

# Turkish Soap Opera Diplomacy: A Western Projection by a Muslim Source<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The rise of Turkish soap operas as a phenomenon, particularly in the Middle East, is a fairly new development. These soap operas have become non-governmental public diplomacy tools representing Turkey globally. The shows predominantly project a Western and modern lifestyle addressing everyday hurdles. More importantly, the female protagonists are central to the storylines. This paper examines the role of soap operas as a cultural diplomacy tool within the context of identity and the social implications that are prompted by these media exports.

## Key words

Cultural diplomacy, soap operas, identity, identification, women, Turkey.

## Biography

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### Soap Operas as Cultural Diplomacy

Culture is a fundamental component in shaping a nation's public diplomacy, sometimes through serving as an explicit product or other times as an implicit attribute.<sup>2</sup> Culture can be defined as 'the set of values and practices that create meaning for a society that has many manifestations'.<sup>3</sup> A nation's culture is a combination of its image, reputation and national brand that emerges from a combination of its history, traditions, values, society, arts, and contributions to global civilization, and yields explicit products. In this respect both high culture and popular culture products are equally soft power resources.

Employing cultural outputs or elements in wielding a nation's soft power (one of the core approaches of public diplomacy) is described as cultural diplomacy. Cultural diplomacy is also defined as 'the management of the international environment through making [the nation's] cultural resources and achievements known overseas and/or facilitating cultural transmission abroad'.<sup>4</sup> Cultural diplomacy is an approach to establishing long-term relationships, corresponding with the relationship-building tool of public diplomacy.<sup>5</sup> It is thus

<sup>2</sup> R. S. Zaharna, *Battles to Bridges U.S. Strategic Communication and Public Diplomacy after 9/11*, New York: Palgrave, p. 118.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The means to Success in World Politics*, New York: Public Affairs Press, 2004, p.11.

<sup>4</sup> Nicholas J. Cull, *Public Diplomacy: Lessons from the Past*, CPD Perspectives on Public Diplomacy, USC Center on Public Diplomacy, Los Angeles: Figueroa Press, 2009, p. 19.

<sup>5</sup> Mark Leonard, *Public Diplomacy*, London: The Foreign Policy Centre, 2002, pp. 18.

one of the key elements of public diplomacy, <sup>6</sup>dependent upon mutual exchanges, dialogue, understanding and relationship building. <sup>7</sup>

While cultural diplomacy is more in line with the tender minded school (new public diplomacy) because of its nature, on various occasions (such as the export of popular culture), the pursuit of soft power can also be in line with a more traditional approach to public diplomacy. Popular culture, which encompasses music, cinema, television and other forms of art, as well as the implicit cultural attributes (the essence of a nation's culture), is a major producer of soft power. In this context, popular culture can be characterized as just another (but highly effective) mode of old public diplomacy. Products of popular culture can hold key importance in which media continuously facilitates the construction and molding of a nation's image.<sup>8</sup> There has been extensive research on popular culture and its effects, particularly those in the realm of critical theory. As a tool of public diplomacy, popular culture attains a cultivation effect amongst the intended audience, through the exposure of values and messages emerging from the source country. 'Cinema, music, art and literature add color, detail and richness to people's perception of the country and help them to get to know the place almost as well as if they'd been there; better, in fact, because the picture that's painted is often a little idealized, and all the more magical for being intangible and incomplete'.<sup>9</sup> Kunczik argues that although images of nations are formed through multi-faceted processes that entail multiple information sources 'radio and TV transmissions of international programs, newspapers and magazines, cultural exchange programs,

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<sup>7</sup> see Benno Signitzer and Timothy Coombs, 'Public relations and public diplomacy: Conceptual Convergences', *Public Relations Review*, 18, pp. 137-147.

<sup>8</sup> Please see Michael Kunczik, *Images of Nation and International Public Relations*, Mahwah: New Jersey, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1997.

<sup>9</sup> Annolt, *Competitive Identity*, p. 100.

sports, books, news services and so on are probably the strongest image shapers'.<sup>10</sup> American drama series such as Dallas, Dynasty and Flamingo Road have substantially dominated the global television audience projecting a certain image of family and capitalist business, hence providing clues for international audiences to understand the American culture.<sup>11</sup>

