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TV Series in Turkish Foreign Policy: Aspects of Hegemony and Resistance

Constantinos Constantinou* and Zenonas Tziarras**

Abstract

This article examines the ways in which (pop or) popular culture may fall within the context of foreign policy. More specifically, it situates our analysis against such backdrop by delving into how Turkey effectively exports pop culture, propaganda and positive images of itself via the use of television (TV) shows. To that end, notable Turkish soap operas market its ancient glorious past. Admittedly, these telenovelas form a salient cultural product export for Turkey as they reach diverse and far-away audiences – from Latin America to Russia, Central Asia, North Africa, the Middle East, and the Balkans, to merely name a few.

Paradoxically, the frenzy has even reached places like Greece. Not to mention, Serbia or Israel, with the latter's phenomenal success accompanied also with some backlash. Therefore, the current study seeks to better understand the magnitude alongside the impact of Turkey's achievement given how it comprises a multi-million-dollar industry, by partially unearthing what makes Turkish TV series so powerful the world over. Further, this research firstly presents an analysis of the hegemonic efforts before presenting the limitations to its success by thoroughly covering the empirical data while, theoretically framing it.

Keywords: TV series, Soap Operas, Turkey, Pop Culture, Propaganda, Soft Power, Propaganda

Introduction

The current article aims at understanding how Turkey exports pop culture, propaganda and positive images of itself, as aspects of hegemony, via the use of television (TV) serials. The article examines the recent expansion of the Turkish TV sector and its positive as well as negative reverberations in the regions where serials happened to be transmitted. Further, it provides a discussion on the transnational impact of the Turkish TV series by drawing on various academic and journalistic sources. As such, it strives to provide to the reader a coherent and critical account on the phenomenon under study. Moreover, this article contributes further into the extant literature by placing emphasis on the propagandistic factor as well, an element that happens to be absent in similar analyses such as that by Yoruk and Vatikiodis (2013).

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The main thesis of the article consists of how the growth of the AKP's (Justice and Development Party) domestic hegemony over the years has gradually enabled Turkey to pursue regional and international hegemony thanks also to the TV serials. It synthesizes the essence of the main argument by stating how the more the AKP's legitimacy erodes domestically, the more difficult it is for Ankara to effectively export hegemonic narratives and exert hegemonic power. Indeed, there is an increasing resistance to Turkish TV serials in places like Greece and the Gulf. It must be noted, however, that although a government can surely promote soft power through its agencies, it nonetheless has often a limited control on its contents.

Beyond any shadow of doubt, pop culture happens to be vital as far as the foreign policy procedure is concerned (Holland 2014: 22). Further, one of the most typical and fruitful tactics aimed at showing a positive image of a nation abroad consists of the sharing of its culture via cultural diplomacy; analogous techniques found in public relations may, indeed, prove fertile in public diplomacy too. For instance, using media such as audio-visuals to their full potential lies at the core of the majority of public diplomacy strategies (Pigman 2014: 124).

Turkish pop culture is projected to the Middle East as an instrument of alternative foreign policy (Yanardağoğlu and Karam 2013: 562). In fact, Turkish television series and soap operas happen to be utilised as nation-branding instruments, with the most well-known television soap operas (TSOs or soaps henceforth) actors having joined ambassadors at receptions held at consulates (Yalkin 2017: 1, 6). Turkish TV series first rose to prominence on a global scale in the mid-2000s (Al Arabiya News 2014) – with a wave of Turkish stars given the red carpet treatment all over the Middle East (Sevim 2012). As for the TV series culture in Turkey, it has started to rise exponentially ever since the 1990s (Vitrinel 2017: 2). The exported series – forming a cultural good besides its exported educational services (Ennis and Momani 2013: 1130; Çakır and Akdağ 2017: 339) – depend on a strong mix of slick production, storylines full of passion as well as intrigue, beautiful actors/actresses and iconic Turkish sites.

