

Beyond Soft Power: How Turkish TV Dramas Shape Global Politics

by Ceren Çetinkaya

The ship swayed. The cold waters of the Bosphorus tossed the vessel from side to side as the chained women on deck fixed their eyes on the silhouette rising from the horizon: minarets, domes, smoke, and stone. Istanbul. Alexandra pressed her fingertips against the railing. The wind threw her hair across her face. When the port finally opened up before them, the shouts of men, the cries of gulls, the smell of salt and empire, she turned to the woman beside her, voice low and bitter: "Have we arrived at the Ottoman hell?"

This is the opening scene of *Magnificent Century*, one of the most watched Turkish productions in history, airing in over 60 countries. The show was a turning point for the Turkish television industry, proof that local drama could travel and compete globally. However, it also turned the soap opera genre into a contested medium of history and political power.

The global circulation of Turkish television dramas offers a striking example of the political power of TV series and how their production and circulation is related to international politics.

Today, Turkey ranks third worldwide in TV drama exports, followed by only the United States and the United Kingdom (The Economist, 2024). Between 2020 and 2023 alone, global demand for Turkish dramas surged by 184%, with countries in the MENA region, Balkans, and Eastern Europe among the top importers (Aytaç et al., 2024). In 2024, the Turkish production industry exported over 300 series to more than 200 countries, generating revenues exceeding \$500 million (Duvar English, 2025). Although early TV series productions primarily targeted domestic viewers, by the 2010s Turkish dramas had gained



Paying attention to how these dramas are produced and how they travel across borders reveals that their global success is not accidental, but shaped through a series of choices that collectively carry macro-level consequences.”

Istanbul, Turkey.

immense international popularity, prompting producers to look beyond national borders and encouraging state officials to harness this momentum for trade power, public diplomacy, and national identity-building strategies.

Nevertheless, this growing visibility has not been without friction. In some contexts, Turkish dramas have become politically contentious, even leading to bans in certain regions as debates over history and regional influence intensify. In 2018, the Saudi-owned broadcaster MBC pulled all Turkish dramas from its network, coinciding with deepening tensions between Ankara and the Saudi-UAE axis following Turkey's support for Qatar. Meanwhile, Egypt's highest Islamic authority issued a fatwa against Muslims consuming Turkish dramas. These moments reveal that popular culture is never simply entertainment, but rather an important political asset. Paying attention to how these dramas are produced and how they travel across borders reveals that their global success is not accidental, but shaped through a series of choices that collectively carry macro-level consequences.

Turkish Soap Operas on the World Stage

Turkish television series have become one of the country's most potent cultural exports and a quietly formidable instrument of soft power. According to Forbes Turkey, Turkish drama exports nearly tripled between 2018 and 2024, spanning both traditional

broadcast and digital platforms. Nowhere is this influence more deeply felt than across the MENA region, where cultural familiarity has translated into tangible gains for Turkey's tourism industry and broader economy.

Turkish dramas first arrived in the region in the mid-2000s as a compelling alternative to Western imports, which were perceived as culturally alien to local sensibilities. The breakthrough moment came with *Gümüş*, broadcast across the Arab world as *Noor* on MBC, a melodrama tracing the romance between a wealthy businessman and a young woman caught between modern ambition and traditional expectation. Its success was staggering, opening the floodgates for what would become a sustained cultural wave.

A second wave quickly followed, bringing richer and more varied storytelling. *Binbir Gece* (1001 Nights) drew audiences into a morally charged romance built on sacrifice and desire, while *Aşk-ı Memnu* (Forbidden Love) and *Yaprak Dökümü* (The Falling of Leaves) expanded the thematic range while preserving the emotional and moral sensibilities that resonated strongly with Arab viewers. MBC played a pivotal role throughout this period, strategically programming Turkish dramas as content that felt both refreshingly modern and culturally accessible, effectively weaving them into the fabric of Arab media life.

