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## Neo-Ottoman Cool 2: Turkish Nation Branding and Arabic-Language Transnational Broadcasting

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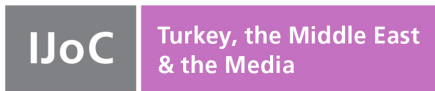
## Neo-Ottoman Cool 2: Turkish Nation Branding and Arabic-Language Transnational Broadcasting

### Abstract

Ten years after the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in Turkey in 2002, Turkish-Arab relations have dramatically improved. This rapprochement was largely based on Turkey's engagement with Arab publics as part of a soft power-based policy conceived as neo-Ottomanism. Against the backdrop of the remarkable popularity of Turkish television dramas in the Arab world, this article focuses on Turkey's transnational broadcasting and nation-branding efforts. Acknowledging the limits and challenges to soft power, it argues that the success of neo-Ottomanism has been based on the Turkish government's use of multiple strategies of outreach through popular culture, rhetoric, and broadcasting to create a new Turkish nation brand of neo-Ottoman cool, articulated as at once more benign and more powerful. The conclusion discusses how the Arab uprisings have complicated Turkey's charm offensive in the Arab world.

### Disciplines

Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences



## Neo-Ottoman Cool 2: Turkish Nation Branding and Arabic-Language Transnational Broadcasting

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Ten years after the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in Turkey in 2002, Turkish-Arab relations have dramatically improved. This rapprochement was largely based on Turkey's engagement with Arab publics as part of a soft power-based policy conceived as neo-Ottomanism. Against the backdrop of the remarkable popularity of Turkish television dramas in the Arab world, this article focuses on Turkey's transnational broadcasting and nation-branding efforts. Acknowledging the limits and challenges to soft power, it argues that the success of neo-Ottomanism has been based on the Turkish government's use of multiple strategies of outreach through popular culture, rhetoric, and broadcasting to create a new Turkish nation brand of *neo-Ottoman cool*, articulated as at once more benign and more powerful. The conclusion discusses how the Arab uprisings have complicated Turkey's charm offensive in the Arab world.

### Introduction

Two Turkish men appear in an old apartment in Istanbul. An elderly man with white hair and beard and a big smile prepares Turkish coffee, while a young, stylish, and clean-shaven man plays oriental music on an antique radio. When the coffee is done, the younger Western-looking man is handed the Turkish coffee on a traditional copper tray. This is how a video promoting the Arabic-language Turkish news and entertainment television station, TRT-7-al-Turkiyya, begins. Broadcast in 2010 with the launch of the government-funded channel, the video shows the young man leaving Istanbul on a ferry and later a train, still holding the Turkish coffee tray. Seconds later, he is shown arriving to the northern Syrian city of Aleppo. The video then takes the viewer on a trip across the Arab world as the young Turk is shown traveling through Damascus, then to various locations in the Middle East and North Africa. The last scene of the promotional video depicts a man in an old Damascene house, where a band plays the same music that started in Istanbul. As the musical piece ends, the Turkish man offers the still-hot Turkish coffee to

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an elderly Arab musician. The musician takes a sip and says in Arabic, "Thank you, this is great." The video ends with an image of the still freshly brewed Turkish cup of coffee, the steam of which spells the words "from Turkey, with all its love."

The video is loaded with symbolism revealing how the producers of TRT-7-al-Tukiyya imagine the Turk, the Arab, and Turkish-Arab relations. The Turkish man, with his Western style and appreciation for a common Arab-Turkish tradition, embodies an aura of *neo-Ottoman cool* (see Kraidy & Al-Ghazzi, 2013). The video portrays the Turk's relation to the Arab world as that of a homecoming of sorts, a renewed discovery, an ode to an older generation of Ottoman Arabs and Turks. The Turkish gaze toward the Arab world, as projected in the video, reflects a rekindling of imperial memories with Istanbul as the symbolic center and spatial starting point of the world depicted in the video. Turkish coffee underscores the authenticity and naturalness of the Arab-Turkish relation. As the former head of al-Jazeera's Beirut bureau said in a special program dedicated to the opening of the channel in 2010,

