TRT WORLD research centre

The Lasting Appeal of Turkish Entertainment

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(TRT - Anadolu Agency)

Soft power has become increasingly important in today's world with its changing global dynamics. This policy outlook looks at Turkish soap operas and analyses the trajectory of, and factors contributing to, their internationalisation. It highlights the impact of Turkish drama series on regional perceptions of the country along with support for its policies. Outlining regional challenges to Turkish entertainment as a modality of Turkish soft power, the policy outlook finally examines how and why Turkish soft power is likely to prevail when it comes to winning hearts and minds across the world.

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Soft power has become increasingly important in today's world with its changing global dynamics. This policy outlook looks at the Turkish entertainment industry, particularly Turkish drama series, as they have taken to screens around the world and analyses the trajectory of, and factors contributing to, their internationalisation such as local industry dynamics, governmental support, cultural affinities, as well as conditions in importing countries. It highlights the impact of Turkish drama series on regional perceptions of the country along with support for its policies as Turkey solidifies its position as a regional power and a 'middle country'. Following from that, the policy outlook outlines regional challenges to Turkish entertainment as a modality of Turkish soft power with entertainment becoming a competitive space for influence and forecasts how and why Turkish entertainment media, and consequently Turkish soft power, will prevail when it comes to winning hearts and minds across the world.

Internationalisation of Turkish Television Dramas

Turkey's entertainment sector, particularly its soap operas, has been gaining popularity worldwide in the last two decades. Television soap operas only became popular domestically in the 1980s, with the industry growing rapidly post 1993 when private television channels proliferated. Prior to that, television programming was solely under the domain of Turkish public broadcaster, Turkish Radio and Television (TRT). After private channels became operational in 1993, foreign content such as Latin American telenovelas proved to be very popular and drove many to private channels for entertainment. Alongside that, local private channels produced their own entertainment programs and hired local production companies to do so, which led to the migration of local labour from film and theatre to television, establishment of new production companies and nurturing of skilled television and production professionals. On the supply side, this led to an increase in the supply of film and television graduates. By the late 1990s, instead of the Latin American telenovelas, Turkish audiences preferred local series, reflected in primetime slots reserved for them. This soon gave rise to intense competition for ratings and advertising revenues amongst production companies, which led to enormous big-budget productions. For example, $1.3 million was spent to produce just the first two weeks of *Oyle Bir Gecer Zaman Ki*, or Time Goes By. Consequently, big-budget productions demanded higher returns, and if high returns did not materialise, the intense competition between television channels led to the cancellation of new series within just six episodes. To recoup the money they spent on production, Turkish producers sought foreign markets to export the high-quality entertainment products to. This trend only continued in the early 2000s when the overall economic picture of the country improved dramatically, leading to a massive increase in advertising budgets and expenditures. Given the intense competition for ratings and advertising revenues, production companies felt the need to produce higher quality output that would attract bigger audiences.

While the first Turkish television drama to be exported was *Deli Yurek*, or Crazy Heart, in 1997, which was sold to Kazakhstan state television for only US$30 per episode, even better quality programming later on not only attracted larger domestic audiences but also triggered a search for new markets. Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan were the first foreign markets for Turkish entertainment products. By 2001, buyers mostly from Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan had bought 65 Turkish dramas. *Yabanci Damat*, or Foreign Groom, became a hit in Greece in 2005 featuring a story about a Greek man marrying a Turkish woman.

