadcasts.

Star Academy, a version of Fame Academy, is keeping the Middle East on the edge of its seat with the rare sight of male and female contestants competing for the prize of money, fame and a record deal.

The show has weathered protests that it is "un-Islamic" and a toxic import from the West but this week Algerian national television stopped showing the programme after protests by the main Islamist party. Aboudjerra Soltani, the leader of the Movement for a Society of Peace, said the show was a "provocation against society and attacked its moral values". It can still be watched on satellite television.

It is week six of the four-month Star Academy marathon, and 12 contestants remain. The favourites include: Rym Ghazali (Algerian, female, 23, bad with money, good at dancing and loves travelling); Issa el Hassan (Bahraini, male, 19, likes food, and playing the piano), and Chayma Hilaly (Tunisian, female, 21, likes belly-dancing and hats).

Launched by the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation and filmed in Lebanon, Star Academy starts with the pan-Arab recruitment of thousands of hopefuls, who audition to become one of the 16 finalists. The finalists live and train together in Adma, Lebanon, taking lessons in music, dancing, singing, fashion, hair-styling and make-up. Besides the two-hour Friday night face-off, there are daily one-hour shows.

Since it is the nearest thing most Arabs have to a democracy, participating in the voting has been seized upon. There are estimates of 80 million voters taking part. Even women are enfranchised. It is however, possible to vote more than once, prompting claims of bias towards the richer Gulf countries which can afford more phone calls and, therefore, more votes. Star Academy is one of the few places in the Arab world where personal advancement depends on talent rather than connections, where men and women can mix freely, and where expressing individualism is something to be celebrated. Such values have made the show both controversial and hugely popular.

Restaurant owners from Rabat to Damascus have complained that the show is damaging their business, since it is broadcast at dinner time.

Hundreds of fan sites have sprung up online, and rumours of love affairs and intrigue between the contestants abound.

Star Academy has also attracted more than its share of militant Islamic critics, who maintain that the show transgresses the most basic Islamic principles, either because men and women live together in an "un-Islamic" way, or because they see reality television as an alien concept imposed by the West.

The Dean of the School of Islamic Law and Shari'a at Kuwait University passed a fatwa condemning the show; the Kuwaiti parliament has discussed legislation to "protect public morality" from Star Academy, and articles in the Saudi press have called the building where the contestants live "a whorehouse".

So far, though, the show has survived the fate of the Arabic Big Brother. It ran in Bahrain in 2004, but was closed down after a week when a kiss between two contestants provoked mass demonstrations in the Bahraini capital, Manama.