Cultivation of a nation's image and culture are processes that develop over time. Nye argues that the cultivation and achievement of desired outcomes can take place by setting an example by offering other intangible assets such as attractive personalities, culture, political values, institutions and policies.<sup>12</sup> Hollywood has been very effective in cultivating foreign audiences supportive of America's position in the world and the values of American life.<sup>13</sup> By projecting the American dream, Hollywood has thus globally promoted the American brand and image. On another level, Hollywood has played a large role in shaping the global perception of other cultures (seemingly in competition to the American culture), such as the Russians of the Soviet Union and Arabs.<sup>14</sup> In all these powerful respects, the creation and promotion of a nation's image through popular cultural outputs such as television programming and cinema is the exemplar of the tough-minded school of public diplomacy, where a one-way asymmetrical communication model is employed to great effect.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Kunczik, *Images of Nation and International Public Relations*, Mahwah: New Jersey, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1997, p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Collins, *Television: Policy and Culture*, London: Unwin Hyman, 1990, pp.118- 130

<sup>12</sup> Nye, *Soft Power*, p. 11 and 31.

<sup>13</sup> Please see Peter Van Hamm, 'Power, Public Diplomacy and the Pax Americana', Jan Melissen (Ed.) *The New Public Diplomacy*, New York: Palgrave, 2007, pp. 47-66.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Kunczik, *Images of Nation and International Public Relations*, Mahwah: New Jersey, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1997, p. 131-133.

## The Emergence of Turkish Soap Operas

The film and television industry in Turkey has been steadily growing, despite suffering immense setbacks from political and economical crises. It was not until the late 1990s that better quality productions were introduced to domestic audiences, eliciting almost a period of Renaissance in film production.<sup>15</sup> Turkish cinema has only been generating acclaimed award-winning productions since mid-90s. The emergence of a more democratic socio-political sphere and the related openness to debating societal issues helped Turkish cinema to flourish; for example, producers and films received awards at Berlin, Rome, Cannes and various other film festivals. With this new visibility in the film industry, coupled with Turkey's motivation in expanding its sphere of influence, it is no surprise that a recent movie, *Kelebeğin Rüyası –Butterfly's Dream-* was Turkey's entry for the 2014 Academy Awards foreign language films category.<sup>16</sup>

Turkish television was dominated first by American series in the 70's and 80's, and then by Mexican and Brazilian *telenovelas* in the early 90's that were somewhat more palatable for the Turkish cultural consumers. American and Mexican shows were better alternatives to the low quality domestic productions. However, in the late 90's television production began to improve drastically with the implementation of new technologies, advancements in film schools and liberalization of the mass media. Turkish television production underwent a Renaissance in the late 90's and early 2000's, overlapping with developments in the film industry. Thus in the last seven years, Turkish soap operas have emerged as a main pillar of Turkey's non-governmental public diplomacy initiatives, becoming

<sup>15</sup> Elif Tunca, 'Sinemamızın Umutlu Tarihi', in Abdurrahman Şen, *Türk Sinemasında Yerli Arayışlar*, Ankara: T.C. Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı, No 24, 2010, pp. 13-35.

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For more information about the movie: <http://www.kelebeginruyasifilm.com>

instruments of soft power. Turkey's unprecedented global success in exporting its popular culture products can rightly be assessed as a part of its cultural diplomacy initiatives, despite having no organic ties to the state itself. This unprecedented success came as a surprise to the TV production industry, as well as to policy makers who were already busy with the push to increase Turkey's regional influence. For that reason Turkey's economic development, political advancements, foreign policy ambitions and advancements in popular culture products all influenced and reinforced one another along related vectors.

The initial expansion into foreign markets began through an action-drama series titled '*Deli Yürek*' in the early 2000's, which was first exported only to the Caucasus because of cultural connections. This initial step created hopes for the Turkish film and television industry to become a global competitor in the cross-cultural entertainment industry. Since then, over 120 soap operas have been exported on TV channels globally, reaching audiences in over 130 countries including Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Qatar, Greece, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Iran, Macedonia (FYROM), Lebanon, Libya, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, U.A.E, Serbia, Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Bulgaria, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Madagascar, Mauritius, French Polynesia, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal and Vietnam.<sup>17</sup> Qatar based MBC, a channel with a liberal outlook (and perhaps itself aiming for a push towards Western style modernity palatable to Middle Eastern audiences) has been a catalyst for the vast expansion of these soap operas in a diverse region. Very recently, one of the most widely acclaimed historical drama series *Muhteşem Yüzyıl (Magnificent Century)* was exported to Italy and China's CCTV. In countries such as Greece and

<sup>17</sup> Yeliz Candermir, 'Turkish soap operas: the unstoppable boom', Blogs WSJ, April 29, 2013, <https://surface.syr.edu/exchange/vol5/iss1/6>  
<http://blogs.wsj.com/middleeast/2013/04/29/turkish-soap-operas-the-unstoppable-boom/>