Turkish coffee is the symbol, the slogan, and what captures Arab-Turkish relations. Turkish coffee is there every day and every morning in every Arab neighborhood, alley, household and café... Turkish coffee neither needs nor waits for a political decision or a presidential or royal decree. (Bin Jiddou, 2010, 04:06-04:40 [video clip])

These themes were also reflected in speeches by the Turkish prime minister, the head of the Islamic-oriented Justice and Development Party, known by its Turkish acronym AKP, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (2010), who declared during the launch of TRT-7-al-Turkiyya, that Turks and Arabs "share the same history, culture and civilization... They are like the fingers of a hand. They are as close as the flesh and the nail of a finger" (03:35-04:50 [video clip]).

This article explores the significance of this new Turkish engagement and popularity in the Arab region and the rise of its soft power across Arab and Muslim countries, captured through its policy of neo-Ottomanism. Given Turkey's imperial Ottoman history with the Arabs, we seek to explain how Turkey achieved such popularity, with 75% of Arabs across seven countries characterizing Turkey's image positively in 2009 and 77% calling for a larger Turkish role in the region (Akgün, Senyücel Gündoğar, & Perçinoğlu, 2009). Drawn from a larger project, this research is based on an extensive textual analysis of the coverage of Turkey and Turkish popular culture in Arab news media, in addition to an analysis of the Turkish channel TRT-7-al-Turkiyya. We ask what role, if any, the television channel has played in the resurgence of Turkish influence in the Arab world. How does the rise of Turkey's profile in the region relate to the complex history of mutual relations? How was Turkish soft power built, to what effect, and with what limitations? Against the backdrop of striking pan-Arab popularity of Turkish television dramas and with a focus on Turkey's transnational broadcasting toward the Arab world, in addition to AKP leaders' skillful use of rhetoric and diplomacy, the article deconstructs the bases of Turkish soft power. It analyzes the significance of changes in Arab-Turkish relations through the lens of Turkish public diplomacy and nation-branding efforts in the Arab region. Noting the limits of and challenges to Turkey's dependence on soft power, particularly in light of the Arab uprisings, the article argues that the Turkish government has succeeded in constructing a positive image of Turkey as a politically and economically rising power. We contend that this success depends on the AKP government's multiple strategies of using popular culture,

broadcasting, rhetoric, and economic branding techniques in a soft power push that aims to enhance Turkey's regional geopolitical and economic clout. Turkey's image, we contend, manages to combine various hitherto separate and seemingly contradictory political, economic, and sociocultural elements in one seductive neo-Ottoman "nation brand," what one Arab columnist captured as a "European, Islamic, Secular, Capitalist Turkey" (Khoury, 2008, para. 4). As we have demonstrated elsewhere, neo-Ottoman cool is largely dependent on popular culture and on being presented as a soft sell to Arab publics (Kraidy & Al-Ghazzi, 2013).

### **Political Identity and Turkish-Arab History**

Before delving into the ways in which the case of Turkey relates to various conceptual formulations of soft power, it is important to address the complexity of Arab-Turkish relations. When 400 years of Ottoman rule over Arabs came to an end in the early 20th century, the Turkish elite's image of Arabs and the Arab elite's image of Turks played an important role in consolidating national identities on both sides by offering an image of an "other" against which the national "self" could be defined. By *image*, we mean "a subject's cognitive construction or mental representation of another actor in the political world" (Herrmann & Fischerkeller, 1995, p. 415). At the time, Turkish negative images of Arabs as backward and untrustworthy, exacerbated by Arab dependence on the British in their struggle against the Ottomans in World War I, sharply contrasted with Turkish perceptions of the West as modern. This worldview was reflected in the policies of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founding father of modern Turkey, which were based on Westernization, secularization, latinizing the alphabet, cleansing Turkish of Arabic and Farsi words, and outlawing the wearing of "oriental" clothes such as the fez (Bengio & Özcan, 2001). Atatürk justified these drastic changes by arguing that Turkey belonged with the civilized West rather than the backward East—associated with Arabs. He attacked the caliphate as an "Arab institution" and insinuated that it was "hostile to progress" (Bozdağlıoğlu, 2003, p. 47). He called for freeing the Turks from Arabic script—"these incomprehensible signs that for centuries have held our minds in an iron vice" (Bozdağlıoğlu, 2003, p. 49).

