

Turkish Soap Power: International Perspectives and Domestic Paradoxes

by Mathieu Rousselin, University of St.Gallen

Between 2005 and 2007, the Turkish melodrama *Gümüş* ("Silver") was aired on Kanal D. A typical TV soap opera in many regards, *Gümüş* essentially features a love story between the pretty dark-haired (and naturally large-bosomed) *Noor*, played by Songül Öden, and her equally attractive blue-eyed and fair-haired husband Mohannad (played by Kıvanç Tatlıtuğ). A perfect husband, Mohannad treats his wife kindly and as his equal – he even supports her actively in her professional career as a fashion designer. The plot nonetheless introduced very unconventional elements to an Islamic audience, such as premarital sex, repeated use of alcohol or abortion. Actresses do not wear any veil and kisses are often exchanged on screen.

Given the enthusiastic reception of the series by the Turkish audience, a handful of producers working for the Saudi-owned and Dubai-based Middle East Broadcasting Center (MBC, the Arab world's leading free-to-air TV net) decided to air the series throughout the Arab world in 2008 and 2009. Renamed *Noor* (the Arabic word for "light"), the series was dubbed from Turkish into Arabic using the colloquial Syrian dialect but without interfering with the plot. This was to be the beginning of a controversial pop-culture phenomenon (Buccianti, 2010). On the one hand, the series was criticised by conservative religious forces for its immorality, to the point that a Saudi religious scholar justified the killing of people involved in the broadcasting of the show (Al-Jazeera, 2008). On the other hand, it is estimated that the last episode of *Gümüş / Noor* gathered 85 million viewers throughout the Arab world including more than half the total number of adult women in the entire region (Worth, 2008). Arab tourists flocked to Istanbul (where the storyline in *Noor* unfolds),

prompting the producers to convert the fictional home of the two lovers into a successful museum which registered more than 70'000 entries in 2008 just for Saudi visitors (Tristram, 2009).

After the success of *Gümüş / Noor*, Turkish soap operas swept across the Middle East, bringing revenues to the booming Turkish TV industry¹ and starting off the first reflections on the contribution of the television dramas to Turkey's soft power in the region (Matthews, 2011; Utkan, 2011). Indeed, soap operas not only give precious insights into domestic Turkish politics (Hintz, 2012) but they also tackle deep philosophical, political and religious issues which are currently debated throughout the Middle East (Rohde, 2012a). This contributes to the success of these television dramas abroad and particularly in the Arab world, transforming the Turkish television industry into a powerful soft power instrument.

This article offers to review three successful Turkish soaps and to investigate the reasons behind their success both in Turkey and internationally. On this basis, this article will then discuss the paradox between the liberal approach to societal and religious issues in the soaps and the increasingly restrictive line of the AKP government on issues of cultural freedoms.

1 Between 2001 and 2011, a total of 65 Turkish television series have been sold abroad, generating revenues of more than 50 million dollars (Bugdayci, 2011). As of 2012, Turkey has sold 70 soap operas to a total of 39 countries in the Middle East, Balkans and Caucasus regions. Kazakhstan (42) is the biggest buyer of Turkish soaps, followed by Bulgaria (27), Azerbaijan (23) and Macedonia (17) – source: Oxford Business Group, 2012.

A THOUSAND AND ONE NIGHTS

Broadcasted on Turkish television between 2006 and 2009, *Binbir Gece* (“A Thousand and One Nights”) tells the story of a young and talented architect called Şehrazat Evliyaoğlu² whose only son suffers from leukaemia and can only be saved by a bone marrow transplant. The surgery is however too expensive for Şehrazat. Having understood her desperate situation, Şehrazat’s boss Onur Aksal offers to lend her a significant part of the needed amount provided that she spends one night with him. Over time, their relationship turns into a genuine love affair and eventually ends with Onur and Şehrazat getting married, despite the initial reluctance of Onur’s mother. In the third season, Onur’s colleague Kerem İnceoğlu learns about the indecent proposal and publically reveals that Şehrazat accepted money in exchange for a night with her then boss. At first, this causes the separation of the couple and forces both Onur and Şehrazat to rethink the terms and meaning of their relationship. Both protagonists find out for themselves that their love is genuine and stronger than the gossip, and their marriage is eventually reinforced by the crisis.