However, the major sale came in 2008 when three Arab satellite channels; the Middle East Broadcasting Centre (MBC), Dubai TV, and Abu Dhabi TV acquired the rights to the series *Gumus*, or Noor, and began to air it in 20 countries across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The drama's final episode drew in more than 85 million viewers. A selection of international hits included *Binbir Gece*, or A Thousand and One Nights, that depicted a reputable architect's son suffering from a disease, *Ask-i Memnu*, or Forbidden Love, that depicted a wealthy widower's quest for love and *Muhtesem Yuzyil*, or The Magnificent Century, that portrayed the life of Ottoman Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent. By 2013, The Magnificent Century became a global hit with an audience of more than 200 million people in 50 countries. Between 2005 and 2011, the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism confirmed that Turkey was able to export more than 36,000 hours of programming. By 2013, more than 100 Turkish dramas were exported to more than 80 countries and brought in $100 million in foreign revenue. Each episode was priced between $15,000 and $150,000. Remake rights were also sold internationally. For example, the broadcast channel ATV sold the remake rights of the Turkish drama *Ezel* to several international markets including Belgium. More recently, Turkish Radio and Television (TRT) developed and produced *Diriliş: Ertuğul* depicting the life of Ertuğrul, father of the 13th-century founder of the Ottoman Empire, which was strongly supported by the then TRT Deputy Director Mr Ibrahim Eren, gripped audiences globally. Export revenues grew exponentially reaching $180 million by 2014. The Turkish government hopes export revenues will cross $1 billion by 2023.



(Ahmet Dumanlı - Anadolu Agency)

Government support also played a role in terms of supply-side factors associated with increasing international appeal of Turkish drama series. The Turkish government provided financial support to content producers and distributors to attend international trade shows, organise trade tours to potential buyer countries and provide logistical support to host trade shows in Turkey bringing international television professionals on platforms such as Discop West Asia and Discop Istanbul. Government officials were quick to support the private sector given that 'distributors and producers had already been able to establish their presence in the global marketplace'.

When the ruling AK Party (Justice and Development Party) came to power in 2002, it promoted a 'pragmatic vision for the co-existence of Islam and democracy'. Tracing the trajectory of how the AK Party promoted Turkish soft power, researcher Bayram Balci at CERI Sciences Po Paris wrote that: This was evident also in the depiction of soft power via:

> "Turkish culture, soap operas, series, and consumer brands became increasingly popular not only in Turkey's immediate neighbourhood, but also in Africa, India, and even in South America... While these [Turkish] series revolved around family life and romance in a traditional conservative Muslim context, as well as Turkey's Ottoman past, they were able to garner a widespread following due to their ability to associate Turkish cultural specificities and history with modern life, even for non-Turkish viewers."

Another key factor is the cultural proximity theory, which suggests that media from culturally affiliated countries are able to garner more attention and engagement from an audience than those from countries considered less culturally close. That may explain the Turkish drama series' appeal for audiences in the MENA region. However, media researchers proposed that 'neo-Ottoman cool' – a term used to describe the Turkish version of modernity, combining Islam, secularism, and capitalism – was behind the popularity of Turkish popular culture, specifically Turkish soap operas, that have become the 'main symbol' of Turkey's soft power in the Arab world. Others, however, believed that this was 'implausible given historical tensions and post-empire disconnects' between the Arab world and Turkey. They further elaborated that 'class, age, gender, and personal history–related differences of the audience' also played a role. Additionally, the cultural proximity theory does not explain the popularity of Turkish soap operas in markets considered culturally different to Turkey such as Brazil and Poland.

While the cultural proximity theory is viable for culturally proximal markets, it is important to note that Turkish producers tend to focus on productions with universal themes and melodramatic storylines. This is aligned with the concept of delocalisation i.e. "minimisation of certain kinds of cultural specificities in a cultural product to lower the possibility of a cultural discount by the foreign audience." This points towards 'multiple proximities' such as shared cross-cultural genre structures and narrative themes, along with cultural affinity, accounting for the popularity of Turkish drama series globally.

Conditions in importing countries can be another factor when understanding the popularity of Turkish drama series. As highlighted by Alankuş and Yanardağoğlu:

> "...economic and cultural attraction may not always be audience admiration and consumption-driven, but they may be contingent on a number of factors such as national and global television market dynamics as well as entrepreneurial initiatives."