On the other hand, Arab stereotypes of Turks as barbarians existed since the 11th century, but anti-Turkish sentiment grew during the late Ottoman era as the idea of modern nationalism based on popular sovereignty and linguistic unity made its way to the Middle East from Europe in the 19th and early 20th centuries (Haarman, 1988). Nostalgia in the popular imagination for the Arab golden age in Baghdad and Cordoba was contrasted with "the nightmare of alien, uncivilized Turkish rule," considered as "the cause for the depressing age of decadence, *inhibitat*" (Haarman, 1988, p. 187). Such negative images of the Ottoman Empire have until recently enjoyed the status of conventional wisdom in the Arab world, not only in textbooks and journalism but also in popular culture from Lebanese 1960s musicals to 2000s Syrian television drama. In Turkey, too, anti-Arab stereotypes were reflected in popular culture. For example, Turks refer to popular music associated with lower-class urban communities as *Arabesk*, a term originally meant to signal unrefined taste and a rejection of modernizing reform (see Stokes, 1992). The point to stress is that mutual negative images of Arabs and Turks and a collective memory of fraught relations had a large impact on political and cultural ties. Despite the fact that Turkey had different relations with individual Arab countries at different times, the emotional and psychological aspects of the shared history produced generalizations about a putatively monolithic Turkish attitude or policy toward all

Arab countries. This was bolstered by the tendency of any Arab state facing problems with Turkey to portray its bilateral issue as an all-Arab one, so as to mobilize Arabs behind its cause and gain their support (Bengio & Özcan, 2001).

Turkish foreign policy and political rhetoric toward its Arab neighbors was drastically different before the AKP's rise to power. In the second half of the 20th century, Turkey solidly placed itself in the Western camp, resulting in actions unfavorable to Arab states. Turkey was the first Muslim-majority country to recognize the state of Israel in 1949. As a member of NATO since 1952, Ankara allowed the United States to use its military bases to intervene in the Middle East, starting with the 1958 civil strife in Lebanon. After Western powers declined to support Turkish military action in Cyprus in 1964, Turkey sided with Egypt on the eve of the 1967 Six-Day War against Israel and denied the United States permission to use Turkish bases to assist Israel in the 1973 war. To keep up with rising oil prices in the 1970s, Turkey dramatically boosted trade with the Arab states and Iran, bringing the country closer to its neighbors, though Arab lack of support on Cyprus and Syria's sheltering of PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) leader Abdullah Öcalan at a time when it was waging attacks against Turkey constrained the rapprochement. Turkey supported coalition forces in the 1991 Gulf War and signed a military treaty with Israel in 1996, and in 1998 Turkey threatened military action against Syria if Damascus continued to provide shelter for Öcalan (Taşpınar, 2008).

In 2001, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Abdullah Gül launched the AKP, which they branded "conservative democratic"—not Islamist (Taşpınar, 2008). The new party, which has won three consecutive elections since 2002, portrayed itself as reformist and staunchly pro-business and focused on its bid to join the European Union. Several reasons contributed to Arab-Turkish rapprochement, including the AKP's rise, the spectacular 2003 vote of the Turkish parliament denying the United States permission to open a northern front in its impending invasion of Iraq, and the government's increasingly critical rhetoric toward Israel. More consequential to Turkey's charm offensive on its Arab neighbors, and after the difficulties of its European Union accession became apparent (Tuğal, 2012), the AKP embraced a Turkey-centric policy of projecting Turkish self-confidence politically and economically, which has come to be known as "neo-Ottomanism." A key notion in neo-Ottoman discourse is "strategic depth," a combination of historical resonance and geographic scale. In a May 2010 article in *Foreign Policy* magazine, Turkey's minister of foreign affairs, Ahmet Davutoğlu, explained his country's neo-Ottoman zero problems with neighbors foreign policy doctrine, necessary for Turkish strategic depth. According to Davutoğlu (2010), it entails:

the adoption of a new discourse and diplomatic style, which has resulted in the spread of Turkish soft power in the region. Although Turkey maintains a powerful military due to its insecure neighborhood, we do not make threats. Instead, Turkish diplomats and politicians have adopted a new language in regional and international politics that prioritizes Turkey's civil-economic power. (para. 19)

As one analyst put it, "neo-Ottomanism is essentially about projecting Turkey's 'soft power'—a bridge between East and West, a Muslim nation, a secular state, a democratic political system, and a capitalistic economic force" (Taşpınar, 2008, p. 3). Thus, relations between Turkey and Arab countries improved

because of a self-conscious foreign policy based on soft power. In the next section, we explore what exactly we mean by *soft power*.

### **Soft Power, Public Diplomacy, and Nation Branding**

Scholars have used concepts such as soft power, public diplomacy, and nation branding to capture different facets of the ways that states communicate with foreign publics, cultivate a favorable image of their country in other nation-states, and promote their political and economic interests abroad. Scholarly literature that explores these issues often seems preoccupied with semantics and weak in theorizing distinctions between concepts such as propaganda, public diplomacy, soft power, hard power, and nation branding (for a critique of the literature, see Anholt, 2006; Li 2009; Melissen, 2005; Wilson, 2008). Propaganda and public diplomacy overlap in many ways, but the former has lost much of its analytic value because of its association with "pejorative connotations" (Cull, Culbert & Welch, 2003). Instead, public diplomacy began to be used in the 1960s to describe "the process by which international actors seek to accomplish the goals of their foreign policy by engaging with foreign publics" (Cull, 2008, p. 31). Cultural production, exchange, and dissemination are understood to be key to public diplomacy (Cull, 2008). Although the history of public diplomacy goes back to the Cold War, the term gained renewed popularity in academic and government circles dealing with the Middle East following the 9/11 attacks, which prompted the infamous question in U.S. political discourse "why do they hate us?" and led to the launch of several public diplomacy projects to win the "hearts and minds" of Muslim publics. The failure of several of these projects during the Bush administration underscores that the aims of public diplomacy are difficult to achieve if they are perceived as contradictory to a country's foreign policy or military actions (Melissen, 2005). In other words, if a country's hard power policies are unpopular, its soft power projects can only go so far in changing that country's image. This leads to the next question: Is there really a difference, then, between hard power and soft power?

Nye (2008) argues that "soft power is the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment" (p. 94), the latter two being attributes of hard power. A country's soft power rests on its cultural resources and political values, and on perceptions of its foreign policies as legitimate and having moral authority (Nye, 2008). Discussing the case of China, Li (2009) rejects this dichotomy and contends that "soft power does not exist in the nature of certain resources of power. . . . It has to be intentionally cultivated through prudent use of all sources of power available in certain social relationships" (p. 3). Li adds that hard power can be used to enhance a country's image as much as soft power can sometimes be aggressive. For example, the U.S.-led military campaigns in Kuwait in 1991 or in Kosovo in 1998 have enhanced its image and popular standing in many of the countries involved. Thus, it is important to emphasize the sociopolitical contexts of how power is used to be able to make these distinctions (Li, 2009). This is related to the problematic distinction between soft power and public diplomacy. Public diplomacy is understood to be simultaneously a component and a vehicle of a country's use of soft power. When a country like Turkey or China strategically frames its foreign policies as part of soft power, in its communication with foreign governments and publics soft power becomes a discursive tactic within public diplomacy. The point is that a decontextualized use of these concepts is difficult to operationalize, and their purely theoretical relation to each other runs the risk of becoming tautological.