The series was successfully aired throughout the Arab world and the Balkans, and it achieved a cult status in Slovakia, Croatia and Serbia (Balkan Chronicle, 2010). To account for the success of *Binbir Gece* beyond Turkish borders and particularly in non-Muslim Balkan countries, Radic (2010) suggests that considerations of cultural proximity intervened in viewers’ decisions to watch the Turkish soap rather than some of its US competitors. Quot-

2 The name recalls the legendary Persian queen Scheherazade, the vizier’s daughter who entertains King Shahryar in the collection of folk tales of the Islamic Golden Age.

ing Sejn Husejnfendic from the University of Sarajevo, Radic also explains the success of the drama by the extent to which *Binbir Gece* broke “the decades-long stereotypes about Turkey as a country of Islamic orientation, and the position of a woman as uneducated, conservative and completely dependent from the male partner/companion/master”.

FORBIDDEN LOVE

Aşk-ı Memnu (“Forbidden Love”) was aired between 2008 and 2010 and is a modern-day adaptation of the bestseller by Turkish author Halit Ziya Uşaklıgil (1867-1945). The drama follows the wealthy widower Adnan (Selcuk Yöntem), who lives cloistered in a beautiful house on the shores of the Bosphorus with his two children Nihal and Bülent, his nephew Behlül (Kıvanç Tatlıtuğ) and a housemaid. A few blocks away lives the widow Firdevs, mother of two daughters Peyker and Bihter (Beren Saat), who inherited large debts from her deceased husband and seeks to seduce Adnan to keep her standard of living. When Peyker gets married, Adnan comes out of his retreat and meets the beautiful Bihter. Both characters fall in love but Bihter’s mother Firdevs and Adnan’s daughter Nihal strongly oppose their union. Bihter and Adnan’s love eventually overcomes all plots and the couple gets married, with all protagonists moving into Adnan’s villa. Yet, Adnan’s nephew Behlül progressively becomes romantically involved with Bihter and endangers her couple. Bihter’s mother Firdevs manages to bring Nihal and Behlül together to save the marriage of her daughter. On the day Nihal and Behlül are supposed to get married, Bihter wants to tell her husband Adnan about her extra-marital affair. Behlül convinces her not to do so and

both spend their last moments together, when they are discovered by Adnan. Ashamed, Bihter kills herself while Behlül flees, prompting all protagonists to leave the house and start a new life elsewhere.

The reasons for the success of *Aşk-ı Memnu* are multiple. First, it is a tale of lust, lies and riches in the high society of Istanbul which is typically portrayed by young and handsome actors wearing expensive clothing and living in unaffordable houses, much in the way other American soaps did in their time (*Dallas*, *Dynasty*, *The Young and the Restless*). But *Forbidden Love* presented a few innovative features for a Turkish audience: a careful depiction of class division and a script which did include some fairly explicit sexual scenes – a rare feature not only in Turkish soaps but in soaps in general. As a result of its liberal portrayal of sexuality, *Forbidden Love* drew the sharp criticism of Family and Women's Affairs Minister Selma Aliye Kavaf from the AKP party (Dişli Zibak, 2010). Another sign of the AKP's disapproval of the series can be found in the Turkish Higher Board of Radio and Television's (RTÜK) decision to fine the broadcasting channel (Kanal D) twice, on the grounds that the show was threatening Turkish family values³. In the same vein, the RTÜK recently exerted pressure on the producers of another television series (*1 Erkek 1 Kadın* – “One Man, One Woman”), on the grounds that their two lead (unmarried) characters ought to get married in the interest of promoting greater morality (Hürriyet Daily News, 2012b).

3 The report, only available in Turkish, is mentioned by Tunç (2010) and in Hürriyet Daily News (2013).

MAGNIFICENT CENTURY

Muhteşem Yüzyıl (“Magnificent Century”) is a historical soap opera based on the life of the tenth Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent, who reigned on the Ottoman Empire from 1520 to his death in 1566. While much of the series depicts Suleiman's accession and exercise of power, from daily politics to the preparation of bloody military campaigns against Christian Europe, the series heavily focuses on the intrigue and rivalries within Suleiman's harem, in particular between Mahidevran (mother to Suleiman's first born child) and Hürrem / Roxelana, daughter of a Ukrainian Orthodox priest, kidnapped by raiders in Crimea and sent to be a palace slave. After converting to Islam, Roxelana was eventually freed and became the Sultan's lawful wife, bearing him five children and allegedly advising Suleiman on matters of state, in particular with regard to the Ottoman Empire's foreign relations with European countries (such as the Polish state).