Russia, the shows are aired with subtitles, while the leading Middle East market views the shows dubbed in the Syrian Arabic variety. Significantly, the use of Syrian Arabic eliminated the disconnect that caused by dubbing previously marketed Mexican telenovelas in literary/classical Arabic, a more unapproachable version of Arabic.<sup>18</sup>

Some of the most popular Turkish soap operas include:

### **TIMS PRODUCTION**

<b>YEAR</b>	<b>SHOW</b>
2013	Happy Family Journal
2013	Lovebird
2012	Game of Silence
2012	While Mom Was Sleeping
2011	Magnificent Century
2011	Heartbreak Mansion
2011	College Diary
2010	Little Secrets
2010	Pebble Stones
2009	Guardian Angels
2009	If Only I Were a Cloud
2009	Es-Es
2008	Pendent
2006	Dead Room

<sup>18</sup> Alexandra Buccianti, 'Dubbed Turkish soap operas conquering the Arab World: social liberation or cultural alienation', Arab Media and Society, Issue 10, Spring 2010, pp. 4-28.

Data collected from TIMS website: <http://www.tims.tv/en/productions>

## AY YAPIM

YEAR	SHOW
2013	Black Money Love
2013	Kurt Seyit ve Sura
2012	Medcezir
2012	Karadayı
2013	20 minutes
2012	The End
2011	Kuzey Güney
2011	Red Scarf
2010	Fatmagül'ün Suçu Ne
2009	Ezel
2008	Forbidden Love
2007	Samanyolu
2007	Dudaktan Kalbe
2007	Aşk Yeniden
2007	Menekşe ile Halil
2006	Falling Leaves

Data collected from AY Yapım website: <http://www.ayyapim.tv>



**AVŞAR FİLM**

<b>YEAR</b>	<b>SHOW</b>
2014	Not Defteri
2013	Karagül
2013	Bugünün Saraylısı
2011	Lale Devri
2011	Yer Gök Aşk
2008	Aşk Yakar
2005	Ihlamurlar Altında
2004	Çemberimde Gül Oya

Data Collected from Avşar Film website: <http://avsarfilm.com.tr>

**ERLER FİLM**

<b>YEAR</b>	<b>SHOW</b>
2013	Küçük Ağa
2010	Aşk Bir Hayal
2006	Arka Sokaklar

Data collected from Erler Film website:

[http://www.erlerfilm.net/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=66&Itemid=92](http://www.erlerfilm.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=66&Itemid=92)

**MED YAPIM**

<b>YEAR</b>	<b>SHOW</b>
2012	Eve Düşen Yıldırım
2011	Adını Feriha Koydum
2011	Canım Babam
2011	Umutsuz Evkadınları
2010	Karadağlar

Data collected from Med Yapım website: <http://www.medyapim.com/tr>

Each episode, with a recap of 30 to 45 minutes, runs between 90 to 120 minutes long. As a result the audience exposure time exceeds those shows that are generally produced in the West. The storylines tend to follow stories that are very real for many, and difficulties that can be experienced by anyone such as relationship problems, sibling rivalries, marriage problems, struggles to make ends meet, domestic abuse, peer pressure and substance abuse. Moreover, some of the stories specifically deal with local and/or regional concerns such as child brides, dowry, abduction and honor killings. The soap operas have lavish settings mostly, but the story lines themselves are still very relatable and are a representation of daily difficulties. This is perhaps one of the driving forces behind the soap operas' success. The soap opera/drama genre has featured romance, domestic violence/women's issues, and even crime. The romance/dram genre, which dominate the market, are pitched to female audiences. Even those with violence/crime themes do not shy away from a love triangle or any romance plot featuring good-looking, athletic actors who are almost always passionately overprotective of their women. Therefore, once more the female audience is

roles.. As mentioned above with regard to the storylines, the soap operas include pre-marital sex, nudity, adultery and love triangles, which are perhaps topics not too risqué for a Western audience but are considered risqué for Middle Eastern markets. Variety refers to this risky choice as ‘taboo themes coming in disguise as a Turkish soap opera’.<sup>19</sup>

The target audience for these series is mostly women, which explains why the stories tend to revolve around women and the men they are interested in. One notable feature of Turkish soap operas is what could be called as the ‘beauty factor’. The physical attractiveness of the actors and actresses is difficult not to notice; some are former models or trained actors who are chosen to look good on TV. Hence, the attractiveness of actors and actresses function in drawing in more viewers.<sup>20</sup> The actors and actresses who could not have gained fame through serious theatrical arts not only become celebrities, but also utilize their popularity through signing product endorsement deals in Turkey and elsewhere. For instance *Kıvanç Tatlıtuğ*, the leading actor in some of the most notable series was featured in a TV commercial for cologne in the Middle East and also in a music video by Lebanese singer *Rola Saad*.<sup>21</sup> Another famous actress *Tuba Büyüküstün* starred in a shampoo commercial aired in the Arab world in 2011. *Beren Saat*, another actress, starred in a soap commercial for a Turkish company that was aired on Arabic TV channels.<sup>22</sup> It would not be an overstatement to suggest that the most widely acclaimed soap operas have become a culture of their own, most of the times yielding their own offshoot merchandise. For instance, *Muhteşem Yüzyıl* depicted