In the case of Turkey, this article maintains that the rise of the AKP during the last decade (2003–2013) has enabled Turkey to cultivate its soft power and drastically improve its image in Arab countries (although the Arab uprisings have challenged the success of its uses of noncoercive power, as we will discuss later in the article). The multifaceted ways that this image was managed and promoted, we argue, constructed a powerful neo-Ottoman cool nation brand. According to van Ham (2008), “branding is an effort to use strategies developed in the commercial sector to manage, if not necessarily wield, the soft power of a geographical location” (p. 127). It is similar to public diplomacy, with the distinction that its strategies of image and symbols management and use of mass media are generally associated with promoting economic rather than foreign policy interests (Gilboa, 2008). A nation brand is also different from a national image due to the active role policy makers and national elites play “in the shaping, changing and maintaining of their country’s image” (Saunders, 2012, p. 51). Nation branding, then, is the “phenomenon by which governments engage in self-conscious activities aimed at producing a certain image of the nation-state” (Bolin & Ståhlberg, 2010, p. 82), and therefore can expand a nation’s soft power. In the case of Turkey, the AKP government has succeeded in enhancing its political and economic interests through popular culture and transnational broadcasting, in addition to political rhetoric, by strategically constructing an attractive neo-Ottoman nation brand. In the next sections, we focus on broadcasting to analyze the elements of nation branding that managed to portray Turkey as simultaneously Islamic and modern, at once moral and economically successful.

#### **TRT-7-al-Turkiyya**

On April 4, 2010, Turkey launched an Arabic-language satellite television channel, TRT-7-al-Turkiyya, transmitting on ARABSAT and NILESAT satellites. Turkish officials made a big show via the new channel: The Crown Prince of Qatar, Tamim bin-Hamad al-Thani, and the head of the Islamic Conference, Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, attended the launching ceremony (Nureddin, 2010). Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan delivered the opening speech, intoning that the channel “was launched to become our common language, or common screen, our common passion.” Erdoğan underscored cultural links by reciting a famous Arabic poem and mentioning iconic Arab artists as loved by Turks, too, in what was described as a “manifesto in the love of Arabs” (Nureddin, 2010). Similarly, reflecting the channel’s embroilment in larger geopolitical dynamics, the managing director of TRT-7-al-Turkiyya, Sefer Turan, an Egypt-educated Arabic-speaking Turk who previously worked for the Islamic 7 channel of the now-defunct al-Refah Islamic Party, added:

For a long time, relations between the two [Arab and Turkish] societies have been perpetuated via intermediaries, by translators. . . . [With TRT-7-al-Turkiyya] we want to talk directly about our geography, education, art, culture, everything. We want to remove the intermediaries from our communication. We want to explain Turkey to the Arab world. (Karabat, 2010, para. 1)

In his study on the German Arabic-language Deutsche Welle channel, Zöllner (2006) argued that, while it is common for government-funded international broadcasters to frame their objectives as promotion of dialogue and cooperation, in effect they follow a monological model. Thus, statements by



Turan are closer to reality than Erdoğan's description of TRT as a "shared language." The media flow and shift in perceptions of relations between Arabs and Turks have been largely unidirectional. While Turkey has addressed Arab publics and exploited its popular culture exports for geopolitical advantage, Arab countries have yet to engage with the Turkish public on the same level.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, there has been a proliferation of "telediplomacy" (Ammon, 2001) efforts aimed at Arab audiences, creating a situation whereby having an Arabic-language satellite channel has become one of the trappings of great power status. Turkey was joining the United States, China, Russia, Iran, and the three European powers—France, Germany, and the United Kingdom—in launching a television channel courting Arabs in their own language. The Arab media sphere's appeal to foreign broadcasters is an indication of the Arab region's importance in the national interest calculus of several states. The rising interest in Arabic-language media and Arab public opinion reflects a perceived need by different states to influence Arab populations. Reasons include the geopolitics of oil, the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Western campaign against Iranian nuclear activity, political Islam and the rise of powerful nonstate actors, and the recent change in the regional political landscape in the wake of the Arab uprisings. These give rise to attempts to enhance the image of the sender state, especially given the weakness of Arab regimes and the feeble legitimacy they have among their citizens. A mix of these factors, depending on the case, prompts major powers with interests in the Middle East to seek to fill that gap with the intention to preempt the rise of hostile ideologies. In such a media landscape, economic calculations (ratings, advertising, etc.) take a backseat as countries' national interests compel them to dedicate resources to transnational broadcasting.