Due the centrality of the historical figure of Suleiman in Turkish identity discourses (Henne, 2012), *Magnificent Century* was probably bound to be a divisive issue for contemporary political forces in Turkey. In a general context of “ottomania” (Tokyay, 2011), the portrayal of the political weight of women via the harem on the affairs of the Ottoman Empire seems to have particularly upset conservative forces within the AKP party (Fawler, 2011b). Despite the series' excellent ratings in Turkey and abroad, the portrayal of the Sultan as a womaniser, alcohol-drinker hedonist apparently offended over 70'000 viewers, who complained to the RTÜK – the latter eventually demanding an apology from the broadcasting channel for “wrongly exposing the

privacy of a historical person" (Fawler, 2011a). Erdoğan himself denounced *Magnificent Century* as "an attempt to insult our past, to treat our history with disrespect and an effort to show our history in a negative light to the younger generations" (quoted in Rohde, 2012b). He later publicly blamed the people involved in the diffusion of the television series: "That's not the Suleiman we know. Before my nation, I condemn both the director of this series and the owner of the television station. We have already alerted the authorities, and we are awaiting a judicial decision." (quoted in Zalewski, 2012) In an obvious attempt to distance himself from Erdoğan and to consolidate his stature as a potential successor, Turkish President Abdullah Gül then welcomed the contribution of *Magnificent Century* to the spread of Turkish culture and values (Dombey, 2012).

Yet, in stark contrast with the stir caused in Turkey, it is estimated that *Magnificent Century* attracted around 150 million viewers in the Middle East, the Balkans and the Turkic republics (Altıntaş, 2012). To take an example, the series has been particularly successful in Greece, with 1.2 million viewers per episode, prompting analysts to talk about "soap opera diplomacy"⁴ (Moore, 2013).

THE TURKISH FORMULA: CULTURE, COSTS AND COURAGE

The first obvious reason behind the suc-

4 As a matter of fact, the Greek interest in Turkish soap predates the *Magnificent Century* and goes back to 2005, when the television series *Yabancı Dama* ("The Foreign Groom") was first aired in Greece under the title "The Borders of Love". Subtitled but not dubbed, "The Borders of Love" was a love story between the poor son of Turkish baklava-makers and the rich daughter of a Greek ship tycoon.

cess of Turkish television series in the Middle-East and in the Balkans is the fact that Turkish plots are culturally appealing to audiences which have a share in the Ottoman/Muslim history as well as to audiences which can identify with the Turkish way of life displayed in the series, while still being attracted by certain forms of modernity. As explained by Bahrain's Culture Minister Mai bint Mohammed Al Khalifa in an interview:

« [Contemporary Turkish] series present an image of stability wherein contemporary practices and Western lifestyles can co-exist with Islamic and Arab identities and culture. The image both types of series reflect of Turkey is of an open and engaging culture, which seems to have found some balance between the different traditions and practices of today's world and which has both an Eastern and Western appeal. This is very attractive to Bahraini and Arab audiences and presents us with an interesting cultural dialogue and scope for exchange between Arabs and Turks today. » (Yinanç, 2012 – emphasis by the authors)

Sina Koloğlu, leading critic for the newspaper *Milliyet*, offers an interesting though polemic variation on the same issue, pointing as well to economic and technical considerations such as the production costs of Turkish Series and the learning curve of the Turkish television industry:

« U.S. cultural imperialism is finished. Years ago we took reruns of 'Dallas' and 'The Young and the Restless.' Now Turkish screenwriters have learned to adapt these shows to local themes with Muslim storylines, Turkish production values have improved, and Asians and Eastern Europeans are buying Turkish series, not American or Brazilian or Mexican ones. They get the same

cheating and the children out of wedlock and the incestuous affairs but with a Turkish sauce on top. » (quoted in Kimmelman, 2010 – emphasis by the authors)

Nevertheless, the mere introduction of Muslim/Turkish cultural features at cheap production costs is not sufficient to guarantee success – and does not do justice to the creative audacity of Turkish screenwriters. Indeed, Turkish soaps routinely tackle in a very frontal manner hotly-debated cultural themes and religious taboos such as the daily emotional and sexual life of an unmarried couple (“One Man, One Woman”); extra-marital affairs, complex sexuality (“Forbidden Love”); non-standard family models and moral dilemmas (“A Thousand and One Nights”); alcohol consumption and privacy of major historical figures (“Magnificent Century”); abortion (“Noor”); drinking, swearing and smoking (“Behzat Ç” – see Public Radio International, 2012).

