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Beyond Soft Power

An illusionary power of seduction?

An assessment of Turkey's cultural power in the Arab world in
light of its audio-visual presence in the region

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Résumé

This paper questions Turkey's "soft power" capacity in the Arab world and Middle East region. It attempts to analyse the role of the different actors involved in the projection of Turkey's "soft power" vis-à-vis the Arab world. The paper distinguishes between public/governmental and private/non-governmental agents producing "soft power" and examines the interaction between them.

The analysis first focuses on the conceptual framework that underlies Turkey's paradigm shift from hard power to cultural, or "soft," power in the Middle East. In particular, it examines the key elements of the "strategic depth" theory, or the so-called "Davutoğlu doctrine," and shows how a new vision for Turkey's international role and cultural attractiveness has been formulated. The paper then examines the tools and instruments used to project Turkey's cultural power in the Middle East: in particular, the export of soap operas [*diziler*] to the Arab world and the launching of an Arabic-language TV channel (TRT Al Arabiyya). The author attempts to identify the actors involved in each of these strategies. Finally, the paper offers an assessment of the real impact of Turkish soap operas and TRT channel in the Middle East. It stresses the limits of Turkey's "soft power" in the region both in terms of conceptual/theoretical relevance and contextual efficacy, and examines the impact of the Arab uprisings on Turkey's projection of soft power vis-à-vis the region. The author concludes that Turkey's cultural power has thus far produced limited outcomes and has had few tangible positive effects in increasing Turkey's general power capacity in the Arab world.

Entrées d'index

Index by keywords : Middle East, strategic depth, Davutoğlu doctrine, regional power, soap operas, TRT

Texte intégral

Introduction

- 1 “My country is your faithful ally and friend” (Erdoğan Mar. 30, 2003). This statement made by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and addressed to Arab people in March 2003 marks a turning point in the history of Turkish-Arab relations. In fact, since the establishment of the Turkish Republic by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in October 1923, Turkey’s foreign policy and strategic thinking were best illustrated by the motto “The Turk has no friend but the Turk.” Ankara saw the Middle East region, in particular, more as a sphere of risk than a sphere of opportunity. The Turks’ wariness and mistrust of the Arabs, who were seen as the “enemies of the interior”¹ and were accused of accelerating the fall of the Ottoman Empire, coupled with the multiplication of territorial disputes with Arab states², provoked a detachment and a separation of Turkey from the Middle East. In this sense, the securitization of the Middle East region for much of the 20th century meant that the interaction between Turkey and the Arabs was either non-existent or, when existent, entirely based on hard power or the threat of the use of military force³. The conflicting character of the relations between Arab countries and Turkey was reinforced, in the beginning of the 20th century, by the rise of Arab nationalism, which conceived the Ottoman Empire as an oppressive entity, and its heir – the Turkish republic – as alienated from the West⁴.
- 2 However, since the arrival of the Justice and Development Party [*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP] to power in 2002, Turkey’s foreign policy and strategic thinking have undergone a major paradigm shift (Sözen 2010). Given its Islamist roots, the AKP was able to bring Turkey closer to its Muslim identity and Ottoman past and to restore and re-establish links with the Arab and Muslim neighbourhood. Therefore, as of 2002, and until the outbreak of the Arab revolutions, Turkey’s public discourse and conduct of foreign policy have reflected a de-securitization of the Middle East/Arab region and a push away from hard power. In fact, in the 2000s, and for the first time since the establishment of the Turkish Republic, Turkey has had a strong presence in the Middle East, not through its hard power and military capabilities, nor through its confrontational attitude and coercive capacity, but rather through its cultural exports to the region. Certainly, the Syrian crisis and the recent renewal of armed conflict between the PKK and the Turkish army have marked a reversal of this trend and a return to the use of hard power. Nevertheless, this evolution does not invalidate the cultural offensive of Turkey in the Arab world.
- 3 Based on Turkey’s newly acquired cultural attractiveness in the Middle East, several scholars and journalists published works discussing the so-called “soft power” in Turkish foreign policy vis-à-vis the Arab world. Titles such as *Soft Power in Turkish Foreign Policy: New Instruments and Challenges* (Öner 2013), *Soft Power and Public Diplomacy in Turkey* (Kalın 2011), *Challenges to Turkey’s Soft Power in the Middle East* (Benli Altunışık 2011), or *Turkey’s soft power on the rise despite challenges* (Akarçeşme Apr. 2, 2013) have proliferated. However, these works have all taken the concept of “soft power” for granted and have failed to question its relevance. In fact, the concept of “soft power,” as defined by Joseph Nye, is very broad and can cover various realities and distinct phenomena. If “soft power” is the “ability to get what you want through attraction rather than through coercion or payments” (Nye, 2005: 5), its mechanisms and vectors remain unclear and ill-defined. In particular, Joseph Nye does not properly address the following questions: Who produces “soft power”? For which purpose? Through which particular instruments and strategies? Is “soft power” effective everywhere and anytime or does its efficiency depend on the local context in which it is projected?
- 4 In this article, I will not disqualify the concept of soft power, but I will rather attempt to determine and identify its “origins” and vectors through the particular case study of Turkey’s “soft power” in the Middle East region. I consider “soft power” to be the ability of an actor to seduce and attract others and thereby “win hearts and minds”. I argue that Turkey’s “soft power” in the Arab world lies mainly in Turkey’s media and

audio-visual presence in the Middle East. Such “soft power” is projected by two different types of actors: the Turkish government on the one hand, and non-governmental actors on the other hand – namely media production companies acting as private “cultural entrepreneurs”. The article is based on more than 50 interviews conducted with state and non-state actors (businessmen, civil society, production companies) in Turkey and the Middle East (Egypt, Kurdistan Regional Government, Lebanon, Qatar, and UAE) between 2011 and 2014.

5 In the first part of our analysis, I examine the conceptual framework and theoretical foundations of Turkey’s paradigm shift with regard to the Middle East. In particular, I explore the so-called “Davutoğlu doctrine” of “strategic depth” [*stratejik derinlik*] and its impact in terms of paving the way for Turkey’s re-engagement with its Arab neighbours.

6 In the second part, I discuss the vectors of Turkish “soft power” in the Middle East and the actors involved in the projection of such power. I examine the export, by Turkish media producers, of soap operas [*diziler*] to the region; by analysing their content and representations, we attempt to interpret the message that these popular culture products convey to the Arab public. I then turn to the projection of “soft power” by the Turkish government and focus on the launching of the Arabic-language TV channel – *TRT Al Arabiyya*. I also analyse the connections and interaction between the Turkish government and private actors in terms of projecting “cultural power” in the region.