To be sure, the shows have played their part in projecting a positive image of Turkey, with the Culture Ministry directly connecting the dramas to the recent upsurge in the amount of tourists to Turkey from Arab countries. Needless to say, the CEO of Turkey's Global Agency, that distributes “Magnificent Century” (*Muhteşem Yüzyıl*) plus other recent hits, states that, they are presenting Turkey to millions of viewers, displaying the beautiful scenery along with their lifestyle and traditions and so, ad verbatim, they: have a great influence on people through soft power (Williams 2013).

Against this background, this article seeks to look at how Turkey utilizes TV series as a foreign policy tool in order to export propaganda and positive images about itself, and how these efforts complement the broader aims of Turkish foreign policy (TFP) since the early 2000s. Lastly, the article examines the backlash that TV series have caused in many cases for TFP, thus revealing the limits of Turkey's hegemonic efforts abroad.

Turkish Power and Foreign Policy

The role and importance of TV series/TSOs is best understood when contextualized within the broader framework of TFP and the way it has developed since the early 2000s and the rise of the AKP to power. The elements of Turkish power and the means through which it is projected in foreign policy have been puzzling scholars and pundits for some time. The argument that Turkey is – or could be – a regional power and hegemon (or a rising great power) is not new in the debate about TFP. For example, Malik Mufti refers to former Turkish president, Celal Bayar, who in 1957 talked about Turkey's efforts to become a "little America." Turkish leaderships that followed, especially the AKP, shared this idea which "encapsulates an aspiration for national greatness characterized by economic entrepreneurship and prosperity, dynamic political and social pluralism, and an assertive foreign policy" (Mufti 2011: 1).

The question is, what kind of power does Turkey have and what are its power projection, as well as foreign policy, aspirations? Undeniably, Turkey is a powerful country in terms of "hard power," which is usually measured based on qualitative factors, such as a country's military, economy, geography, and population and the way these factors can be utilized to achieve a state's strategic goals or impose its will on others if need be.¹ In other words, a state's ability to set the (geo)political agenda, thus having an impact on what can be discussed and done according to its own interests, is considered as another component of hard power (Lukes 2005: 20-25). The projection of Turkey's hard power has become much more salient in recent years especially in its military and economic dimension.²

But hard power is only one aspect of national power. Another aspect is that of "soft power." According to Joseph Nye, soft power comprises of the skill to structure a situation in such way that others will desire what you want, that is, develop preferences or define their interests in ways that are in accordance to those of your own nation (Jackson and Sørensen 2013: 184, 313). To illustrate this further, the European Union (EU) accession process of Turkey helped alter its foreign policy apparatuses as it begun employing, say, cultural soft power tools to a bigger extent; with soap operas becoming a significant actor, for example, in Turkey's Balkan relations (Demirta 2015: 135, 137). Indeed, the recent attractiveness of TV series in Arab nations is credited for ameliorating the appeal of Turkey as a point of cultural orientation as well (Clarke 2016: 160).

Soft power is central to this discussion on popular culture, cultural diplomacy and foreign policy. It is also worth underlining that the concept of soft power has been widely utilised to describe the mounting popularity of Turkey in its region and beyond, particularly, owing to its cultural products. Indeed, the aforesaid cultural diplomacy has matched well with the "new era" of TFP. On the whole, the rising visibility of TV series (aired by countless TV stations in the Middle East and the Balkans, with Turkish artists being embraced as celebrities) reflects the wide brand appeal Turkey has relished, serving to beget interest in Turkish language and culture (Fidan 2013: 95). Further, the soft power of Turkey in places such as Africa has been immensely augmented during the past decade and seems to be rising quite rapidly (Ng'ang'a 2018) – not to mention other markets such as Spain (Gonzalez 2018). Within Turkey's milieu, it is worthwhile pointing out the salience of Turkey's soft power in the Sunni Muslim world; especially as President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan already ascertained

himself to be the “Sultan of Soft Power” in the wider Sunni Muslim world, positioning himself as a champion for Palestine in places transcending Turkey and the Sunni Arab world (Garrie 2018).