<sup>19</sup> Nick Vivarelli, ‘Turkish Soaps slip by Middle East Censors’, Variety, October 9, 2013, <http://variety.com/2013/biz/news/turkish-soaps-slip-by-middle-east-censors-1200706654/>

<sup>20</sup> Pilot test conducted by the author in Los Angeles among Arab expat students.

<sup>21</sup> Cologne commercial: Mohannad and Lemis; Music Video: Rola Saad, Nawyahalo, 2008.

*Süleyman the Magnificent*, (also an artisan and a poet), crafting an emerald diamond for his beloved concubine *Hürrem*. Shortly after the episode was aired, emerald *Hürrem* rings, ranging from genuine emeralds to plastic, became a huge hit in Turkey, then also spreading to the wider Middle East. Also, the *hamam* (Turkish steam bath) and palace scenes on the show have had a transformative effect in recreating hamams as spheres of social interaction. To illustrate, in Turkey, going to a *hamam* was reinvented with *Hürrem Sultan*, inspiring traditional *wedding hamams*.<sup>23</sup> In regards to the international audience, Turkish soap operas have translated into an increased rate of incoming tourists, notably from the Middle East to İstanbul, where the greatest numbers of these shows are produced.

The protagonists represented in the soap operas are almost all women, reflecting a combination of weaknesses and strengths, while possessing a great deal of femininity lurking in the leading male characters. The stories revolve around women, their relations with men and their families. The protagonist women generally seek power, challenging societal norms set for their gender, yet are simultaneously looking for their prince charming. Even crime/action themed soap operas have a central focus on romance, the main driving force of the Turkish soap opera world. For instance the racy series ‘*Forbidden Love*’ shattered the moral boundaries of conservative Muslims in Turkey and abroad, even though the series itself was ironically adapted from a 19<sup>th</sup> century Ottoman novel depicting the story a young woman searching for true love in the course of seeking revenge against her mother. The protagonist, a young independent İstanbul socialite, marries a wealthy businessman seeking to replace the love of her deceased father. However, it is not

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<sup>23</sup> Hürrem’s Effect on Invitations, Hürriyet Daily News,  
<http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/hurrems-effect-on-invitations.aspx?pageID=238&nID=20738&NewsCatID=381>

too long until she finds a passionate new love in her husband's step-nephew. Hence, the ultimate sin of adultery only becomes a means to finding that impossible true love while she is trying to break free from the marriage. Another well-known soap opera '*Magnificent Century*' depicts the story of the Ottoman *Sultan Süleyman's* concubine *Roxelana* and her journey in becoming the legal wife, queen, significantly changing the rules of the Harem. Consequently, *Hürrem Sultan* not only challenges the norms of her society but also the palace while gracefully seeking the love and care of his beloved emperor. *Noor*, the first famous Turkish series similarly showed that marriage is about equal partnership and where one cannot find it the misery can be solved through legal means.<sup>24</sup> The content of these series indicate the central role of women to the storylines, searching to empower themselves only to surrender to the patriarchal society later on. Nevertheless, the storylines reflect a can-do approach, representing the endless possibilities in the face of difficult times. For that reason, these series have had enormous impact on how women deal with their everyday hurdles in the Middle East.<sup>25</sup> *Kismet*, an Al-Jazeera documentary by *Nina Maria Paschalidou* eloquently discusses the role of female characters in Turkish soap operas and female empowerment.<sup>26</sup>

The success of Turkish soap operas in the Arab world only dates back to 2007, when a low-popularity television drama series in Turkey, '*Gümüş*' (*Noor*) was picked up by Middle Eastern private broadcaster (MBC), which crafted a hit-

<sup>24</sup> Harry Van Versendaal, 'New tool for female empowerment: Turkish soap operas', Ekhatimerini, March 16, 2014,

[http://www.ekhatimerini.com/4dcgi/w\\_articles\\_wsit4\\_1\\_16/03/2014\\_538206](http://www.ekhatimerini.com/4dcgi/w_articles_wsit4_1_16/03/2014_538206)