7 In the third part, I assess the impact of Turkey’s “soft power” in the Middle East. I discuss the limitations of Turkey’s cultural power both in terms of theoretical and analytical relevance and practical and contextual efficacy. I argue that while the cultural actions of the Turkish government and private entrepreneurs might have rendered Turkey “popular” for the Arab masses, they have nevertheless produced limited outcomes in terms of increasing Turkey’s general power capacity in the region. Moreover, I examine the impact of the so-called “Arab Spring” on Turkey’s use of soft power in the region: I show that with the outbreak of the Arab uprisings, and particularly with the beginning of the Syrian revolution, Turkey has been compelled to move away from soft power and to embrace hard power in the conduct of its foreign policy vis-à-vis the Middle East.

I. “Strategic Depth” and the “Davutoğlu Doctrine”: a reengagement with the Arab world

8 Turkey’s rapprochement with the Middle East must mainly be understood in light of the so-called “Davutoğlu Doctrine” (Grigoriadis 2010). Currently serving as Prime Minister (2014-), and formerly nominated Erdoğan’s foreign affairs advisor (2003-2009) and later Turkey’s minister of foreign affairs (2009-2014), Ahmet Davutoğlu has had an important influence on the design of Turkey’s foreign policy, as confirmed by several Turkish policymakers whom I interviewed in Ankara. When the AKP seized power in November 2002, it was a newly-born party (created in 2001) with little or no experience in terms of foreign affairs. The party therefore looked for experts of international relations to help design the country’s foreign policy. Given that Ahmet Davutoğlu was known to be an intellectual with a conservative background whose affinities coincide with those of the AKP⁵, he was nominated Prime Minister Erdoğan’s advisor and was invited to put into practice a vision that he had formulated in 2001.

9 In 2001, Ahmet Davutoğlu, who was at that time professor of International Relations at Boğaziçi University, published a book titled *Stratejik Derinlik: Türkiye’nin Uluslararası Konumu* (Strategic Depth: Turkey’s International Position), in which he articulated a new strategic vision for Turkey (Davutoğlu 2001). In this

seminal work, Davutoğlu assesses the strengths and weaknesses of Turkey in the 21st century and suggests ways by which Turkey could become a global power.

- 10 Davutoğlu's main argument is straightforward: In the post-Cold war order, a country's significance and power on the world stage lies on its "strategic depth" (Jabbour 2011). For a country to be a "central state" [*merkez ülke*] and a leading actor in international relations, it must possess "geographical depth" – meaning an exceptional geopolitical location – and "historical depth", meaning a rich cultural and historical background (Davutoğlu 2001: 87). Considering the Turkish case, Davutoğlu asserts that his country is uniquely endowed to be a central state. In fact, with regard to geographical depth, Turkey is strategically positioned at the confluence of East and West, at the intersection of the Middle East, the Balkans, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Europe. Its exceptional location on the Rimland belt grants it the natural ability to influence the regional and international geopolitical balances. With regard to historical depth, Turkey has a rich historical and cultural legacy as heir to the Ottoman Empire. Therefore, based on the cultural and historical ties it has with the former Ottoman territories, Turkey must be able to increase its influence and power in neighbouring regions. In the words of Davutoğlu:

Turkey enjoys multiple regional identities and thus has the capability as well as the responsibility to follow an integrated and multidimensional foreign policy. The unique combination of our history and geography brings with it a sense of responsibility. To contribute actively towards conflict resolution and international peace and security in all these areas is a call of duty arising from the depths of a multidimensional history of Turkey (*Ibid.*: 142).

- 11 Yet, while all neighbouring regions are seen as important, Davutoğlu considers the Middle East to be of utmost significance and value for Turkey. Reviving the geopolitical theories developed by Halford Mackinder and Nicholas Spykman, Davutoğlu asserts that the Middle East region is located in the heart of Eurasia, and is therefore "key to strategic balances" (*Ibid.*: 357). Whoever is able to control this area will be able to greatly influence regional and international power configurations (*Ibid.*: 146). Therefore, according to the professor-turned-politician, Turkey should increase its influence in the Middle East so as to create a regional "hinterland," necessary for Ankara's rise in the international arena (*Ibid.*: 155).

- 12 After stating the importance of the Middle East, Davutoğlu suggests means to increase Turkey's power in this region. The author insists that Turks must first "overcome psychological barriers" and reconcile with their Muslim identity and their Ottoman past, so that they can genuinely use Turkey's historical and identity ties with the Arabs in order to facilitate interaction with the Middle East and therefore increase Ankara's regional leverage. While the language he uses is pragmatic and not ideological, his book nevertheless includes a "neo-Ottoman" tone: Neo-Ottomanism is not understood here in its "hard version" – as a willingness to restore the Ottoman Empire in its geographical and territorial extension (which would mean eliminating borders) – but is rather understood in its "soft version," as an inclination to restore the cultural influence and prestige of Turkey in the territories that were once part of the Ottoman Empire (Taspinar 2008). In fact, in order to help Turkey rise to the status of regional power, Davutoğlu emphasizes the necessity of making his country culturally attractive and of developing horizontal relations between the Turkish society and Arab societies (Davutoğlu 2001: 615). Hence, the idea of "soft power" – as conceptualized by Joseph Nye – is clearly incorporated in Davutoğlu's thinking. However, the term "soft power" is not used by Davutoğlu, nor does he specify what instruments and tools should be used to make Turkey culturally attractive in the region. His thought therefore remains theoretical and does not provide a concrete blueprint for action.

- 13 When Ahmet Davutoğlu was appointed advisor to Prime Minister Erdoğan in 2003, he became one of the few intellectuals – after Zbigniew Brzezinski, Henry Kissinger and Alvaro Garcia Linera⁶ – to be nominated to a state position and to be offered the opportunity to put his theory into practice. Hence, since 2003 the conceptual

framework he developed has structured and guided Turkey's diplomatic action in the regional and international arenas. In particular, a new policy of rapprochement with the Middle East has been set in motion, with a constant use of "soft power" instruments.

- 14 In fact, throughout the 2000s, Turkey has been culturally present in the Middle East, particularly through popular culture and audio-visual products. It is to the examination of these instruments that we now turn.