These two dimensions of national power (hard and soft power) could be ultimately combined into one, that of “smart power” (Nye 2011: 20-23) which, as illustratively put by one author, “heals with the velvet, gloved hand of policy while judiciously resorting to the mailed fist only when extreme circumstances warrant it” (Chong 2015: 233). An older and probably more accurate conception – one could argue – of this kind of power is Antonio Gramsci’s “hegemony.” Explaining the Gramscian hegemony in a statement that strongly resembles the concept of smart power, Robert Cox and Timothy Sinclair write: “Gramsci took over from Machiavelli the image of power as a centaur: half man, half beast, a necessary combination of consent and coercion;” and they go on to add that hegemony prevails “To the extent that the consensual aspect of power is in the forefront” (Cox and Sinclair 1996: 127).

From this perspective, it can be argued that soft power is not really that “soft”, for it works better in a broader power context. Nye himself notes that “soft power resources often work indirectly by shaping the environment for policy, and sometimes take years to produce the desired outcomes” (Nye 2004: 99). Which means that soft power is neither itself the policy nor does it define it; it merely shapes the environment in which policy is conducted, and this policy might well be coercive or hard power centred. In the same vein, Janice Bially Mattern (2005: 583-584) holds that “soft power should not be understood in juxtaposition to hard power but as a continuation of it by different means.” Namely, it is just another way of getting one’s way, not necessarily by coercion but by indirect imposition too. And if soft power is, again, about – helping in – making someone do something that they would not otherwise do, then it is ultimately not that “soft” while, in the grand scheme of things, smart power is not that different from the concept of hegemony either.

Given that in the concept of hegemony “domination is facilitated by the fact that the dominated consent to, and indeed embrace and internalize, the norms and values of the prevailing order,” (Mufti 2011: 4) one could argue that Turkey does not really possess hegemonic power, even though it aspires to, as Arab and Muslim populations states have not fully embraced or internalized Turkish norms and values as the AKP government would like to. There is a rather opposite pattern emerging, with state and non-state actors reacting to Turkey’s hegemonic efforts, that points to the fact that there is a gap between Turkey’s foreign policy aspirations and actual capabilities (for more on the Turkish model, see Göksel 2012; Tziarras 2013; Göksel 2014; Tuğal 2016).

In order for Turkey to successfully manage to break away from its Middle Eastern isolation towards a hegemonic and greater power status, it needs to go beyond the limits of material power (e.g. military and economic), for a state cannot lead without having ideological power. And this is related both to the concept of soft power and the selective use of force in the context of smart power. In short, for Turkey, it is a matter of acquiring hegemonic power and influence. It goes without saying that Turkey’s projection of power, be it material or ideological, is by definition more possible to be impactful in states or regions with closer geographical and cultural proximity to it. For example, it is much more difficult for Turkey to cultivate or capitalize on ideological power in Latin America as opposed to the Middle East or the Balkans. And as the possibility of positive outcomes for Turkey is higher

in such places, similarly, the possibility for a negative backlash is higher as well since the power projection can be more easily perceived negatively.

In what follows, we focus on the aspect of TV series as a means (a soft power/hegemonic foreign policy tool) that seeks to cultivate ideological power in the context of Turkey's broader hegemonic efforts, driven by the AKP's desire to create a distinct and "dynamic cultural axis" as part of its outward and independent foreign policy orientation (Davutoğlu 2010: 159). Moreover, we also look at the backlash and resistance that these efforts have stirred in the domain of TV series – a natural side-effect of hegemonic aspirations.