<sup>25</sup> Kismet: How Soap Operas Changed the World, Al Jazeera Witness Films, <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/witness/2013/11/kismet-how-soap-operas-changed-world-20131117152457476872.html>

<sup>26</sup> Kismet: How Soap Operas Changed the World, Al Jazeera Witness Films, <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/witness/2013/11/kismet-how-soap-operas-changed-world-20131117152457476872.html>

series out of the show.<sup>27</sup> MBC's channel 2 and 4 both feature Western content including American shows such as *The Dr. Oz Show*, *Mad Man*, *Project Runway* and *Pretty Little Liars*. MBC has been the primary outlet carrying Turkish soap operas subtly promoting a liberal and Western lifestyle, not contradicting the network's preferences. However MBC's coverage has created a wave of criticism within the more conservative societies in the Middle East.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, Turkish series in the Middle East became Turkey's soft power tool<sup>29</sup>, owing to MBC's initial efforts in endorsing a Western content. This media coverage thus enabled a socio-political reunion between Turkey and the Middle East, developing a Turkish style Hollywood effect. The final episode of *Gümüş/Noor* alone reached an audience of 70 to 80 million Arab viewers.<sup>30</sup> Following the success of Turkish soap operas MBC turned to İstanbul once again in capitalizing the Turkish style Hollywood effect by producing *Extra Turki*, a celebrity entertainment program. *Extra Turki* reports on Turkish television stars and offers exclusive interviews.<sup>31</sup> Each episode is shot at various touristic spots such as the *Topkapı Palace*, *Sait Haim Paşa Palace*, *Yıldız Park* and various other spots with the view of the Bosphorus. Additionally, Turkish television stars have been greeted with much enthusiasm in the Arab world and have set new beauty norms triggering a so-called

<sup>27</sup> Kerem Öktem, 'Projecting Power: Non-Conventional Policy Actors in Turkey's Intenational Relations', in Kerem Öktem, Ayşe Kadioğlu, Mehmet Karlı (Eds.), *Another Empire: A Decade of Turkey's Foreign Policy Under the Justice and Development Party*, İstanbul: Bilgi University Press, 2012, p. 99.

<sup>28</sup> Muhammad Ayish, 'Television Broadcasting in the Arab world', in Noha Mellor, Muhammad Ayish, Nabil Dajani, Khalil Rinnawi (Eds.), *Arab Media Globalization and Emerging Media Industries*, London: Policity, 2011, p. 92.

<sup>29</sup> 'Turks put twist in racy soaps: Soap operas in the Arab World yield their own soft power' The New York Times, [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/18/arts/18abroad.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/18/arts/18abroad.html?_r=0), June 17, 2010.

<sup>30</sup> Kismet: How Soap Operas Changed the World, Al Jazeera Witness Films, <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/witness/2013/11/kismet-how-soap-operas-changed-world-20131117152457476872.html>

<sup>31</sup> *Extra Turki* MBC, <http://www.mbc.net/ar/programs/extra-turki.html>

‘Turkish Look’, which defines the new trends in plastic surgery in the Middle East.<sup>32</sup>

Turkish soap operas have been sweeping the Middle East, Balkans, parts of Europe, the Caucasus and Africa, and are rapidly spreading across Russia and Asia, and most recently South America. Turkish drama series exports exceeded \$100 million, with the majority being distributed by Calinos Entertainment and Global Agency.<sup>33</sup> *Muhteşem Yüzyıl (Magnificent Century)*, the controversial drama series on Ottoman Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent, now airs in 70 countries, and was sold to *Emirates* in 2013 to be aired on their flight entertainment system. The same drama series has been exported to Italy, the first Western European country to purchase the series. Interestingly, *Muhteşem Yüzyıl* has become a hit show in Greece,<sup>34</sup> stirring political debates while growing interest in Turkish language classes.<sup>35</sup> Currently, China’s CCTV is the latest addition to the global expansion of Turkish soap operas.

To this day, over 100 Turkish soap operas have been exported globally, acting as a cultural powerhouse. As a result Turkish soap operas and actors became cultural ambassadors representing the country of origin, while at the same time being criticized as *neo-Ottoman cool*. This concept reflects the debate on Turkey’s more assertive foreign policy towards the Middle East and the criticism that the new foreign policy is merely trying to reinstate the Ottoman glory as well as the

<sup>32</sup> ‘Turkish look all the rage among Arab women’, *Globserver Middle East*, April 27, 2013, <http://globserver.cn/en/north-africa/press/turkish-look-all-rage-among-arab-women>.