II. A complex and multidimensional "seduction enterprise": the projection of Turkey's cultural power in the region by the AKP government and private actors

- 15 Turkey's cultural influence in the Arab world is a direct consequence of the actions and initiatives of two types of actors: on the one hand, the export by private Turkish companies of TV series (soap operas) to the Middle East, and on the other hand, the launching by the Turkish government of a TV channel dedicated to the Arab audience: *TRT Al Arabiyya*.

Popular culture and soap operas as means to win the hearts and minds of the Arab masses: the projection of cultural power by private Turkish entrepreneurs.

- 16 Turkey's "soft power" in the region is mostly based on popular culture and mass entertainment. Indeed, Turkey's cultural prestige and attractiveness in the Middle East are closely associated with the export of soap operas that have swept the region and turned into a social phenomenon worthy of academic and scholarly attention.

- 17 While soap operas are popular in every part of the world, they are particularly significant in the context of the Arab world, where they constitute an inherent and essential part of social life (Gonzales-Quijano 2011: 116). In fact, soap operas, or *musalsalat* in Arabic, are widely consumed in the Middle East: They are watched collectively with family and friends or individually; they are broadcasted on a "small screen" in private houses or on a big screen in public spaces like coffee shops; and they are seen during daytime or night-time, and even after *iftar* (the meal that breaks the fast) in the holy month of Ramadan. Traditionally, as of the 1960s, the Arab drama scene has been dominated by Egyptian *musalsalat*, generally displaying love-and-hate stories and socially-inspired comedies (with the famous Egyptian actor Adel Imam for example) or offering a biographical account of historical figures (for instance the life of President Gamal Abdelnasser, of King Faruk, and of the artists Asmahan and Oum Kalthoum). These soap operas, which were all in Egyptian dialect, gained wide popularity across the Middle East and contributed to Egypt's regional hegemony. In the 1990s, however, Syria developed its own capacity to produce soap operas and succeeded in competing with, and even dethroning, Egyptian *musalsalat*. Here also, Syrian soap operas – exported to the Arab world in Syrian dialect – have allowed the country to gain visibility in the Middle East, and to increase its regional clout and prestige. Hence, given the pervasiveness of TV series in the Arab world and the potential that they offer in terms of "soft power," whoever is able to dominate the soap opera industry and to export its own *musalsalat* to the region can, at least to a certain

extent, spread its worldview, values, and ideas to Arab populations, and build cultural prestige in the region.

- 18 In the 2000s Turkey followed the trend set by Egypt and Syria and started to export soap operas to the Middle East. From the outset, it is important to state two facts. First, there was a demand in the Arab world for new media products and for *musalsalat* different from those produced by Egypt and Syria. Therefore, Turkish soap operas were welcomed. Second, the production and export of the Turkish series to the region is the work of private companies that are not linked to official circles in Ankara. These actors, whom we can call “cultural entrepreneurs,” produced the TV series essentially for a local Turkish public with the sole objective of doing business and making profit; however, as the first series were exported to the Arab world and became popular in this region, they have contributed to Turkey’s “soft power,” something that the cultural entrepreneurs were neither planning nor expecting. And while the Turkish government did not provide any public support for these cultural entrepreneurs, it nevertheless capitalized on the success of these series to increase Ankara’s prestige in the Arab street.

Fig. 1



Promotional material showing protagonists Mehmet/Muhannad and Gümüş/Nour from *Gümüş* soap opera

- 19 Three different categories of Turkish soap operas are exported to the Middle East (Gonzales Quijano 2011): romances, historical dramas, and political thrillers. Each of these categories promote a certain image or “brand” of Turkey. The first “conquest” of the Middle East by Turkish soap operas started in 2008 with the export of the romantic soap opera *Gümüş* (Silver) which, with its 85 million Arab viewers, represented a genuine success story in the Middle East (Fig. 1). While the series was also popular in other regions such as the Balkans and Central Europe, it recorded its biggest audience ratings in the Arab world (Rotivel 2011). *Gümüş* follows the story of the wealthy, handsome gentleman Mehmet (played by Kivanç Tatlıtuğ) who is forced by his grandfather to marry his cousin Gümüş (played by Songül Öden), a young lady with a conservative background born and raised in a traditional village of Anatolia. Beyond the love story that eventually unfolds between Gümüş and Mehmet, mesmerizing the Arab public, the series became attractive in the region as it portrayed Turkey as a country where people have a modern yet Muslim-compatible lifestyle: The protagonists drink alcohol, dance in nightclubs, and kiss in public, yet they often pray, and they respect the patriarchal model of their family by listening to the elders⁷ and living with their parents. Moreover, throughout the series, the viewers witness the emancipation of the female character Gümüş. With the strong support of her husband Mehmet, Gümüş becomes a successful businesswoman and a renowned fashion designer; she therefore personifies the ideal of a Muslim lady who perfectly succeeds in both business duties and household responsibilities.

Fig. 2



A Lebanese shopkeeper selling T-shirts with the photos of Nour and Muhannad

- 20 In Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Morocco, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, the series created a phenomenon of *Gümüş-mania* (Figs. 2, 4). Ladies rushed to buy T-shirts and posters with the photo of their favourite character; newborn babies were named after the protagonists; some divorces were recorded due to the fact that Arab wives were no longer content with their husbands and demanded that the latter be as romantic as “Mehmet” (Bucciante 2010). While the series was first aired on the Saudi satellite channel MBC in the daytime slot (2 pm), its high audience ratings pushed the managers of MBC to broadcast it in evening prime time (9.30 pm) (Bucciante 2010).
- 21 Being a success story in the Arab world, the series *Gümüş* paved the way for the export of other popular Turkish romantic soap operas like *Aşk ve Ceza* (Love and Punishment), *Öyle Bir Geçer Zaman Ki* (Time goes by), *Aşk-ı Memnu* (Forbidden Love), *Asi*, and *Fatmagül’ün Suçu Ne?* (What is Fatmagül’s fault?), all of which have reached high audience ratings in the region⁸. Our interviews in Turkey show that Turkish producers originally created their series exclusively for a local Turkish audience⁹. However, the popularity that *Gümüş* acquired in the Arab world made them realize the potential and opportunities offered by the Middle East market. Motivated by economic and financial gains, they have, since then, attempted to export their series to the Arab world.
- 22 The plots of the romantic soap operas exported to the Arab market are often identical: Almost all the stories revolve around a conservative family who moves from Anatolia to engage in business in Istanbul, and who succeeds in business without compromising religious values and Muslim traditions. The importance and significance of these soap operas in terms of cultural power and social attractiveness lies in the fact that they promote an image of Turkey as an ideal society where Islam coexists with modernity, where men and women are equal, and where capitalism and consumerism do not erode social and religious values. This is precisely the ideal-type of society that Muslims and Arabs are longing for, but which they cannot find in their own countries. In this sense, Turkish romantic soap operas are – for the Arab populations – a means to escape their grim reality; they offer them the possibility to imagine themselves living in a better world. In other words, Turkish *diziler* act like a mirror that reflects what a majority of Arab viewers dreams of¹⁰: embracing modernity without compromising their religious values and social traditions. Therefore, by conveying images and representations that appeal to the Arab public, Turkish romantic soaps have contributed to “winning hearts and minds” and making Turkey attractive in the imaginary of Arab viewers.