A couple of examples come to mind. The first one is associated with the 2008 financial crisis when many Balkan and Eastern European channels had to buy Turkish content as local production ground to a halt and Turkish content was of high quality and affordable. The 'influence of shifts in foreign policy' was one of the four major factors identified with the success of Turkish soap operas in the Arab world. The second example is associated with international relations between other countries: due to hostile relations between Pakistan and India, recurrent bans on Indian content in Pakistan have led to Pakistani distributors and television networks exploring Turkish content instead.

International Impact

Though the connection is unconfirmed between the skyrocketing popularity of Turkish drama series within the past decade and international perception of the country, when the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV) conducted public opinion surveys in 2009 in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iraq, and Iran, results unexpectedly showed an uptick in Turkey's image. While the surveys conducted by TESEV from 2009 till 2012 on perceptions of Turkey in the MENA

region and Iran cannot be expected to provide a complete and wholly-accurate view of public opinion, they do offer a broad view of perceptions.

A survey conducted by BILGESAM in 2010-11 titled 'The Perception of Turkey and Turks in Egypt' had similar findings with more than 60 percent of Egyptians considering Turkey to be an effective role model for the Middle East. The 2011 Arab Attitudes survey, an annual poll conducted by IBOPE Zogby International, also confirmed the findings of the 2010-2011 BILGESAM survey's findings. According to the survey, the results were surprising given that Turkey's image in the Arab world had been negative throughout most of the twentieth century.

The fact that Turkish drama series were so popular across much of the Muslim world may be because Turkish drama series "were not about wars in the Muslim lands like Homeland, or fiery sagas warning against unwashed villainous Muslim invaders: Here Muslims were kings." The content, reflecting human and societal issues within Turkey, sparked conversations about many things relevant to the Muslim world.



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Linking Turkey's positive image to Turkish soap operas, Cerami (2013) stated that the "popularity of Turkish television series, from the Balkans to the Middle East, has brought Turkey to an international audience and is subtly transforming the image of the country abroad." The Government of Turkey itself has recognised the power of Turkish drama series in terms of soft power promotion. According to researchers:

> "[W]ith [these] television series [Turkey] can enter every house and spread the influence of Turkish culture', observes a government official, noting that 'two or three television series accomplish a publicity campaign [worth of] millions of dollars."

Joseph Nye was the first to popularise the term 'soft power' in 1990 and defined it as a kind of power that is "significantly based on intangible factors, such as the system of values, lifestyles and cultural models not imposed coercively." The increasingly acknowledged importance of soft power is linked with an evolving international system that highlights the fact that transnational relations are no longer restricted to intergovernmental relations.

The Turkish entertainment industry is comparable in terms of its soft power reach to Hollywood. Hollywood movies have shaped ideas and images of economic, political and societal development. The South Korean entertainment industry is another example. Riding the successful Korean wave, or 'Hallyu', the popularity of Korean films, dramas and music has skyrocketed since 2010, particularly in the Asian region and specifically in China. Some even consider the Turkish 'dizi' as even more influential than Hollywood itself. According to Fatima Bhutto, whose analysis of Turkish drama series is mostly based on the wildly successful *Diliriş Ertuğrul*, Turkish drama series' ability to balance middle-class conservatism with secular modernity is key for its international appeal – unlike Hollywood, and even Bollywood and K-Pop that appear to increasingly emulate American culture, as "Turkish television shows blazed through...because their heroes were modern, but not westernised [and] propelled purely by the righteous power of values." Turkish drama series' popularity across the globe signals an end to the hegemony of American culture and is also a sign of growing Turkish soft power.

As Turkey approaches a bona fide 'middle power' status as a state that acts as a guardian "of the global balance of power protecting peace and order in the international system", soft power in the form of Turkish drama series have proved to be effective instruments of public diplomacy, taken in the context of middle powers "being widely accepted to be bridge-builders, striving to link up different clusters of states built around certain interests and ideas", as they effectively balance modernity with old-world values interwoven in the storylines. Their popularity now spans the globe, from the Middle East to North Africa, from South Asia to South America. Turkish drama series have certainly added to Turkey's status as a regional leader and middle power, becoming natural steps on the way to greater recognition as a global actor.