<sup>33</sup> For a list of series exported by Calinos Entertainment and Global Agency please see: <http://www.calinosentertainment.com/tvseries/> and <http://www.theglobalagency.tv/sts/lovebird.php>

<sup>34</sup> Zafer Yörük and Pantelis Vatikiotis, ‘Soft Power or Illusion of Hegemony: The Case of the Turkish Soap Opera ‘Colonialism’’, *International Journal of Communication*, Vol 7, 2013, pp. 2361-2385.

<sup>35</sup> Christos Teazis, Muhteşem Serüven, *ATAUM e-bülten*, Şubat 2013, p. 6.

commercialization of goods related to the Ottoman Empire. To illustrate, Marketing campaigns have employed an Ottoman narrative to boost sales with the success of ‘*Magnificent Century*’, a drama series on the life of the Ottoman *Sultan Süleyman*.<sup>36</sup> As a result, one can draw connections between the rising popularity of Turkish soap operas, the shows becoming major cultural exports and more assertive Turkish foreign policy.

### **Charm Effect of Identity**

Turkish soap operas are perhaps most popular in the wider Middle East, which is the primary consumer of these cultural products. There has been ongoing discussion on the popularity of Turkish soap operas, yet there seems to be a lack of sufficient research and analysis. I will first examine the source effect, and then address the identification component in the attractiveness of soap operas from an identity perspective.

The credibility of a media’s source is related to whether or not the source is palatable to the target audience. Particularly for the Middle East, credibility is one of the most notable factors in the thriving popularity of Turkish soap operas. Similarly, American efforts to engage with the Arab audience in the aftermath of 9/11 via Radio Sawa and Al-Hurra demonstrated the role of source and its effect on credibility.<sup>37</sup> A large part of Turkish soap operas’ credibility lies in the medium itself originating from a Muslim country unlike the culturally alien Western or

<sup>36</sup> for a discussion on soap operas and neo-Ottoman cool please see Omar al-Ghazzi and Marwan M. Kraidy, ‘Neo-Ottoman Cool 2: Turkish Nation Branding and Arabic Language Transnational Broadcasting’, *International Journal of Communication*, Vol 7, 2013, pp. 2341- 2360. For a discussion on Ottomania, soap operas and foreign policy please see: Elif Batuman, ‘Ottomania: a hit TV shows reimagines Turkey’s imperial past’, *The New Yorker*, Feb 17 & 24, 2014, pp.50-58.

<sup>37</sup> Mohammed al-Nawawy, ‘U.S. Public Diplomacy and the News Credibility of Radio Sawa and Television Al-Hurra in the Arab World’, in Philip Seib (Ed.), *New Media and the New Middle East*, New York: Palgrave, 2007, pp. 119- 137.



Latin American shows, while the Middle East is more value defined.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, the role of religion is a major factor as well. In this context, Seib argues that the Middle East is value-driven where religion plays a significant role, hence pointing to undeniable effect of cultural dynamics and the presence of Islam in the socio-political sphere.<sup>39</sup> The failure of Hi magazine, aimed at creating a dialogue with Arab youth focusing on American values to resonate with the targeted Arab communities, is perhaps a prime example of a cultural based public diplomacy challenge.<sup>40</sup> Cultural, historical and social similarities therefore play a key role in the way audiences identify with the source and the medium. Psychoanalytic literature can be one perspective to study the identification effect of soap operas. Erikson, a key figure in psychoanalytic identity theory, defines identification as the initial form of emotional tie with an object/person. Primary identification is formed between a child and parents.<sup>41</sup> The prerequisite of identification is idealization of the object (parent). Imitation and modeling are the outcomes of idealization. At this time the child unconsciously embraces the characteristics of the parents and imitates their behavior, hence learning through modeling. Secondary identification takes place when an individual identifies with leaders or others that they envy or with whom they feel they share common characteristics.<sup>42</sup> To elaborate, individual identification is more likely to occur when one person thinks the other person or

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<sup>38</sup> Darell Ezell, *Beyond Cairo: US Engagement with the Muslim World*, New York: Palgrave, 2012, pp. 105-114.

<sup>39</sup> Philip Seib, *Public Diplomacy and the Media in the Middle East*, CPD Perspectives on Public Diplomacy, Paper 6, USC Center on Public Diplomacy, Los Angeles: Figueroa Press, 2013, p. 11-20.

<sup>40</sup> R.S. Zaharna, *Battles to Bridges: U.S. Strategic Communication and Public Diplomacy After 9/11*, New York: Palgrave, 2010, pp. 34-35.

<sup>41</sup> Please see Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, W.W. Norton and Company, New York, 1968.