Yet, the most salient recurring issue in Turkish soaps is certainly the emancipation of women, who are overwhelmingly depicted as unveiled, witty, independent, sexually active, emotionally complex individuals, blossoming in their professional life, sometimes actively intervening in the murky business of politics and consistently demanding equal rights and equal treatment to their husbands. It is in this sense that Professor Aslı Tunç from the Istanbul Bilgi University describes the plots of most Turkish soaps as “progressive and liberating” (Moore, 2013). Keeping in mind that the Arab viewers of Turkish soaps are mostly women (Worth, 2008; Moore, 2013), one may sincerely wonder whether female viewers will long accept the discrepancy between the equality they could glimpse at on prime-time and the inferior status to which they are often subjected in real life. Additional research along these

lines will be much needed in the years to come to help us understand the effective contribution of the Turkish television industry on the evolution of gender relationships within Arab societies.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: THE PARADOX OF SOAP POWER TURKEY

The booming Turkish television industry is at the heart of an interesting paradox.

On the one hand, Turkish series are hugely successful both domestically and internationally, representing a major economic / trade interest, with important repercussions for tourism. Surveys on the international image of Turkey have highlighted the decisive contribution of the Turkish television soap operas with 78% of Arab respondents reporting watching at least one Turkish series during the year (Salem, 2011). The same survey concluded that:

« *The impact of watching hours of these Turkish soap operas cannot be underestimated as they have the effect of creating attachment, understanding, and affection for Turkish identity, culture, and values among wide regional publics. Like Egyptian TV and cinema created a prominent cultural place for Egypt in previous decades, Turkish television has made similar inroads in Arab (and Iranian) popular culture. This has been complemented by a wave of tourism to Turkey in which Arabs and Iranians from various classes and walks of life have visited Turkey and become familiar and attached to its towns and cities, history and monuments, culture and people.* » (Salem, 2011:6-7 – emphasis by the authors)

The Turkish government even considers its television industry as an official instrument

of foreign policy, as evidenced by the decision to air the series free of charge internationally or by recent declarations of AKP Vice Culture and Tourism Minister Abdurrahman Arıcı⁵ (Hürriyet Daily News, 2012a).

Yet on the other hand, the liberal approach to societal and religious issues, which is precisely the reason why millions of Turkish and Arab viewers eagerly watch these soaps, is being increasingly contested domestically by fractions of the AKP. Accusations of immorality have flourished in political discourses and the RTÜK has fined producers for underpinning Turkish family values. It is in this sense that Rohde (2012b) talks of Turkish soaps as an illustration of the “culture war” within Islam. Although surely excessive, the expression “culture war” points to the real (and universal) challenge of finding an acceptable articulation between cultural liberties (in particular the freedom of cultural expression) and public order.

Turkish screenwriters have succeeded in extending the perimeters of cultural liberties by tackling increasingly sensitive issues – in so doing, they met opposition and provoked teeth-grinding, but they were protected from open censorship by the success of their series, which they could invoke as a sign of societal endorsement. But borders are meant to be tested and the industry is now moving into even more burning issues than sexuality and the Ottoman past – namely the treatment of the Kurdish minority⁶ (Krajeski, 2012).

5 A. Arıcı declared that “With TV series we can enter every house and spread the influence of Turkish culture” (Hürriyet, 2012a).

6 After the complaint filed by Selahattin Demirtaş, chairman of the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party, against four Turkish soaps deemed anti-Kurdish, producers launched *Ayrılık Olmasaydı*, the first openly Kurdish soap.

LIST OF REFERENCES

Altıntaş B., 2012. Turkey debates soap opera that angered prime minister. *Today's Zaman*, 27 November.

The Balkan Chronicle, 2010. Turkish Soap Operas Take Balkans by Storm, 31 December.

Bucciante A., 2010. Dubbed Turkish soap operas conquering the Arab world: social liberation or cultural alienation? *Arab Media & Society* 10, Spring. Available at: <http://www.arabmediasociety.com/?article=735>

Bugdayci C., 2011. The soft power of Turkish television. *Southeast European Times*, July 23.

Dişli Zibak F., 2010. Do TV series pose a threat to family values? *Today's Zaman*, 21 February.