Cihan News Agency's Abdulhamit Bilici acknowledged this by stating, "Americans, Europeans, Russians and even the Chinese have their channels directed towards the Arab peoples, so why shouldn't the Turks also have their channel?" (Salha, 2010, para. 13). Turan, the TRT-7-al-Turkiyya's coordinator, saw the challenge in operating in such a media system:

There are 750 satellite channels in Arabic; we are going to be the 751<sup>st</sup>: We have to do something new in terms of format and content. . . . But we want to go further and co-produce television programs with Arab countries. The story can start in Istanbul, then continue in Damascus and finish in Cairo. ("Turkey Uses," 2010, para. 8)

Turan's choice of words is telling about the style and tenor of the self-image that Turkey seeks to construct, as a soft sell stylistically emblematic of the symbol of the channel's promotional video, the Turkish cup of coffee. Indeed, TRT-7-al-Turkiyya's mix of news and entertainment, such as the popular Turkish television drama, makes it a softer sell than its competitors. The channel's array of programs includes *On the Banks of the Bosphorus*, a talk show staged on a boat sailing on the Bosphorus, a morning show, *Al-Turkiyya's Morning*; and the weekly *A Friday and a Mosque*, which broadcasts a dubbed Friday sermon from a Turkish mosque. Other observed programs deal with history such as *The First World War and the Middle East*, which gives a Turkish-friendly account of the last days of the Ottoman Empire, and a documentary program *The River That Flows West*, which discusses Islamic-Western relations. The channel

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<sup>1</sup> This might change if al-Jazeera implements its plan to launch a Turkish-language channel.

also sturdily promotes Turkish businesses and tourism. One daily tourism segment is *The Wonders of Turkey*. Another program promotes Turkish universities to Arab students. The program *An Eye on the Economy* focuses on Turkish and world economic news. Another segment, *Istanbul Istanbul*, highlights different facets of the cultural vibrancy of Turkey's commercial capital. Many of these programs, in addition to the channel's short promotional videos, can be described as enacting a strategy of branding.

### **The Marketing of a Neo-Ottoman Brand?**

The AKP-led government's focus on soft power to promote its economic and political interests has resulted in turning neo-Ottomanism into a nation brand that evocatively articulates a Turkey that is European, Islamic, moral, politically influential, and economically successful—the neo-Ottoman cool brand. A number of TRT-7-al-Turkiyya programs focus on Turkey's economic successes and promote Turkish businesses and tourism. Breaks between drama series or news programs are filled with segments promoting tourism in Turkey. Economic news programs closely follow Turkish economic projects within Turkey and abroad. Furthermore, the name of the channel in Arabic, which means "The Turkish One," evokes a brand name. Similarly, promotional clips, one of which simply places the channel's name on the map of Turkey, and the other longer promotional video of the channel discussed in the introduction are examples of advertisements of a nation brand. In the latter video, as we previously mentioned, the representation of the Turkish coffee as the symbol of Arab-Turkish relations frames Turkey in a soft sell to the region, as familiar, unthreatening and heartwarming as Turkish coffee. The channel represents an amalgam of its government's outreach strategies toward the Arab world. It includes news programs that convey the Turkish point of view and report its officials' activities; broadcasts the popular Turkish television dramas; and promotes Turkish businesses, tourism, and education.