Fig. 3

Promotional material for *Muhteşem Yüzyıl* presenting the main cast of the series

- 23 The second category of Turkish soap operas are the historical series, mostly exemplified by *Muhteşem Yüzyıl* (Magnificent Century), a hit series in the Middle East (Fig. 3). Produced by the company Tims Production, the series is based on the life of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent, the longest reigning Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, and his wife Hürrem. The soap opera glorifies the Ottoman past and revives Turkish history in the minds of Turks and Arabs. What is of major importance in our analysis is the political message indirectly conveyed to the Arab and Muslim audience through this soap opera: An in-depth analysis of the script shows that *Muhteşem Yüzyıl* portrays the Ottoman Empire – and by inference Turkey – as a legitimate power and a perfect representative of Arabs and Muslims worldwide. Throughout the series, we note a recurrence of the terms “Islam,” “Muslim,” and “Jihad” hundreds of times, and a repetition of several statements that convey the message that the past rulers of this country (the Sultan-Caliphs) ruled “with the Koran and the Sharia” and “protected Islam and Muslims against infidels and heretics”¹¹. For instance, we note statements like: “I want to combat for the cause of Allah, for it is a sacred duty”; “Our mission is to spread the light of Islam; May Allah be with us”¹². Furthermore, the series implicitly reminds the Middle Eastern populations of their historical ties with Turkey. For instance, we find significant statements by Suleiman the Magnificent like: “I am the Sultan of Anatolia, Diyarbakır, Kurdistan, Azerbaijan, Damascus, Aleppo, Egypt, Mecca, Jerusalem, and Yemen. I am the Sultan of Arab territories which my ancestors had conquered”; “I rule over the Safavids, the Mameluks of Egypt, the Abbasids, Syria, Palestine, Hijaz, and the Silk Road”¹³.

Fig. 4



An Egyptian magazine reporting about the wedding of the Turkish actress Nur Fettahoğlu playing the role of Mahidevran Sultan in *Muhteşem Yüzyıl*

- 24 Hence, by emphasizing the historical ties between Turks and Arabs under the Ottoman Empire, and by portraying Turkey as heir to the Caliphate, an institution that defended Muslims and spread the word of Islam, *Muhteşem Yüzyıl* attempts to appeal to Muslims in the Arab world, who have long suffered from a lack of credible leadership¹⁴. As to Arab Christian viewers who follow this series, our interviews and research show that *Muhteşem Yüzyıl* attracts them for a variety of reasons: While some of the Christian viewers watch the series because they are curious about history – especially the “Golden era” of Sultan Suleiman – the majority of them follows the *musalsal* because they are attracted by the action and the plot in the series (the love intrigues in the Harem), the costumes and accessories that the characters wear, the theme songs, as well as the beauty of the actors and actresses, in particular Meryem Uzerli playing the role of Hürrem (Fig. 5). Therefore, everybody seems to like the series, albeit for different reasons. What’s more, the series appealed not only to the Arab populations, but also to the Kurds of Syria and Iraq. In fact, during our visit to Erbil, we noticed a real interest for *Muhteşem Yüzyıl* (and all the Turkish soap operas in general): In the streets of Erbil, several advertisements were promoting the next episode of the series, shops were selling accessories like the ones used by the characters, and taxi drivers often spoke with enthusiasm about the beauty of “Sultana Hürrem”.

Fig. 5



An Emirati magazine talking about the costumes and the fashion style of the actress Meryem Uzerli playing the part of Hürrem in *Muhteşem Yüzyıl*

- 25 Here again, it is interesting to note that the production of historical series was not politically motivated, but only based on economic and financial incentives. In an interview we made with Timur Savcı, producer of *Muhteşem Yüzyıl*, he asserted that his “main objective when producing this series was to sell a story and a product which everybody, in Turkey and in the neighbouring regions, would relate to”¹⁵. According to Savcı, creating a series based on the life of Suleiman the Magnificent and the history of the Ottoman Empire was a rational choice: Turks would be attracted by the rediscovery of their past; Muslim and Turkmen populations in the Arab world, Central Asia, and the Balkans would identify with the story as they share the same identity, history, and values of Turkey, while other people would at least be attracted by the setting, the sound and light effects, and the expensive costumes and accessories (a budget of 70 million dollars).

Fig. 6



Promotional material for *Kurtlar Vadisi*

- 26 Finally, the third category of soap operas exported to the Middle East are the political thriller series exemplified by *Kurtlar Vadisi* (Valley of the Wolves). Produced by the company PanaFilm, aired in Turkey in 2007 and exported to the Arab world in 2008, this series promotes an image of Turkey as a powerful country able to confront

the West. The series revolves around the Turkish intelligence agent Polat Alemdar (played by Necati Şaşmaz) whose mission is to defend Iraqis against American occupation (Fig. 6). The series is built around a Manichean vision of the world in which Americans are portrayed as evil, “the bad guys”, “the barbarians”, while the Turkish characters are presented as “the good guys,” the “benevolent forces”, and the big brothers and godfathers of an oppressed Arab and Muslim population. One statement in the script is particularly emblematic: In a scene where Polat Alemdar meets an Israeli agent and an American soldier, he says: “All those who had ruled this region in the past oppressed local populations, except our ancestors. Our ancestors taught us to fight against injustice, colonization, and imperialism”¹⁶. The message conveyed, whether intentionally or unintentionally, is the following: Turkey is a nation who has the political courage to challenge Western domination and to stand up for moral values.

