

## INTERCONNECTIONS OF PEACE AND CONFLICT: CULTURE, POLITICS & INSTITUTIONS IN NATIONAL, REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

Turkey, located between Armenia, Greece, Cyprus, Syria, Iran and Russia, lies at the heart of processes of both peace and conflict. There are similar processes occurring within Turkey itself (the product of internal political cleavages and boundaries, and the role of religion or ethnicity as an engine for polarisation or contact). Both regionally and domestically, there are opportunities for research on these issues, which can help achieve a better understanding of the historical backgrounds of such processes of peace and conflict, and offer the opportunity to map similarities and differences across the various states and societies involved in them. This strategic research initiative promotes interdisciplinary collaboration across a range of academic disciplines in order to approach the theme of peace and conflict in the region from a broad perspective. The programme aims to identify best practice procedures which have produced positive results in the past (for example, the shift in the nature of the Greek-Turkish relationship from one of protracted conflict to one of manageable disputes), and to bring such understanding to bear on other confrontational pairings. The initiative's wider objective is a positive spill-over of the results of academic research across policy making and the promotion of peace and stability in the region.

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### The globalisation of the Turkish television industry

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In recent years, Turkey has become the second largest producer of TV series in the world, after the US. Indeed, the Turkish television industry has become a global growth industry with over 250 commercial TV channels, whose audiences span more than 100 countries from the Balkans to the Middle East and from Asia to Latin America. Through in-depth interviews with Turkish TV industry professionals, my project explores the transnational appeal of Turkish television series, as well as the production and marketing strategies of the industry. It also aims to examine the impact of Turkish government policies on media and culture on the global flow and sales of these shows. Turkish TV industry professionals claim that their cultural products have strengthened Turkey's soft-power in the world, particularly in the Middle East. While their discourse echoes that of government officials and the current aspirations of foreign-policy makers, it has also caused the industry to be seen as accountable for Turkey's image in the world; both government figures and popular actors have criticised the TV industry for inaccurate representations of Turkish national identity, history and cultural values. Therefore, my research also explores both the possibilities and limits of this assumed soft-power against the backdrop of the current media environment in Turkey.

In 2016 alone, exports of Turkish television series generated over \$350 million in revenue; they reached over 500 million viewers in more than 100 countries, with a number of TV series breaking viewing records both inside and outside Turkey (Sofuoglu 2017). Their popularity has prompted public debates, both in the national and transnational realms, on a wide variety of key societal issues, such as Ottoman history, nationalism, violence against women, secularism, cultural traditions, gender roles and Islam. Furthermore, Turkish TV series have even been credited with helping to boost commerce and tourism in Turkey. Between 2002 and 2010, Turkish trade with Syria increased threefold, nearly fourfold with the Maghreb countries, fivefold with the Gulf countries and Yemen, and sevenfold with Egypt (Kirişci 2011). Many popular magazines and newspapers have featured articles containing quotes from Arab tourists visiting Istanbul who wanted to see the Ottoman palaces, ancient monuments and other locations of the city featured in the television series. In order to improve economic and political relations with the Arab world, the Turkish government launched the Arabic-language television channel TRT-7-al-Turkiyya in 2010 and visa requirements for nationals of several Arab countries were waived.

Most importantly, the popularity of Turkish TV soap operas has been seen as responsible for improving Turkey's image in the Middle East. Statistics – for example 75% of Arabs across seven countries characterised Turkey's image positively in 2009 and 77% called for a larger Turkish role in the region (Akgün, Gündoğar 2013) – have been used to suggest a direct correlation between Turkish soaps and Turkey's soft-power, without taking into consideration the impact of the bold policy moves of Turkey's then prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, which were welcomed in the Middle East. In an effort to boost the sector further, the cultural ministry increased its support for films and television series from \$28.5 million to \$40 million in 2017 (Sofuoğlu 2017). In 2008, 85 million people across the Arab world tuned in to see the final episode of *Muhtesem Yüzyil* – the most popular Turkish soap to date globally – and the fact that Justice and Development Party (AKP) government officials were accompanied by popular TV soap stars during diplomatic tours in the Middle East raises questions regarding the nature of the symbiotic relationship between the Turkish TV industry and government, as well as about how much soft-power Turkish soap operas are expected to generate for the state.

The soft-power of Turkish soaps and the new 'Ottoman-cool image' (Kraidy, Al-Ghazzi 2013) that the Turkish government has worked to create are not without limits. It is wishful thinking indeed to assume that the success of a particular nation's cultural products in global media markets results in that nation gaining soft-power. As J.S. Nye (2014) has cautioned us, we should not confuse the international appeal of media products with soft-power; soft-power can only be enhanced if foreign policy and democratic values are also adequately developed. As Z. Yörük and P. Vatikiotis (2013: 2374) have argued, 'While Turkish political and economic influence coincides with the improving exports of Turkish TV series, the rhetoric of the "Turkish model" and "soft power" do not convincingly demonstrate the link between these phenomena, given that cultural popularity and power of any type (be it soft or hard) do not automatically follow one another.' For instance, the tourism boom is largely a consequence of long-term development policies. Similarly, increase in trade and other collaborations, especially with Turkey's allies in the Middle East, is related to AKP policies that go back to the early 2000s, before these soap operas became popular.

Moreover, 'the growing international attention to media culture as a useful source for boosting national brand images could have concerning effects, such as the development of a pragmatic and opportunistic cultural policy for the purposes of enhancing national images and economic profits in the international arena' (Iwabuchi 2013: 444). Indeed, the Turkish state has made direct and indirect impositions on the Turkish television industry from time to time due to concerns about the image of Turkey represented in these TV series.



Thus another question that I have explored in my interviews with TV production company executives is whether or not Turkey has developed new cultural policies with the goal of enhancing the nation's image through these television exports. The first preliminary conclusions I have been able to draw indicate that no such policies have been developed to date, with the exception of some monetary support for distributors who participate in the marketing and advertising of these soaps abroad at regional and international conventions.

Regarding the reason for the transnational popularity of Turkish soaps, the executives of the TV production and distribution companies I have talked to point to high production values and the universal themes of Turkish soaps, along with audience boredom with American TV programming as playing a significant role in the success of the Turkish TV industry and its international expansion.

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