On TV Series

As already mentioned, Turkish TV series have proved to be quite successful around the globe: from South America, Central Asia, and Pakistan to the Balkans and Russia. In point of fact, if we were to take the last ten years, Turkish TV series have become a main player in the international TV industry as 25 per cent of imported fiction content on a global scale derives from Turkey (Binici 2017). Furthermore, reports rank Turkey as the second-highest exporter of TV series following the United States (US), selling to disparate nations, that is, to more than 140 countries (Daily Sabah 2017), alongside a business volume assessed to surpass \$350 million as of 2017 (Mathai 2017). Removing any room for doubt, the Arab world comprises its largest market (Tokyay 2017), with the industry having gone stratospheric (Ozsoy and Karakaya 2017) even as some series realised phenomenal success in the Arab world and turned stars (e.g., actor Kıvanç Tatlıtuğ and actress Serenay Sarıkaya) into household names (AFP 2018).

To take the example of the US, it must be noted that entertainment shows are characterised by a proclivity to follow the line of the government, particularly, when a national security crisis occurs; for instance, the pro-torture Fox TV drama series *24* (Nacos 2013: 336, 349). The Islamic world's version of US culture war takes place in an extravagantly reproduced 16th century palace; more precisely, in a state-of-the-art television studio in Istanbul. "Magnificent Century" happens to be one of the most popular programs in Turkey (besides being the eminent show in the Middle East), broadcasted in 45 nations, with the programs subtly altering cultural norms (Rohde 2012). Intriguingly, "Magnificent Century" (a slickly shot soap opera which has become a worldwide sensation), is paralleled to "Sex and the City" with fans from Israel (using the Hebrew subtitles, tempting its big Russian-speaking population) and the Arab world, besides viewers from Cairo to Kosovo (Izikovich 2014). Undeniably, some Turkish dramas evoke a reachable modernity (Burkart and Christensen 2013: 5); a modernity that has been attractive to Arabs (Kraidy and Al-Ghazzi 2013: 26), seeing such a flawless Muslim and secular country (Matthews 2011).

The Turkish series, widespread primarily in the Middle East, Balkans and North Africa, have a particularly strong impact with respect to women across the region. Further, in an inspirational film that reveals the impact of TV series on women across the region, about half way (specifically, at 28:40') one can see journalist Nikolaos Hiladakis talking about how the TV series under discussion comprise the "soft political power" of Turkey (Paschalidou 2014). As for Africa, in Morocco, TV series happen to be the most watched TV programs; in fact,

some of these manage to attract up to 6 million viewers per episode (Kasraoui 2017). Not to mention, how the soft power of Turkey – that is, the aspect of its film industry with its TV series – reaches also places like Somalia, too, with Turkish drama series winning over Hollywood and Bollywood as the former last for months whilst providing entertainment on a daily basis (Mohamed 2018).³

Concerning propaganda and manipulation, other than existing for the sake of politics, the aforesaid two words also play a pivotal role in the everyday lives of individuals as well as pop culture (Karakartal 2017). But, what exactly is propaganda? It is when a government tries hard to influence people to think in a specific manner; a practice that has long been around, evident, for example, during the First World War (BBC 2017). Today, in the case under examination, it still manifests itself by having the Turkish government trying to persuade the general public to think of present-day Turkey in their preferred way.

In view of the representation of liberated women on the screen, Arab women have reportedly been filing for divorce with their spouses thanks to Turkish dramas providing a sense of freedom for them (as before, they stayed at home for the majority of time) (Georgiou 2012: 874). Nonetheless, some guess that the TV industry forms part of a hidden agenda to disseminate Turkish power as the government backs the industry with subsidies and funds. Put differently, given how Turkey is notorious for violating media freedom, it is believed that governmental censorship over the content must exist at least to some extent (Kaplan 2016).

Although series like “The Last Emperor” – Turkey’s latest TV blockbuster – may relish superior production values, its message remains the same given how it comprises of state propaganda intended to appeal to watchers’ worst instincts – leaving them with a revisionist, conspiratorial narrative of Turkish history. What is more, the series’ villains actually strongly resemble those imagined by President Erdoğan, with the entwining of conspiracies (e.g. Jewish, Freemasons and other pertaining, for instance, to the Catholic Church) being germane to the grand conspiracy referred to by, again, Erdoğan, and watched over by an obscure puppet-master he calls “the Mastermind;” the title of a documentary aired on a prominent pro-government news channel that, inter alia, exposed how Jews controlled the world for the previous 3,500 years (Erdemir and Kessler 2017).