Challenges to the Turkish Film and Television Industry

WIn early 2018, the Dubai-based, Saudi-owned, media group MBC spokesperson Mazen Hayek announced via Emirati media that they were going to ban Turkish drama series without providing any explanation. At the time, all shows with Turkish origins were immediately taken off air in Saudi Arabia as well as the United Arab Emirates. This is despite Turkish soap operas' massive popularity in the Arab world.

Though there was no explanation provided, it was denounced by Turkish officials as a 'political move', considering Turkey supported Qatar during the Gulf states' blockade of the country which was led by Saudi Arabia. These countries included Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt. Turkish support for Qatar also accompanied troop deployment in the country. Turkish officials' claim of the removal of Turkish soap operas from MBC channels is supported by the fact that the CEO of the media conglomerate, Mr Walid al-Ibrahim, had recently been released after being imprisoned for three months as part of the Saudi Crown Prince's allegedly anti-corruption purge impacting many Saudi businessmen and officials.

There may have been objections to Turkish content in terms of both suitability in conservative Gulf states as well as profitability with Turkish content costing the film and TV industries of allies such as Egypt and Lebanon. However, according to Turkish film critic Mr Burcak Evren, these objections were not related to the blanket ban which was 'purely political'; the fact that it was a blanket ban and not targeted in terms of banning only the historical-based ones or the morally objective ones supports this assertion. Egypt, an ally of Saudi Arabia and the UAE followed suit by also banning all Turkish content in the country while Egypt's *Dar Al-Iftaa*, one of the Middle East's oldest and most influential bodies responsible for issuing religious edicts, reportedly published a statement or 'fatwa' accusing Turkey of trying to create an 'area of influence' for itself in the Middle East using its soft power. According to the Middle East Monitor, the statement targeted the *Diriliş Ertuğrul* for aiming to "revive the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East and regain sovereignty over Arab countries which were previously under Ottoman rule."

This was shortly after the Kuala Lumpur (KL) Summit was held in December 2019. According to then-Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad in November 2019, five countries - Malaysia, Indonesia, Turkey, Qatar and Pakistan - were to be the 'pioneers of the Kuala Lumpur Summit' that will discuss issues facing the Muslim ummah including those relevant to peace, security and defence; trade and investment; and technology and internet governance. The KL Summit 2019 was considered a direct threat to the Saudi-led Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), with the OIC Secretary General Yousef al-Othaimeen, a Saudi national, criticising it as an attempt to divide the Muslim world. Saudi Arabia reportedly considered the summit to be the wrong forum to address issues of the Muslim world, while some analysts believed the country feared being diplomatically isolated by regional rivals who were supposed to be attending including Iran, Qatar and Turkey. Curiously, or perhaps not so much, Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan abruptly cancelled his scheduled attendance following a visit to Saudi Arabia prior to the summit. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan pointed out that he was "unsurprised about reports that Saudi Arabia pressured Pakistan not to attend a summit for Muslim leaders in Malaysia" while adding that "it was not the first time that Riyadh had threatened Islamabad." Perhaps he was referring to alleged Saudi displeasure at the prospect of airing Turkish content, particularly *Diriliş Ertuğrul*, on Pakistani national television, which was ordered by PM Khan himself in early December 2019. Indeed, employees of Pakistan national television who were a part of the team responsible for dubbing the eagerly awaited drama series posted social media videos in early January 2020 claiming they had been told the project had been shelved without any further explanation. Given Saudi highhandedness when it came to Pakistan attending the KL Summit, it is reasonable to expect the kingdom to continue to extract a price for helping a cash-strapped Pakistan as it faced an economic crisis in late 2018. Given the widespread popularity of the series in the MENA region, as well as the positive impact on perceptions of Turkey as noted above, Saudi Arabia may have expected Pakistani leadership to follow suit and ban, not encourage, Turkish content viewership in the country.