- 27 Because of the success of this series in the Arab world, the company PanaFilm produced a movie titled *Kurtlar Vadisi Filistin* (Valley of the Wolves, Palestine). The story is inspired by the Mavi Marmara Flotilla episode.¹⁷ It revolves around a group of Turks who send a humanitarian convoy to Gaza and attempt to provide assistance for the Palestinian population. The language used in the movie is telling: For example, in one scene, when an Israeli soldier asks the Turkish character why he came to Israel, the latter answers: “I did not come to Israel, I came to Palestine” (Fig. 7). In another scene, an Israeli agent tells the Turkish character: “You know you won’t make it out from our Promised Land”, to which the latter answers “I don’t know what part of this land has been promised to you, but I promise you six feet under” (Figs. 8, 9). The date of the series’ release is not trivial: Coming out in 2010, the movie resonated with Ankara’s fiery rhetoric against Israel at that time and the degradation of its relations with Tel Aviv. It provided support for Erdoğan’s denunciation of Israeli killings during the Davos meetings of March 2009, and to Turkey’s harsh stance regarding the Israeli assault on the Mavi Marmara ship. By portraying Turkey as the champion of the Palestinian cause, the movie seduced the Arab audience and pushed it to perceive Turkey as a good leader at the regional and international level, and as a legitimate and credible representative of the Arab world.

Fig. 7



Scene from *Kurtlar vadisi* where a Turkish intelligence agent is talking with an Israeli soldier

Fig. 8



Screen capture showing the main character Polat Alemdar adopting a defiant language when addressing to an Israeli protagonist

Fig. 9



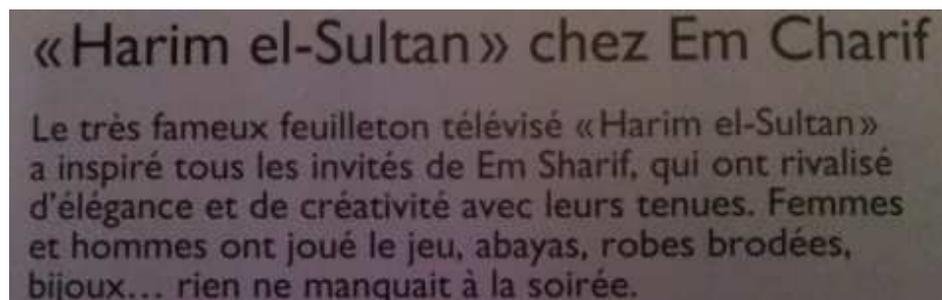
Screen capture showing the main character Polat Alemdar adopting a defiant language when addressing to an Israeli protagonist

28 Beyond the representations and the images that Turkish soap operas convey and that appeal to Arab populations, the success of the *diziler* is due to other factors, in particular their quality of production on the one hand and the structure and nature of the Arab export market on the other hand. In terms of production, the Turkish soap opera industry is highly developed compared to its Arab counterpart. Benefiting from a good economic situation in their country, production companies are dedicating huge budgets to create high-standard series that can compete with international and American hit series. The quality of the image and sound, the professional performance and the charisma of the actors, the realistic scenarios, the attractiveness of the music and theme song, and the beauty of the picturesque shots (at the Bosphorus, in luxurious villas), have all contributed to the popular appeal of these series. Moreover, the format used made the series competitive: The majority of the *diziler* are made up of two to four seasons, each composed of thirty 90-minute episodes. This makes them price-competitive, as broadcasters and TV channels buy long episodes that can fill up lengthy airing time. Hence, the success of Turkish soap operas lies in part in their production strategies.

29 Additionally, it is the export strategies that account for their popularity in the Arab world. In fact, Turkish *diziler* are dubbed not in classical Arabic but in colloquial Arabic, the language that people use in their daily life. Through the use of dialects with which people can connect, these series easily penetrate the minds of the Arab public and allow the viewers to identify with the characters and accept the message that is

indirectly conveyed in the scenario. The dialect, in this sense, creates a sense of proximity between the Arab viewer and the soap opera on the one hand, and between Turkish and Arab societies on the other hand. Dubbing was made in Syrian dialect rather than Egyptian dialect. In our opinion, this choice might have been driven by two factors. The first relates to market economics: Given that in the 2000s Syrian *musalsat* dethroned their Egyptian counterparts and became more popular, it was logical and rational that the Turkish series be dubbed in this dialect to ensure their success. The second reason may be political: When the first Turkish soap opera, *Gümüş*, was aired on Arab TV channels in 2008, Syria and Turkey enjoyed excellent diplomatic, economic and social relations. Erdoğan and Bashar al-Assad were close friends; Ankara and Damascus signed a free trade agreement and were considering the lift of visas;¹⁸ and diplomatic visits were very frequent between the two countries. The soap opera industry has therefore benefitted from the Turkish-Syrian honeymoon. It is indeed highly probable that the dubbing in Syrian dialect was made possible by the political rapprochement between Damascus and Ankara. Our research shows, in fact, that all Turkish *diziler* were translated into Arabic in Damascus by three Syrian production companies – Sama Art Production, Firdaws Art Production, and ABC Damascus – and were dubbed by Syrian actors. Since the beginning of the Syrian uprising and the ensuing degradation of relations between Bashar al-Assad and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Syria has suspended its dubbing work of Turkish soap operas and has stopped airing them, thus proving that there is a political dimension to the dubbing. These series are now being dubbed in Dubai by Emirati companies¹⁹.

Fig. 10



A Lebanese magazine article talking about a night organized in Beirut on the theme of *Muhteşem Yüzyıl*

30 In addition to dubbing, we also note that the names of the characters and the title of the soap operas have been adapted to the Arab context. In *Gümüş*, for example, the name of the main character “Mehmet” becomes “Muhannad”²⁰ in the Arabic-dubbed version of the series; similarly, “Gümüş” becomes “Nour”, a common female Arabic name. Very amusingly, the title of the series *Muhteşem Yüzyıl*, which literally means “Magnificent Century,” was translated in Arabic into a very different name: “Harim el-Sultan,” which means “The Sultan’s Harem” (Fig. 10). In fact, the expression “Sultan’s Harem” speaks to the imaginary of Arab viewers for whom the harem is a subject of phantasms and a symbol of an exotic world in which all desires are fulfilled. Therefore, the title in itself made the series very appealing for the Arab public.