The Impact of TV Series as a TFP Success

The ubiquitous presence of series such as “Diriliş: Ertuğrul”, relishing top weekly TV ratings, convey the notion that Turkey has a distinctive mission as the heir of a great empire (a nation supposedly established by strong, courageous and wise men). In a scene, the characters talk in the aftermath of a battle regarding the sort of idealised empire they shall create (rewarding talent and intelligence besides martial competence) (Armstrong 2017). A reason behind the witnessed popularity of the dramas in question can be how they mirror the desire of their viewers to escape into an imaginary world that is more comforting in contrast to the chaotic reality of contemporary Turkey. In a severely polarised nation hit by increasing economic trouble and concerned with the war over the border in Syria, these series calms viewers by capitalizing on a satisfying myth of Turkish glory (Armstrong 2017).

Furthermore, Turkish TV series have managed to reach as distant locations as South America, with the “Telenovelas Turcas” – as Turkish dramas are known in Argentina –

contributing to the improvement of cultural relations between the two countries as soap operas bring Turkey to Argentinian living rooms (HDN 2017). In effect, Turkish TV series have replaced Latin American shows exploiting the nostalgia for a system of family values that individuals in the region have lost. Additionally, the TV series travel from Serbia and Albania to Bosnia/Herzegovina and the Black Sea (Hamzic et al. 2013). Intriguingly, however, Erdoğan views places like Kosovo as a neo-Ottoman vassal state, with TV series aiding in strengthening a positive image of Turkey whilst instilling further admiration (Xhambazi 2018).

It becomes evident here then, that the Ottoman Empire is in fashion not only in regards to Turkish politics but, also, to pop culture. One needs to look no further than “Magnificent Century”, the 2011 soap opera cantered on the life of Sultan Süleyman, which ran for five seasons and accumulated fans from 47 countries. Moreover, because of the growing focus on the country’s once glorious ancient past, Turkey’s cultural centres fall short of explicating why the nation’s citizens find themselves divided (S.J. 2016). The TV series comprise a true pop culture phenomenon and are, in fact, the product of a long tradition of Turkish melodrama in cinemas and small screens. The hit “Aşk-ı Memnu” transcended Turkish borders as it was also a huge success in Pakistan, with the last episode watched by more than 90 million people, constituting the first time a foreign drama had relished such high viewership in Pakistan (Achilli 2016).

Alarmingly, some fail to distinguish between watching TV shows like “Reaksiyon” and watching the news. Utilizing extant events as a point of departure, other series like “Kızılmele” aired on national TV serve viewers a hagiography of Turkey’s progressively influential intelligence agency (Zalewski 2015). Additionally, Turkey wishes to augment the bulk of the national cultural product exports to \$2 billion by 2023 (Natividad 2017). Undoubtedly, the Turkish TV industry has become a key economic power in Middle Eastern, southern European and Latin American nations, with TV series positively affecting tourism as followers become so fascinated by the scenes of their favoured shows that go to really see them (Şafak 2016). This reality has actually been termed as “destination marketing” (Koksal and Gjana 2015: 230), and has Istanbul challenging hitherto preferred tourist destinations such as London or Paris (Bilbassy-Charters 2010). It is thus easy to comprehend how great is the power of these TV series whose impact is surely to be taken seriously.

On the whole, TV series constitute a cultural powerhouse (Natividad 2017). They are watched by more than 400 million people, and with the help of very handsome actors, they present a seductive modernity, advertised on giant billboards in Chile (e.g., the Turkish series called “1,001 Nights” was 2014’s most viewed program in this country). All in all, the series have accomplished something that even the best diplomacy strategies would fail to do (Tali 2016). Even charity fundraising events include Turkish TV drama themes such as, Turkish flags, food and music while Erdoğan employed the TV series as a conversation starter when, for example, he visited Chile, Peru and Ecuador. Interestingly enough, in Peru one commentator proclaimed how alike the two nations’ family values happen to be, regardless of their dissimilar religions and cultures (Tali 2016). Lastly, the ongoing overseas success of Turkish TV shows is certainly applauded by Erdoğan, as it bolsters the global image and reputation of Turkey; and yet, the industry emphasizes that it is totally autonomous and free of any government support (Tali 2016).