Yet this landscape was far from static. The rise of Ottoman-themed television dramas marked a decisive turning point,

not only in the aesthetic and narrative character of Turkish exports, but in their geopolitical stakes. *Magnificent Century* propelled Turkish historical dramas onto a global stage by combining high production value with a dramatized reimagining of Ottoman imperial history, attracting vast international audiences and sparking debates over historical representation and national identity. The series portrays the reign of Suleiman the Magnificent not through the austere lens of conventional historiography, but through the intimate corridors of the Topkapı Palace: its power struggles, romantic entanglements, and court intrigues. In doing so, it transformed a distant imperial past into a visceral viewing experience, and in the process made TV shows a contested terrain far beyond the borders of Turkey.

A new wave of historical epics followed, grander and far more contested in their interpretations: *Resurrection: Ertuğrul* and *Establishment: Osman*. Unlike *Magnificent Century*'s focus on palace intrigue and personal drama, these series foregrounded religious symbolism, heroic masculinity, and a civilizational narrative of Ottoman origins, making their political undertones far more explicit. Turkish state institutions began to read, and at times actively promote, these productions as expressions of a renewed national vision.

Behind these productions lies a more complex institutional picture. The major studios behind Turkish historical dramas operate as private commercial >

“As states increasingly use cultural production as a foreign policy tool, struggles over imperial memory will be fought not only in archives and academies, but also on streaming platforms and broadcast schedules.”



Photo: © shutterstock

entities, formally independent of the state. Yet the line between commercial calculation and political alignment has grown increasingly blurred. State broadcaster TRT, by commissioning and co-producing prestige historical epics, shapes both the financial incentives and the narrative frameworks available to producers. At the same time, it would be reductive to cast producers purely as instruments of official ideology: the proven export appetite of MENA and South Asian audiences for epic narratives of Muslim heroism creates its own gravitational pull. The result is a productive ambiguity in which patriotic grandeur and commercial savvy are difficult to disentangle, and producers can credibly present themselves as simply responding to audience demand.

War of Screens: Geopolitics and Historical Memory

What had once been a story of shared melodrama became, increasingly, a flashpoint for diplomatic friction. Nowhere is this clearer than in Turkey's turbulent relationship with Saudi Arabia. Already strained by sharply divergent responses to the Arab Spring uprisings, the relationship was pushed further to the brink by the 2017 Gulf crisis, when Ankara openly sided with Qatar against the Saudi-led blockade, sending cargo planes loaded with supplies to Doha in a move widely read as a direct challenge to Riyadh's regional authority.

The breaking point came with the 2018 murder of Saudi journalist Jamal

Khashoggi inside the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul. Rather than pursuing quiet diplomacy, Turkey adopted an unexpectedly assertive strategy: selectively releasing investigative findings to international media, deliberately keeping the story alive in global news cycles and framing the killing as a premeditated, state-directed operation.

It was against this charged backdrop that Saudi Arabia's next move unfolded: not in a diplomatic communique, but in a phone call. In 2018, media professionals across the MBC network were instructed directly by state officials to stop purchasing Turkish content and to pull existing Turkish series from broadcast schedules and digital platforms, leaving visible gaps in libraries that had been built over years. The ban spread quickly. The UAE and other regional broadcasters followed suit, not through formal announcements, but through quiet realignment. As one industry professional put it: "We kept the Turkish content, but in a very discreet way, not with the usual marketing, because we didn't want to trigger hostility in the region." Entertainment, it turned out, was never just entertainment.

MBC Group occupies a dominant position in the regional media landscape and has long been one of the largest buyers of Turkish dramas, contributing significantly to their circulation across the Middle East. Through its extensive satellite network, programming capacity, and control over regional content flows, MBC Group wields substantial power in shaping which cultural products circulate across Arab markets, and when political tensions arise, this power becomes an instrument with clear geopolitical implications. In such contexts, entertainment industries stop being solely commercial domains; they become arenas in which states project narratives, signal alliances, and articulate shifting regional hierarchies.

The ban's eventual lifting was itself a geopolitical signal. Following President

Erdoğan's visit to King Salman in April 2022, and a gradual diplomatic thaw, MBC signed a five-year content agreement with two of Turkey's biggest production companies. No public statement required: the deal spoke for itself.

Yet Saudi Arabia was not the only front in this cultural war. Egypt's fraught relationship with Turkish television stretches back to 2013, when the ousting of President Mohamed Morsi and Ankara's vocal condemnation of the military takeover prompted prominent figures in Egypt's artistic community to call for a boycott of Turkish dramas. Some broadcasters temporarily suspended Turkish content, an early sign of how geopolitical disagreements could rapidly translate into pressure on transnational cultural flows.