<sup>42</sup> Please see M. Mahler, F. Pine, A. Bergman, *The Psychological Birth of the Human Infant*, Hutchinson and Co, London, 1975.

leader is ‘like them’ or has attributes that resonate with them. Hence, attractive power is a prerequisite of identification.

The complex psychological process of individual identification can be applicable to large-group such as nations.<sup>43</sup> Variables such as a nation’s identity, history, values, norms, culture and economy can have profound behavioral effect on whether a country can identify with another one. This identification effect may have leverage on whether a country is found attractive on the basis of soft power. In this regard, it is no surprise that despite a slight decline in attractiveness perhaps stemming from Turkey’s official position vis-à-vis the Syrian civil war and Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Turkey still remains the main non-Arab influential figure in the Middle East.<sup>44</sup>

When it comes to the Arab Middle East, it would be fair to suggest that the broader population uphold religious values and is very traditional. Once more, drawing from the credibility of the source element, the Western and modern nature of the Turkish soap operas are likely to be embraced despite the conservative nature of the audience. As a matter of fact, the role of identification and religion play a significant role in the effectiveness of messages and acceptability to Western themed shows. From another perspective, a broadly modern portrayal of everyday life depicted in the Turkish soap operas may be found attractive not only because of the messages represented but also because of the secular imagery. Most series are shot in the upscale İstanbul neighborhoods adorned with sceneries of the Bosphorus.

<sup>43</sup> For a discussion on large group identity please see Vamik D. Volkan, ‘Large-Group Identity, International Relations and Psychoanalysis’, Paper presented at Gasteig Cultural Center, Rosenheimer Platz. May 23, 2008, <http://www.vamikvolkan.com/Large-group-Identity,-International-Relations-and-Psychoanalysis.php>, For a discussion on attraction and identification please see Craig Hayden, *The Rhetoric of Soft Power*, Lanham: Lexington, 2012, pp. 42-52.

<sup>44</sup> Mensur Akgün, Sabiha Şenyücel Gündoğar, *The Perception of Turkey in the Middle East 2013*, TESEV Foreign Policy Programme, İstanbul: TESEV, 2013.

A recent study argues that Turkish soap operas helped accommodate what had been considered culturally alien, namely the Muslim and more Western identity, which may have increased regional interest in these series.<sup>45</sup> As a matter of fact, the introduction of an alien culture could have been the major motivation behind the success of these series. Muslim yet modern Turkey, as the producer of these shows can trigger the ‘identification’ effect. It might be easier for the audience to identify with these shows and the source country because of religious and regional connections. Viewers may therefore be comfortable with these shows despite their modern and secular settings. Perhaps the audience can easily identify with a culture and the products of a proximal culture.<sup>46</sup> The complex relationship between Turkish soap operas and the religion element is also embodied in the above mentioned modernity aspect. While the shows are produced by predominantly Muslim Turkey, they do not imply at any point that the shows are emanating from a Muslim country per se, and are rather perceived as reinforcing secular traditions.

The projective identification dynamic of soap operas are largely discounted in terms of Turkish drama series. Projective identification is described as an individual projecting the good or bad parts of the self (identity) to an object and then re-identifying with those aspects. In terms of media use, an audience is likely to find aspects that one could identify with and features that viewers would like to see in themselves. As a result, those identifiable features are projected back into the self, distorting the lines between the TV character and the audience. Viewers see

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<sup>45</sup> Eylem Yanardağoğlu and Imad N. Karam, ‘The Fever that Hit the Arab Satellite Television: Audience Perceptions of the Turkish TV Series’, *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, Vol. 20, Issue 5, 2013, pp. 561-579.

themselves in the characters.<sup>47</sup> By way of example, female characters in these soap operas that are portrayed as independent women may essentially manifest qualities that the female audience finds identifiable such as being strained in an abusive marriage. Hence they imagine themselves as having the free, independent features of that female character, first projecting and then identifying with it. This could explain some Arab females' endeavors in seeking emancipation from the traditional roles or pursuing their freedom from an oppressive spouse.

### **Implications in the Middle East**

Female characters in the soap operas acquire a dual identity symbolizing both strength and vulnerability at the same time. The storylines are centered on women where the female characters represent a synthesis of modernity and traditionalism, a very impeccable reflection of the in-between sentiment of Turkish society. As a result, the characters appear to be in a lost space, trying to find the balance between the traditionalist society and modernist demands of the modern age. Being in between is manifested by the emancipation of women from traditional social patterns. However, as the characters seek their independence, they still have a need to feel appreciated by male characters. In that sense, as much as the shows are about the current state of women in the society, they also reflect shifts in defining and redefining gender roles. Therefore, the soap operas while being a source of entertainment are also a source of inspiration within the trajectory of shifting social norms in the Middle East.