Speaking of ingredients constituting to this success being also the careful selection of actors, the couple starring in the Turkish series “Wounded Love” (also called “Vatanım Sensin”), Hilal and Leon, made it to TV’s Top Couple 2018; that is, they took the top prize upon the completion of the poll, leaving behind 63 (mainly) American antagonists, regardless of the fact that most Americans did not even know the show and the significant time difference between California and Istanbul (Piester 2018).

With reference to Turkish serials and Greece, turning the heed away from solely TV soap operas, it must be noted that in the TV series in question, an attempt is being made to create the image of Turkey having nothing to be envious of the modern western world. Attention vis-à-vis reality games like the Greek “Survivor”, which comprises yet another Turkish production, is certainly worthwhile given the great impact it relishes. One could take, for example, the symbolism behind one of the episodes where the invited Turkish renowned chef literally fed the hungry – as a result of the financial crisis – Greeks, who had won the “food reward” (Diakantonis 2017). Also, films such as the “Roza of Smyrna” deserve attention as they were produced by the Argonauts SA with the participation of Turkish production company *Sarmaşık Sanatlar* (filmed in both, Greece and Turkey), becoming the highest-grossing movie of the season in Greece – now showing at the 24th Delphi Greek Film Festival (Skoufatoglou 2017). All the more, it is common for Turkish series’ actors to be admired by groups of Greek women (Yörük and Vatikiotis 2013: 2373). That is to say, the multifarious craze appears to be here to stay.

To bring the discussion home, it is thought-provoking, at best, viewing a local (Sigma) TV Channel in Cyprus broadcasting purely Turkish productions for the first time in the history of Cypriot television (that is, at least since 1974 onwards) (Nomikou 2016). And, apart from “Survivor”, now the Turkish TV series “Aşk-I Memnun” airs on the channel of Extra Cyprus. It appears that things have changed in Cyprus as such a move in the past could have been taken by the local channels as a national issue (Philenews 2017).

Bridging Politics with Business: The Marketing Toolbox

In a wider context, the topic under scrutiny may be placed more within the marketing margins. A nexus appears to exist between the marketing function (from a consumption and spending perspective) and the marketing of Turkey’s past (presented as a once glorious empire to sell its present-day unique mission). For example, Turkish soaps widely viewed in the Balkans aid in painting the picture of Turkey as a modern and developed state, and they depict the Ottoman past in a glorious and romanticised manner (Zadrožna 2017: 533).

Theoretically-speaking, there are ten kinds of entities that are being marketed. Apart from goods and services, the list also includes events, ideas and experiences (Kotler and Keller 2009: 46-7). Taking the case of a museum, what it essentially offers is a service, with the delivery of a service being substituted here with the selling of an experience; the success of communicating historical facts and information (the core product) rests on the ability to construct images, convey information whilst, engaging the visitors (Goulding 2002: 150). Apart from museums, firms, too, orchestrate numerous services and goods in an effort to create, stage and market an experience. For instance, Disney theme parks form this sort of experiential marketing, permitting their clients to visit a fairy kingdom (Kotler and Keller

2009: 46). In a similar vein, tourists visit the various locations in Turkey where the filming of their favourite (TV drama) scene(s) took place.