31 The success of Turkish soap operas in the Middle East is not only based on their dubbing language and their adaptation to the Arab context, but also on the nature and structure of the Arab drama industry. While Arab soap operas display love stories but avoid touching upon “sensitive” topics such as premarital sex, abortion, and women emancipation, Turkish soap operas deal with these “real” issues that are seen by the Arab public as relevant, attractive, and linked to reality. In terms of format, Arab soap operas are usually produced with very low budgets, which impacts negatively on their quality (image and sound, actors’ performance, marketing strategies, etc.). These shortcomings of the Arab media have therefore left a room for the Turkish *diziler* to take hold in Middle East societies.

32 Our analysis has thus far shown that the projection of “soft power” through Turkish soap operas is the result of non-governmental actors. It is important here to consider

the interaction between these actors and the Turkish government, and to study the role, if any, played by the latter. Our field research and interviews with Turkish producers show clearly that production companies did not receive any kind of material or moral support from political actors and governmental circles. The producer of *Muhteşem Yüzyıl*, Timur Savcı, even told us that when his production team asked for authorization to shoot in Topkapı palace, the government only granted them permission for a few days, and the team later had to create its own palace-like setting.

33 However, we notice that while the government did not contribute to the production of Turkish soap operas, it nevertheless attempted to “surf” on their popularity and success in order to increase Ankara’s influence and prestige in the region and to build a regional power. Two anecdotes provide concrete illustrations. In an interview with a diplomat in Ankara²¹ we were told that during a visit to the United Arab Emirates in 2010, President Abdullah Gül, in order to “break the ice” with the Gulf rulers, started his official meeting by talking about the latest episode of the series *Fatmagül’ün Suçu Ne* (“Fatma” in the Arabic-dubbed version), which was very popular in the Gulf and was watched even by the royal family! Another anecdote relates to the series *Muhteşem Yüzyıl*: In late 2012, Erdoğan called for prosecutors to ban this soap opera, accusing it of distorting historical facts. In particular, the Prime minister claimed that the series misrepresented Suleiman the Magnificent by portraying him as an emotional man who spent more time in the harem than in conquests. The series was in fact taken off TV channels and from Turkish airlines flights for over a week. During that time, we had the chance to meet with the consul of Turkey in Dubai Elif Çomoğlu Ülgen, who told us that

it is highly doubtful that this ban will continue, as Prime minister Erdoğan knows that the series is very popular all over the Arab world; therefore, he will soon put it back on the screens, as it serves our soft power in the region²².

34 Indeed, all claims against *Muhteşem Yüzyıl* were quickly dismissed, and the series was broadcasted again. This clearly shows that even when the Turkish government has negative views of the soap operas, it has nevertheless capitalized on them to increase Ankara’s attractiveness in the Middle East, and has instrumentalised their popularity to consolidate its power in the region.

TRT Al Arabiyya: the Turkish government’s attempt to build a regional power through television.

35 While the export of Turkish soap operas is the initiative of private cultural entrepreneurs, other media instruments have been designed by the government in order to better reach out to the Middle East. In particular, the launching by the Turkish government of an Arabic-language TV channel – TRT Al Arabiyya – and the establishment of an Arabic branch of Anadolu Agency shows Ankara’s willingness to use the media as a means of cultural influence.

36 In April 2010, at a time in which soap operas were conquering “hearts and minds” in the Arab world, Prime Minister Erdoğan inaugurated TRT Al Arabiyya in Istanbul. In his opening speech, Erdoğan stated:

TRT will be our common channel, the channel of all Turks and Arabs. It will bind us to each other. It will unite our hearts. It will serve to deepen our relationships, strengthen our brotherhood, and consolidate our union (*TRT Al Arabiyya* 2010).

37 He added:

Although we are talking different languages in this vast geography, we should not forget that we have one history, one culture and similar values. We have given a shape to history together. Be sure that we will give a shape to the future

altogether. We are the members of a civilization that places high importance on neighborliness.

38 Hence, TRT in Arabic is clearly designed as an instrument of “soft power”. As is reflected in the Prime Minister’s speech, this channel is part of the AKP strategy to “win the hearts and minds” of the Arab public, therefore contributing to Turkey’s regional power. In fact, on its website, the channel indicates that its mission and goal is to create an “interaction between Turks and Arabs,” to “raise awareness about the values they have in common”, to “create a mutual understanding”, thus “strengthening cultural and historical links between these peoples”²³.

39 It is obvious that this channel is being used to promote a certain official discourse about Turkey. In fact, the news bulletins and the various talk shows and programs broadcasted on TRT Al Arabiyya adopt the governmental point of view and attempt to explain, justify, and legitimize Ankara’s political positions. For example, when corruption allegations against the government broke out and a political dispute erupted with the Cemaat of Fethullah Gülen²⁴, the news bulletin of TRT Al Arabiyya attempted to defend Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his government by portraying the Hizmet movement as a “secret and opaque organization”, by designating Gülen as “a manipulator,” and by offering the Arab public a simplistic narrative in which the AKP is depicted as victim and Gülen as the “bad guy”. Similarly, following the overthrowing of Mohammad Morsi in Egypt, TRT Al Arabiyya aired a talk show in which it clearly sided with the Muslim Brothers, denouncing a “coup,” praising the Turkish government for its courageous stance, and implicitly encouraging Turks and Arabs to embrace the Rabi’a Movement²⁵. Therefore, this channel serves Ankara’s public diplomacy: It attempts to communicate, spread, and justify Turkey’s political choices to an Arabic-speaking public.

40 However, one must note that no matter how novel and smart TRT Al Arabiyya might be as an instrument of “soft power”, its effects are limited. With limited experience and resources compared to other leading channels in the region such as Al Jazeera, Al Arabiyya, Al Hurra, or France 24 in Arabic, TRT struggles to win a share of the Arab media market and to compete with well-established channels. Moreover, our field research shows that TRT is not appealing to Arab viewers²⁶. In fact, for those in the Arab world who are “tuned” to news channels – that is to say the Arab elite and intellectuals – TRT is unappealing precisely because it is perceived as a state-owned channel that is unable to dissociate from the AKP and to adopt a more independent and neutral editorial line. In other words, for critical Arab viewers, TRT is perceived as the “spokesman of Ankara” and an instrument of the Turkish government, which undermines its credibility and limits its attractiveness. Thus, given these observations, it is difficult to say that TRT Al Arabiyya is a successful soft power tool.