What had merely simmering tension erupted into something far more ideologically charged with the global success of *Resurrection: Ertuğrul*. In 2020, Egypt's Global Fatwa Index issued an edict condemning the show, accusing it of functioning as a colonial campaign over former Ottoman domains. Turkish soap operas, the edict argued, were being used to export the idea that Erdoğan and his followers are the rightful leaders of the Islamic world, cloaking material and political ambition in the language of Islamic solidarity. The accusation was striking: a television drama had been recast as an instrument of neo-Ottoman imperialism.

What these two cases reveal, when read together, is that the same cultural texts can carry radically different political meanings depending on where and through what historical lens they are viewed. The Saudi ban was largely a response to contemporary diplomatic tensions, relatively detached from the actual content of the shows. Egypt's reaction, by contrast, zeroed in on the narratives themselves, introducing a colonial register that reframed the entire debate. And yet, as distributors and consumers from both Turkey and

the region noted, beneath the political and ideological rhetoric lay a simpler reality: economic reasoning. Both cases signaled a region increasingly determined to build its own media industries.

That ambition took its most dramatic form in 2019, when the UAE and Egypt co-produced *Kingdoms of Fire*, a lavish historical epic explicitly designed as a counter-narrative to the Ottoman imaginary promoted by Turkish dramas. Aired in the immediate aftermath of the Saudi ban, the production was a direct challenge to Turkey's rising cultural influence and its projection of a particular version of history across the region. Here, television had become something more than entertainment or even soft power; it had become a medium for historical contestation, a way of fighting over memory itself.

Counter-productions like *Kingdoms of Fire* reveal that transnational television can no longer be understood as a purely market-driven phenomenon. These are not simply dramas competing for ratings; they are arguments – about the past, about regional leadership, about whose version of history gets to circulate across Arab living rooms. The involvement of state institutions, religious bodies, media conglomerates, and creative professionals in these struggles points to something that conventional diplomacy often obscures: geopolitical contests are not only waged through summits and sanctions. They also take place in writers' rooms, production studios, and broadcast schedules, by industry workers whose meaning-making practices carry consequences far beyond the screen. The journey from Alexandra's bitter remark at the gates of Istanbul to Egypt's fatwa against *Resurrection: Ertuğrul* is a story about what happens when popular culture becomes too politically legible to ignore. Turkish television dramas did not set out to reshape regional geopolitics. They set out to entertain. Yet the accumulated weight of their choices, which empires

to glorify, which version of Islamic history to center, proved impossible for neighboring states to receive as neutral.

The Saudi and Egyptian cases, distinct in both their triggers and logic, together demonstrate that the same cultural text can function simultaneously as a commercial product, a soft power instrument, and a provocation. The response was not merely diplomatic but creative: *Kingdoms of Fire* was an argument made in the language of television, a counter-narrative produced precisely because narratives had come to matter.

As more states invest in prestige cultural production as an adjunct to foreign policy, the dynamics traced here are likely to multiply. The battles over who controls the past – whose imperial memory is legitimized, whose is contested – will continue to be fought not only in archives and academies, but also in streaming libraries and broadcast schedules.

References

The Economist, "The Third-Largest Exporter of Television Is Not Who You Might Expect," February 15, 2024. <https://www.economist.com/culture/2024/02/15/the-third-largest-exporter-of-television-is-not-who-you-might-expect>

Ayşe İpek Aytaç, Mehmet Üner, and Elif Esiyok, "Internationalization of Turkish TV Soap Operas," *Rutgers Business Review* 9, no. 2 (2024): 241.

Duvar English, "Turkey's TV Series Industry Earned over \$500 Million from Exports in 2024," *Duvar English*, January 20, 2025, <https://www.duvarenglish.com/turkeys-tv-series-industry-earned-over-500-million-from-exports-in-2024-news-65557>

Ceren Çetinkaya is a Researcher at the oiip, where her work focuses on changing security perceptions and the future of EU-Turkey relations through strategic foresight methods. She completed her PhD in 2026 at Central European University with a thesis on Turkish foreign policy and cultural production.