But to stay within the example of museums, such organizations employ marketing to strengthen their public images and attract audiences (Kotler and Keller 2009: 47). Not to mention that, through such mediums, it becomes plausible to utilize the past so as to maintain values that never existed. In post-war Croatia, the intelligentsia and government chose to concentrate on museums and heritage sites, as a way of constructing and marketing history (Domic 2000: 5, 7). In other words, Turkey seems to know how to manipulate its past, like in the case of former Yugoslavia (Domic and Boukas 2017: 232), and market it in such way so as to affect its present and future. Not least given how the tactics made hitherto in terms of its TV soaps, are far from coincidental as they encompass big investment; with the success of Turkish film and TV industry reaching a multi-million dollar worth industry that exports culture around the globe as corroborated earlier (Sharma 2018). And part of the result is, of course, the acquirement of some ideological power among certain populations.

A Backlash to Turkey's Hegemonic Efforts

Nevertheless, Turkish TV series have not been received positively everywhere. In the context of the AKP's hegemonic vision on the basis of conservative Turkish and Muslim values, TV series depict the magnificent rule of the Ottomans in addition to the glorious civilization individuals once enjoyed under the Ottoman Empire, amalgamating Ottoman and religious rhetoric so as to gather his supporters around this collective imagination (Xhambazi 2018). Yet, it is vital to examine here the backlash or, resistance, as one could argue to what the TV series under analysis are projecting and to Turkey's hegemonic project more broadly. Especially in view of how, for some time now, various groups have openly been resisting the cultural suppression over art on behalf of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's AKP government. A case in point is that the AKP moved to ban the extensively popular TV series *The Magnificent Century* (*Muhteşem Yüzyıl*), denouncing the series as an inappropriate portrayal of Turkey's ancestry and removing it from the inflight entertainment system of Turkish Airlines after to the public remarks made by Erdoğan (Hintz 2012).

To begin with, resistance to TV series is not new. The Greek-Orthodox Bishop Anthimos criticised Greek fans of Turkish TV soaps years ago; needless to say that, the showbiz community of Greece was also quite unhappy over the issue (Makris 2012). Indeed, the Greek TV station ANT1 has decided to stop showing the Turkish dramas as of 2018 (Planetnews.gr 2018). Furthermore, Turkey's success has faced some backlash in countries like Israel as well, as a Turkish TV drama showed Israeli security forces shooting elderly men (McCarthy 2010). In addition, Israeli politicians along with media outlets utterly condemned one episode of a prevalent Turkish soap opera (namely, "The Valley of the Wolves: Ambush") that showed Mossad (Israel's intelligence service) spying inside Turkey and abducting Turkish babies. Moreover, the program depicted Mossad attacking the Turkish embassy in Tel Aviv, taking the ambassador together with his family hostage (Flower and Medding 2010). It is worth highlighting the Anti-Semitism commonly seen in Turkish TV series as Jewish people constitute the most evil villains in various popular shows (Erdemir and Kessler 2017).

Another case in point is the series entitled “Endless Love”, produced in Istanbul (in 2015) which won an International Emmy Award, has been translated in more than 50 languages (Persian and Arabic included), and is relishing high ratings in various countries, from Iran, Afghanistan and Azerbaijan to Balkan countries like Bosnia-Herzegovina, Albania, FYROM and Montenegro (Synovitz 2018). However, in places such as, Uzbekistan, the show in question was banned by the country’s President, Shavkat Mirziyoev. The reason being that religion is rigidly controlled by the national security services for many years now, masquerading as the fight against Islamic extremism, and this particular series has stirred controversy from radical Islamists and the state that wishes to make sure that the role of the family in Uzbek society will not be threatened (Synovitz 2018).

The magnitude of TV series and recent developments is certainly worthy of heed at this point. TV series have been depicting their own distinctive brand of soft power in the Arab world for some time now, with clerics in Saudi Arabia having issued fatwas – or religious decrees (Moussley 2008) – ordering death sentences for the creators of numerous shows like these dramas that cause marital friction to the point of divorce (Zalewski 2013). Not to mention how a number of religious scholars in predominantly conservative nations, such as Egypt and Afghanistan, blame the growing divorce rate on these TV shows (Nawa 2017).