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<sup>47</sup> Donald D. Diefenbach and Mark D. West, 'Cultivation and the Third-Person Effect', in Michael Morgan, James Shanahan, Nancy Signorielli (Eds.), *Living With Television Now*, New York: Peter Lang, 2012, pp. 329-346.

In a similar vein, romance is a traditionally disregarded aspect of the traditional Middle Eastern family makeup. Together with the Turkish soap operas a missing component of the Arab domestic life has come under the limelight. Magnificent Century's *Sultan Süleyman* is frequently depicted as reciting his own poetry to his wife *Hürrem* stressing on the traditional romantic aspect of relationships, suggesting that even an emperor can fall under the spell of a beautiful woman.<sup>48</sup> Similar to female characters, male characters too demonstrate a shift between traditional paternalistic culture and a more modern understanding of the role of males in the society. To illustrate, leading male characters often show romantic gestures such as bringing flowers, birthday/anniversary celebrations, showering with extravagant gifts, openly expressing their love and, more importantly, fighting for love. In that regard, the still aggressive, dominant and protective behavior of male character is undermined by their newly found romance. By way of example, young Arabs profess to have learned romance from *Muhannad*, the leading character in the series *Noor*, and their preference to include romance in their relationships and get to know their future spouse prior to setting marriage arrangements. Bringing flowers to wives, celebrating birthdays, and showing affection are new behaviors in the region.<sup>49</sup> Salamandra terms this change in gender relations and romantic relationships 'the *Muhannad effect*'.<sup>50</sup> Thereby it can be argued that one of the major implications of these soap operas is the introduction and normalization of romance in the Arab social life.

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<sup>48</sup> Ottoman Sultan Süleyman wrote his own poetry in Persian and Turkish with the alias '*Muhibbi*'. A vast majority of his work was devoted to his wife Hürrem.

<sup>49</sup> Notes from a pilot research conducted by the author in Los Angeles amongst groups of Saudi exchange students.

<sup>50</sup> Christina Salamandra, 'The Muhannad Effect: Media Panic, Melodrama, and the Arab Female Gaze', *Anthropological Quarterly*, Vol 85, No 1, pp. 45-77.

Notably, a new behavioral trend is emerging via the soap operas, causing a generational divide between youngsters and their parents in terms of views on romance, gender relations, family lifestyle and individuality. Young audiences complain about their parents not understanding the new way of life and the importance of romance in building a healthy, happy relationship. It appears that no matter how inaccessible societies may seem, new media trends have a cultivation effect that can in the long run lead to significant sociological shifts. Consequently, it can be argued that these audiences are being cultivated with Western lifestyle, and that a modern, yet Muslim Turkish identity is thereby being projected globally.

These massive transformations in the Arab Middle East have caused a friction between Muslim religious clergy and Turkish soap operas which are apparently providing a new set of dynamics for everyday social conduct, especially concerning the social roles of women. In 2009, a Saudi Islamic cleric declared it was permissible to kill owners of satellite television stations that show immoral content referring to the Turkish soap operas.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, in Afghanistan the religious *ulema* called for the cancellation of 'Forbidden Love' on the grounds that it was corrupting the youth.<sup>52</sup>

## Conclusion

Turkey is an emerging power in the global market utilizing a multi-faceted public diplomacy strategy through humanitarian assistance, developmental aid, mediation efforts and various cultural initiatives. Although most of these PD tools involve the

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<sup>51</sup> Simon Henderson, Saudi Arabia Changes Course Slowly, The Washington Institute, Policywatch 1479, February 18, 2009, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/saudi-arabia-changes-course-slowly>

<sup>52</sup> International Religious Freedom Report for 2011, <https://surface.syr.edu/exchange/vol5/iss1/6>, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/193129.pdf>, p.11.

state, media exports have emerged as a non-government cultural diplomacy tool of its own. As a matter of fact, the soap operas received certain criticism from Turkey's conservative circles. However, the unexpected success of these cultural exports became convenient tools in reinforcing Turkey's foreign policy ambitions vis-à-vis the Middle East. The role of identification plays a significant role in the widely acclaimed success of these shows. As a result, this unprecedented exposure to Turkey's cultural outputs seems to invoke Arab females' emancipation from the given social roles owing to the Western content of the soap operas. Despite the ongoing backlash from various Muslim clergies, a generational gap is giving impetus to a gradual social change and shifts in gender roles. Given the long-term success of Turkish soap operas, the Western content of the shows will continue to be a source of inspiration for the women in the Middle East while providing the pretext that enhances Turkey's soft power.

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