However, state-run Pakistan Television Corporation (PTV) aired *Diriliş Ertuğrul* in April 2020, and PM Khan once again reiterated support for the drama series, claiming it to depict a "life with values" and being reflective of Islamic culture. Even though PM Khan had ordered PTV to air the Turkish TV series in November 2019, the timing of its broadcast in April 2020 appears to be linked to a visit by President Erdoğan to Pakistan in February 2020 where he addressed the Pakistani Parliament for a record fourth time, more than any other international leader, seemingly signalling the strength of the Turkey-Pakistan relationship in spite of Pakistani leadership cancelling their attendance at the KL Summit as noted above. Like the MENA region, as well as other parts of the world where Turkısh content is popular, *Diriliş Ertuğrul* was well-received in Pakistan also.



President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdogan (2nd R) takes part a joint session of Pakistan's National Assembly and Senate in Islamabad, Pakistan, on November 17, 2016. (Kayhan Özer - Anadolu Agency)

This could be construed as an illustration of diverging Saudi and Turkish convictions of what regional leadership, particularly as experts contend Turkey's resurgence as a regional power amidst a fractured Gulf, entails, as well as a vision for the future when it comes to regional cohesion and cooperation. Saudi leadership appears to follow a *quid pro quo* approach with a price for all support extended to countries like Pakistan that the kingdom considers to be long-time alliances, whereas Turkish leadership appears to appreciate the inherent value in maintaining long-term alliances despite differences. Additionally, Turkish foreign policy appears to be value-based and responsive to hard realities of power struggles with Turkey projecting its sense of identity and history in all international engagements but respecting and encouraging inclusive approaches and efforts. This is in contrast to Saudi foreign policy, which has grown to be reportedly more reckless and short-sighted under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, leading a blockade against Qatar, orchestrating the house arrest of Lebanese Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri, the diplomatic row with Canada over human rights issues, the disastrous war in Yemen and the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, to name a few examples from the recent past. Perhaps most importantly given the context of Pakistan, Saudi Arabia did not condemn India for continuing human rights violations against Kashmiri Muslims in Indian administered Kashmir due to, allegedly as per analysts, India's growing economic clout. Turkey, on the other hand, was one of the few countries to publicly call out the Indian leadership for their blatant disregard for Kashmiris' human rights.

This may forecast how and why Turkish entertainment media, and consequently Turkish soft power, will prevail when it comes to winning hearts and minds across the world. Saudi Arabia and the UAE produced a $40 million series shot in Tunisia titled *'Mamalik el-Nar'* or Kingdoms of Fire, meant to reveal the 'the fierce history behind the Ottoman state' in the words of the producer himself as it depicts supposed exploitation of the Arabs by the Turks. As per Table 1 below that compares the objectives, production, distribution strategies and international reception of *Mamalik el-Nar* and *Diriliş Ertuğrul*, IMDb ratings of the former show suggest it did not perform as well as the latter, with some viewers stating it to be 'full of lies', with experts asserting the show to be resulting from growing Saudi-UAE animosity towards Turkish influence in the region.