41 In addition to TRT Al Arabiyya, the AKP government opened bureaus in Beirut and Cairo for the Turkish press agency Anadolu. These bureaus are in charge of conducting public diplomacy: They produce information in Arabic whose main purpose is to promote a positive image of Turkey and legitimize the AKP government’s policy choices. During our interview with Hamze Tekin, the vice-president of the Anadolu Agency in Beirut, the latter stated the following:

Our role is to tell a grand narrative about Turkey. We need the Arab world to better understand Turkey and what our great government is doing. We also serve the other way round: We collect information about the Arab world for our government so that they can make informed decisions and policy choices²⁷.

42 This instrument seems to be very efficient today. The majority of Arab news channels quote Anadolu as their source when mentioning news related to Turkey; they therefore unknowingly reproduce and spread the official discourse of Turkey. The reason why these channels use Anadolu is simply because it is a “shortcut” and the easiest way to obtain information about Turkey.

43 Having examined the various instruments of projection of Turkish soft power in the

region, we now turn to a detailed and in-depth assessment of their efficiency.

III. An assessment of Turkey's soft power in the Middle East: an illusory power of seduction?

The difficulty and limitations of measuring the impact of soft power, especially in the Middle East region

44 When assessing Turkey's "soft power" capacity, it is necessary to state one fact from the outset: "Soft power" is not an operational, easy-to-use concept. First, it is theoretically and practically difficult – not to say impossible – to measure the concrete impact of a soft power initiative. The political science community lacks quantitative instruments to gauge and determine the real consequences of soft power.

45 Second, soft power does not always translate into political capacity. A country's culture and values might appeal to other nations without them accepting the political leadership of this country and or aligning with its political and diplomatic positions. In the case of the Middle East, we do not find examples and cases in which Turkey's "soft power" has led Arab individuals to change their policy preferences because they are culturally attracted to Turkey. In other words, we do not find instances in which "soft power" has pushed an actor to do what he would otherwise not do, as in Robert Dahl's definition of power. For instance, during the Arab revolutions, people in the Middle East did not align their political positions with the views of Ankara, even though they watched Turkish soap operas. In our interviews in Lebanon in particular, we noticed that addicts of Turkish *diziler* criticized Ankara's policy vis-à-vis Syria, Lebanon's neighbouring country. People affiliated to the "March 8 Coalition" – a political coalition known for its favourable views of Syria and its support for Bashar al-Assad – continued watching their favourite soap operas while at the same time siding with Bashar and denouncing the role of Ankara in the Syrian crisis. Hence, watching a soap opera did not lead viewers to change their political opinions or to defend Turkey's interests.

46 In more general terms, it is possible to appreciate the soap operas and popular culture of a country while at the same time being politically opposed to this country. The best illustration of this is the fact that the Middle East region is amongst the biggest consumers of American films and at the same time shows high levels of anti-Americanism.

47 Having discussed these analytical difficulties and theoretical limitations for assessing Turkey's "soft power" in the region, we now turn to the examination of the practical consequences of Turkey's "soft power" in the Middle East in the past decade.

Achievements and shortcomings of Turkey's "soft power" in the region

48 The impact of Turkey's "soft power" in the Middle East is subject to controversy. While some writers and observers consider that Turkey has won the hearts and minds of Arabs and Muslims through its "soft power" (Kalin 2011), others argue that Turkey's "soft power" has produced limited positive effects (Benli Altunışık 2011). We support the view that Turkey's "soft power" has produced highly limited effects, and that its shortcomings outweigh its achievements.

49 On the positive side, field research and interviews we conducted in the region show clearly that “soft power” actions are self-reinforcing and create a “virtuous circle”: The more one watches a soap opera or TRT talk shows, the more one is willing to visit Turkey for tourism, enrol in a *Yunus Emre Cultural Center* to learn the Turkish language, or apply for scholarship to study in Istanbul. Therefore, it is clear that Turkey’s cultural presence in the Middle East has increased its “attractiveness” and has made Arab populations curious to discover or re-discover this country²⁸.

50 On the negative side, while Turkey’s strong cultural presence may have appealed to some Arab populations, it has also created negative reactions and feelings in certain segments of Arab societies. Consider the example of soap operas: Our interviews in Cairo, Beirut, Doha, and Erbil show that while soap operas are popular among the “masses” and the general public, they are nevertheless negatively perceived by the intelligentsia and the elite, who perceive them as a “cultural invasion” or as “cultural imperialism”. What is more, given the religious and cultural diversity of the Middle East populations, soap operas have failed to please everybody and to create a positive perception of Turkey in the minds of all Arab people. *Muhteşem Yüzyıl*, for instance, was subject to much criticism from certain conservative segments of the Sunni Arab community. In fact, some Sunnis whom we interviewed were shocked by the series and considered it a “scandal” to show Sultan Suleiman making love and supposedly drinking alcohol. As for the soap opera *Gümüş*, it drew much criticism from religious circles for whom *Gümüş* exhibited a liberal lifestyle that might “corrupt the Muslim conservative values of Arab youth”²⁹. A Saudi sheikh went as far as to offer a pilgrimage to the hajj for all those who boycott Turkish soap operas, and a Syrian sheikh ruled that carrying the picture of the Turkish character Mehmet on one’s T-shirt invalidates one’s prayers (Buccianti 2010).

51 In addition, it seems that the Arab revolutions have negatively affected Turkey’s “soft power” in the Middle East. First, the Arab Spring has dealt a blow to Turkey’s prestige in the region, pushing some segments of the Arab populations to have negative perceptions of Turkey. As a consequence, they have naturally shown a certain indifference to Turkish products in general and to Turkish soap operas in particular, and have even called for a boycott of these products as a means of protest against Turkey’s interventions in the internal affairs of the Arab world. For example, a number of Egyptian artists and filmmakers have initiated a boycott of Turkish soap operas to protest “Turkish intervention in Egyptian affairs and the position of the Turkish government towards Egypt’s 30th of June Revolution”³⁰. Second, Erdoğan’s harsh rhetoric and tough stances against Bashar al-Assad in Syria and Abdelfattah al-Sissi in Egypt have had disastrous effects on Turkey’s “soft power,” by causing Arab governments to take official actions against Turkish cultural products: in fact, in Egypt, President al-Sissi imposed a ban on the broadcast of Turkish soap operas (Mc Arthur Aug. 22, 2013); in Syria, as stated above, the government not only stopped broadcasting Turkish series, but also demanded that Syrian companies suspend their dubbing work of Turkish soaps. Consequently, Arab viewers across the Middle East were not able to follow season 4 of *Muhteşem Yüzyıl* because the episodes were only dubbed until season 3. Third, as Syria has turned into a real quagmire and a political problem for the AKP government, there has been a shift in Turkey away from “soft power” into an open embrace of “hard power”, as exemplified by Turkey’s military intervention in Syria to evacuate the tomb of Suleiman Shah, its participation in the international coalition against Daesh, and its call for a NATO military operation in Syria. Hence, after wandering in the avenues of “soft power” in the 2000s, Turkey is now moving back to the traditional “hard power” approach.