Dombey D., 2012. Erdogan, Gul and the magnificent Sultan. *The World – Financial Times Blog*, November 29. Available at: <http://blogs.ft.com/the-world/2012/11/erdogan-gul-and-the-magnificent-sultan/>(restricted access)

Fawler S., 2011a. Magnificent Century divides Turkish TV viewers over the life of Suleiman. *The Guardian | The Observer*, March 20

Fawler S., 2011b. The Dirt, and the Soap, on the Ottoman Empire. *New York Times*, 17 March.

Gonzalez-Quijano Y., 2008. Passions turques: un truc de femmes. *Culture et Politique Arabes*, August. Available online at: <http://cpa.hypotheses.org/263>

Henne P., 2012. Of Sultans and Soap Operas. *Huffington Post*, 30 November.

Hintz L., 2012. Reading Turkish Politics

Interestingly, the Turkish State did not ban this highly political production, but demanded that the series be in Turkish rather than in Kurdish. The use of the word “Kurd” is also prohibited, prompting characters to resort to euphemistic expressions such as “Let’s just say she is from Diyarbakır”.

from a Soap Opera. *Foreign Policy*, 7 December
Hürriyet Daily News, 2013. RTÜK to decide
 on length of lovemaking scenes in Turkish TV
 series, 11 January.

Hürriyet Daily News, 2012a. Works con-
 tinue to give TV series to foreigners for free.
 12 October

Hürriyet Daily News, 2012b. State pressure
 in Turkey leads unmarried TV couples to tie
 the knot, 30 May 30.

Al-Jazeera, 2008. Saudi scholar issues TV
 death fatwa, 13 September.

Kimmelman M., 2010. Turks Put Twist in
 Racy Soaps. *New York Times*, 17 June.

Krajewski J., 2012. Turkey: Days of Their
 Lives, *Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting*, 30
 March.

Matthews O., 2011. The Arab World's
 'Dallas'. *Newsweek*, 5 September.

Moore R., 2013. Soap Opera Diplomacy:
 Turkish TV in Greece. *The International*, 12
 February.

Oxford Business Group, 2012. Soap pow-
 er: The sweeping success of Turkish television
 series. *The Report: Turkey 2012*. Available at:
<http://www.oxfordbusinessgroup.com/news/soap-power-sweeping-success-turkish-television-series>

Public Radio international, 2012. Turkish
 TV show Behzat C draws ire of censors, ado-
 ration of public, 3 December. Available online
 at: <http://www.pri.org/stories/arts-entertainment/turkish-tv-show-behzat-c-draws-ire-of-censors-adoration-of-public-12250.html>

Radic N., 2010. Turkish soap opera at-
 tracts regional audience. *Southeast European
 Times*, 20 December.

Rohde D., 2012a. The Islamic World's
 Culture War, Played Out on TV Soap Operas
The Atlantic, 9 March.

Rohde D., 2012b. Inside Islam's cul-
 ture war. *Opinion*, Reuters, 8 March. Avail-

able at: <http://blogs.reuters.com/david-rohde/2012/03/08/inside-islams-culture-war/>

Salem P. 2011. Turkey's image in the Arab
 World, *TESEV Foreign Policy Programme*, May.
 Available at: http://www.tesev.org.tr/Upload/Publication/de444c67-2c2d-4312-bb59-e902e-b944e50/Paul_Salem_FINAL.pdf

Tokay M., 2011. "Ottomania" on the rise
 in Turkey. *SES Türkiye*, 17 October.

Tristram P., 2009. Noor, or Gümüş, the Arab
 World's Most Popular Television Soap Opera.
Middle East Issues. Available at: <http://middleeast.about.com/od/mediacultureandthearts/a/noor-tv-show.htm>

Tunç A., 2010. Aşk-i Memnu: A recent hype
 of glamour, love and deception. *News Etc.*, 27
 June. Available at: <http://en.habervesaire.com/haber/1884/>

Utkan H. 2011. Series boost Turkish "soft
 power" in region. *Hürriyet Daily News*, 5 April.

Worth R., 2008. Arab TV Tests Societies'
 Limits With Depictions of Sex and Equality.
New York Times, 26 September.

Yinanç B. 2012. Turkish soap operas pro-
 vide chance for dialogue with Arabs. *Hürriyet
 Daily News*, 5 April.

Zalewski P., 2012. Why Is Turkey's Prime
 Minister at War with a Soap Opera? *Time*, 26
 December.