Table 1: **A comparison of *Mamalik el-Nar* with *Diriliş Ertuğrul***

TV Series	Diriliş Ertuğrul	Mamalik el-Nar
Objective	A Turkish Radio and Television (TRT) representative stated that the series 'aim to strengthen the nationhood sentiment of Turkish people by teaching the audience how the Turkish state came into existence, through a combination of history and quality entertainment'	As per experts, the main purpose is to diminish Turkey's soft power in the region and undermine its credibility in the eyes of Arab nations.
First Episode	December 2014	November 2019
Premiered	Turkish public channel TRT 1	Private media channel Middle East Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) backed by Saudi Arabia
Plot	Story of 13th-century Ertuğrul Gazi, a warrior and the father of Osman, the founder of the Ottoman Empire, depicting the Turkish nomads' struggle against a myriad of adversaries including crusaders, Mongols and Christian Byzantines.	Highlight the violence of the Ottomans' domination of the Arab world in the early 16th century during and after the last era of the Mamluks.
Director	Metin Güney (Turkish)	Peter Webber (British)
Producer	Turkish production company, supported by TRT.	UAE production company, supported by MBC of which 60 percent of shares are owned by Saudi Arabia.
Episodes	150 (Seasons 1-5)	14 (Season 1)
Budget	44 million US Dollar (USD) (December 2014 USD-TRY exchange rate)	40 million US Dollar (USD)
International Broadcast	Broadcast on private and/or state channels in 60+ countries. Also available on Netflix in select countries.	Broadcast on MBC, a Saudi channel. Also available on Netflix in select countries.
Language(s)	Turkish. TRT dubbed series in Arabic, Urdu, Spanish, Russian and Kiswahili on YouTube. Other languages to follow.	Arabic.
Challenge(s)	Saudi Arabia's Dubai-based media group MBC removed Turkish shows including Diliris Ertuğrul from its biggest TV networks in 2018. Egypt's Global Fatwa Index (GFI) reportedly issued a fatwa in 2020, indicating that the drama aims to revive the Ottoman Empire and regain sovereignty over Arab countries. Thus, it must not be watched or supported by Muslims.	Turkish viewers, including journalists and politicians, considered the show to be targeted harassment.
International Endorsement(s)	Pakistan PM Imran Khan praised the show in a public speech. State-owned channel PTV dubbed it in Urdu and broadcast it in April 2020. Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro visited the set of Diriliş Ertuğrul in 2018 with his wife.	
IMDb Rating *(as of May 2020)*	7.7/10 (20,635 votes)	5.5/10 (824 votes)

Source: TRT World Research Centre



Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro (L) and his wife Cilia Flores (R) visit the set of famous Turkish TV show "Dirilis Ertugrul", which is broadcasted in 65 other countries, in Beykoz district of Istanbul, Turkey on July 10, 2018. (Orhan Akkanat - Anadolu Agency)

Hopes and Aspirations

Public diplomacy is a key priority for Turkey and has been over the past two decades. Besides film and television, including international broadcasting, Turkey's public diplomacy initiatives include humanitarian aid, or what has become known as 'humanitarian diplomacy' also. Having provided humanitarian assistance to many countries ranging from Central Asia to Latin America, Turkey is now recognised as one of the largest humanitarian assistance providers in terms of percentage of gross national income.

Even though the UAE was a pioneer of soft power in the Gulf while several Saudi government agencies have spent billions of dollars on da'wa (Islamic propagation) activities around the world over the past decades as a public diplomacy outreach effort, both countries, being tightly controlled monarchies, appear to have further stepped up their efforts to use their soft power to further their political agendas that have been coloured by the Arab Spring in 2011 when hopes and aspirations for democratisation and a new social contract were first inspired. While they have appeared to challenge growing Turkish soft power, they seem to not understand the crux of its success in the Muslim world: alignment with the hopes and aspirations of the people for democracy and dignity. When Saudi Arabia and the UAE banned Turkish content, social media users across the region expressed their disappointment. Even as Egypt's highest Islamic authority issued a statement against Muslims consuming Turkish content, Arab tourists flocked to Istanbul. Despite the long wait, Pakistanis are reportedly thrilled to watch *Diliriş Ertuğrul* in their own language, breaking popularity records in the country.

That may be pointing towards the fact that Turkish content is indeed reflective of the hopes and aspirations of the people and resonates with them. Turkey's soft power will only continue to grow via its film and television industry given Turkish content aims to inspire, and not command, hearts and minds.