Conclusion

52 This paper has examined the actors and instruments involved in Turkey’s projection

of “soft power” in the Arab world and analysed the efficiency of “soft power” actions in the region. It has demonstrated that Turkish soap operas and TV channel TRT Al Arabiyya have had limited effects in terms of increasing Turkey’s general power capacity in the Middle East.

53 While Turkey’s “soft power” has had a limited political impact, it has nevertheless drawn Arab populations’ attention to this country, thus creating a debate around the Turkish “brand”. Therefore, we suggest that the real impact of soap operas and the TRT is the emergence of a debate in the Middle East around the so-called “Turkish model”. In fact, Turkey’s “soft power,” along with its economic dynamism and proactive diplomacy, have allowed the country to gain regional exposure and to become the subject of a heated debate around the “model” it represents. Here lies the true success of Turkey’s “soft power” projection: the cultural presence of Turkey in the Middle East has drawn the attention of Arab and Muslim populations to this country, and stirred their curiosity to understand the Turkish experience, or the so-called “Turkish model” (Benli Altunışık 2005: 45-63; Göksel 2012: 99-120). Whether this “model” is admired or criticized, whether it is applicable to the Middle East or not, is not in itself important for assessing the efficiency of Turkey’s “soft power”. Rather, what is important in our eyes is the fact that this “soft power” has succeeded in building a certain “brand” image of Turkey.

54 Nevertheless, it remains to be seen whether Turkey’s “soft power” and the debate it has generated around the “Turkish model” have allowed the country to acquire a “place in the Sun” in the Middle East or have simply won her “fifteen minutes of fame” (Ülgen 2010).

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Notes

1 Interview with İlber Ortaylı, April 2014, Istanbul.

2 With Syria over the Hatay province, and with Iraq over Mossul.

3 For example, Turkey and Syria were at the brink of war in 1999 because Syria was hosting the Kurdish PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan.

4 Arab populations resented the policies of “Turkification” led by the Ottoman Empire during its period of decline. As early as 1913, the Arab National Congress held in Paris demanded reforms that would grant Arabs living under the Ottoman Empire more autonomy. The adopted resolutions included making Arabic “an official language in the Arab provinces... the employment of Arab troops in their home provinces except in time of war... stronger locally-controlled provincial government” (Khalidi 1980: 309-310).

5 He was born in the conservative city of Konya and taught International Relations at the University of Malaysia in the 1990s.

6 Alvaro Garcia Linera is the intellectual who conceptualized the politics of the left parties in Bolivia, and served as the theorist of Morales. He became vice-president of Bolivia.

7 Personified here by Mehmet’s mother and grandfather.

8 According to a survey by the Turkish think tank TESEV, 78% of Arabs watch at least one romantic Turkish soap opera. (Akgün, Perçinoğlu and Senyücel Gündoğar 2010: 16).

9 Interview with Timur Savcı, owner of Tims Productions, Istanbul, April 2014.

- 10 Interviews with a dozen of young student graduates in Lebanon, Egypt and Iraqi Kurdistan.
- 11 The author of this article watched all the episodes of the series ; the terms “Islam” and “jihad” are mentioned more than 700 times.
- 12 Season 2, episode 35.
- 13 Season 1, episode 48.
- 14 The authoritarian regimes of the Arab world are seen by their citizens as “subservient” to the West.
- 15 Interview in Istanbul (translated from Turkish by the author), April 2014.
- 16 Season 1, Episode 10.
- 17 In May 2010, Turkey took part in a maritime convoy to Gaza, known as the Gaza Freedom Flotilla, which carried humanitarian aid to the Palestinian population and attempted to break the Israeli siege on Gaza. Turkey participated in this Flotilla through the Turkish NGO *İnsan Hak ve Hürriyetleri ve İnsan Yardım Vakfı* (The Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief), which bought a ship called *Mavi Marmara* (The Blue Marmara) and used it to carry aid to Gaza. As a result of Israel’s assault on the Flotilla, nine Turkish activists were killed. Turkey reacted harshly and Prime Minister Erdoğan demanded an official apology from the Israeli government, compensation for the victims’ families, and a lift of the Israeli siege on Gaza. This episode made Turkey very popular in the Middle East, since it was seen as the champion of the Palestinian cause.
- 18 Tourist visas were in fact lifted between the two countries in 2009.
- 19 The dubbing work is done by Syrian actors residing in the United Arab Emirates or by Emirati people. It is still done in the Syrian dialect in order to ensure continuity with the previous episodes.
- 20 The name “Muhannad” is a common name in the Arab world; it is not the same as “Muhammad”, the name of the Prophet.
- 21 Off-the-record interview, January 2014.
- 22 November 2012, Dubai.
- 23 <http://www.trtarabic.com/trtworld/ar/>
- 24 The Fethullah Gülen movement (also known in Turkish as “Cemaat” or “Hizmet”) is a transnational religious and social movement whose proclaimed objective is to form a “Golden generation” [*altın nesil*] of young Muslims who are well-versed in religion and open to modernity, globalization and sciences. Until 2013, the movement and the AKP were engaged in a “marriage of convenience” against a common enemy represented by the military and the Kemalist establishment. See Yavuz and Esposito (2009).
- 25 The Rabi’a Movement is a large sit-in in Rabi’a square in Egypt in support of the Muslim Brotherhood and former President Morsi against the coup of President Abdelfattah al-Sissi. The Movement coincided with the outbreak of the Gezi Park revolt in Turkey (June 2013).
- 26 Ten interviews conducted with intellectuals, university professors, students, and housewives, between 2012 and 2013.
- 27 Interview, Beirut, September 2012.
- 28 Survey mentioned above.
- 29 See mention of the fatwa by Sheikh Abdelaziz Abdallah Al Sheikh in (Wafi Sep. 14, 2008).
- 30 On 30 June 2013, the one-year anniversary of the inauguration of Mohammad Morsi into the presidency, Egyptians took to the streets calling for his ouster. Turkey called this “military coup” against a democratically elected president and sided with Morsi. See *Hürriyet Daily News* (Aug. 7, 2013).

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