Moreover, the MBC Group (the Arab world’s leading private broadcaster), which happens to be Dubai-based and under the control of Saudi investors, was ordered to end its broadcasting of incredibly popular Turkish TV shows (Sharma 2018). More specifically, the decision covers the entire programs originating from Turkey and influences six shows (Uras 2018). This decision took place against the background of escalating tensions between Turkey and the Saudi Arabia-United Arab Emirates axis in the commotion over Qatar’s support for the Muslim Brotherhood, which the Saudis and Emiratis have branded a “terrorist” organization. The ban can help the latter demonstrate to their allies that they are backing them while, synchronously, communicate to their domestic audiences that they are combating unwanted and foreign cultural influences for internal consumption (Sharma 2018). To further elaborate, with regards to the recently antagonistic Saudi-Turkish relations, Turkey powerfully supports Qatar as Saudi Arabia (along with three other Arab states) boycotted it; plus, Turkey retains ties to Iran – the kingdom’s number one regional opponent (Gambrell 2018).⁴ Amr Adib, a popular Egyptian TV host, applauded the decision made by MBC and advised the satellite channels of Egypt to do the same (El-Behary 2018), demonstrating how similar tendencies of resistance to TFP exist elsewhere in the Middle East as well. This is not to argue that such incidents prove that there is not a market for Turkish TV series in the Arab World, or that they do not remain largely successful, but to highlight the dynamics of politicization, polarization and resistance that Turkish soft power often produces across the region.

Conclusion

The growth of the AKP’s domestic hegemony over the years has gradually enabled Turkey to pursue regional or international hegemony as well, with TV series being one aspect of these efforts. In this sense, for many years, TV series had the role of generating ideological and cultural power for Turkey within other countries. However, Ankara’s cultural propaganda

and exportation of values and norms to other peoples of the region and beyond made sense insofar Turkey had something substantial to offer such as a successful political and economic system. Even then, TV series were perceived as threatening by many. Since the early to mid-2010s, Turkey's hegemonic pursuit has encountered some major obstacles. The popularity of the so-called Turkish model started declining abroad, not least because of the country's growing democratic deficit and deteriorating economy.

The first significant fragments of resistance to the AKP's hegemonic cultural project, domestically, manifested in 2013 when the Gezi Park Protests broke-out (Moudouros 2014; Onbaşı 2016). This crack in the AKP's domestic hegemony was followed by the loss of the parliamentary majority, for the first time, in the June 2015 elections – which were, however, followed by a snap election in November 2015 after which the AKP regained the majority (Özge Kemahlıoğlu 2015). More such examples of resistance – to the otherwise resilient AKP government – can be given. Yet the bottom line is that, the more the AKP's legitimacy erodes domestically, the more difficult it is for Ankara to effectively export hegemonic narratives and exert hegemonic power. It is no wonder that increasing domestic backlash to the AKP's power has been followed by foreign policy challenges and increasing resistance to TV series, given that the latter have been growingly perceived as a threat and negative influence. It would, of course, be naïve to say that the AKP has completely lost its power domestically or that it no longer has the ability to exert influence abroad. Nonetheless, the examination of the rise and recent decline of Turkish TV series clearly demonstrates – as many other aspects of Turkish politics do – that the loss of popular legitimacy and growing authoritarianism (see e.g. Başer & Öztürk 2017) do not come without a cost and do not remain unchallenged.

Notes

1. See, for example, the Global Firepower Index for Turkey's military power, https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.asp?country_id=turkey (accessed 25 May 2018).
2. See, for example, Turkey's operations in Syria and Iraq as well as the growing number of Turkish military bases abroad (Kasapoglu 2017).
3. A caveat here is that there are people who draw inspiration from watching Turkish TV drama series like *Fatmagül* where a gang-rape victim fights for justice. A case in point, in the wake of the recent Egyptian Revolution, is Samira, a sexual harassment victim in Cairo, admits to having found the courage – in spite of pressures to remain quiet – to take the offenders, that is, the army officers to court (van Versendaal 2014).
4. It is worth noting that the removal of successful Turkish series from MBC is expected to continue in the future as well (Saeed 2018).

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