This is no coincidence. The AKP's "zero problems with neighbors" policy was motivated substantially by economic considerations (Tuğal, 2012). Between 2002 and 2010, Turkish trade increased threefold with Syria, nearly fourfold with Maghreb countries, fivefold with the Gulf countries and Yemen, and sevenfold with Egypt (Kirişci, 2011). The waiving of visa requirements for nationals of several Arab countries also contributed to the increase in the number of Arab visitors to Turkey, from 332,000 in 1991 to almost 1.9 million in 2010 (Kirişci, 2011). Another tool of Turkey's nation branding is the state's use of popular culture to encourage business ties. The Turkish government announced that it would give prizes and financial awards to support producers and directors to create media products that help Turkey's image and market Turkish products abroad (Salha, 2010). Also, actor Kivanç Tatlıtuğ, the star of the popular drama series *Nour* [Turkish original: *Gümüş*, first broadcast by Saudi MBC channel in 2008], was scheduled to visit Egypt in February 2011 on a trip sponsored by the Turkish embassy in Cairo to promote an Istanbul shopping festival, though the Egyptian uprising forced a change of plans (Al-Kashuti, 2011). A reverse effect is also in play: Turkish businessmen and professionals involved in economic projects abroad contribute to the unified message of the national brand. On his 2011 "Arab Spring" tour, Erdoğan was accompanied by 250 Turkish businessmen ("Turkey, Egypt," 2011). In his visit to Somalia in 2011, Erdoğan announced an impressive development effort in one of the most dangerous countries in the world; a Turkish engineer working in Somalia was quoted by Reuters as saying, "our government likes to help anyone in crisis so we come here without thinking" (Lough, 2012, para. 4). Clearly, Turkey's foreign policy adeptly articulates geopolitical and economic interests in an attractive national image.

The visit to Somalia reflects another key aspect of Turkey's neo-Ottoman nation brand: its image as a moral, Islamic power. Two unlikely visits by Turkish officials have stood out and received extensive attention in the Arab region on news and social media: Erdoğan's visits to Somalia and Davutoğlu's visit to Myanmar. In his speech in Somalia in August 2011, Erdoğan shamed the international community for abandoning the war-torn country, saying the world's Somalia policy—or lack thereof—represented a "test for civilization and contemporary values" ("Turkey PM," 2011, para. 12). The 2012 Myanmar trip aimed to deliver aid and highlight the plight of the minority Rohingya Muslims after a spate of violence with the majority Buddhists. On both trips, Erdoğan's wife and daughter accompanied the Turkish delegation. Pictures and videos of the Turkish first lady, crying emotionally as Muslims in Myanmar told of their suffering and pleaded for help, circulated on Arab social media, hailed as an example of the piousness and morality of Turkey's ruling class. Both visits set the Arab media agenda on Turkish leaders' diplomacy and oratory skills in addressing Muslim publics and portraying Turkish foreign policy in terms of an Islamic *moralpolitik* that seeks to empower and defend suffering Muslims. As one Bahraini commentator reacted:

For the second time our Turkish brothers have beat us to the rescue of Muslims. . . . [The first time was when] they visited Somalia in a precedent that has not been done by a single Arab leader, not even an official from the Arab League. However, the Turks care for their religion and for the well-being of Muslims all over the world. (Al-Murshid, 2012, para. 1)

The image of Turkey as an Islamic moral power is intrinsic to its national brand in the region and part of its economic allure. Turkey is tapping into the growing Islamic finance sector and is to begin selling sharia-compliant bonds for pious Muslim investors (Patnaude, 2012). The country is already a leader in Islamic halal tourism, with many resorts that cater to conservative Muslim sensibilities by providing gender-segregated swimming pools and declining to serve alcohol (Lafi, 2009).

Thus, the AKP government's use of popular culture and broadcasting, rhetoric, and media-savvy diplomacy has successfully constructed and promoted an integrated neo-Ottoman national brand and image. In light of this strategy, Arab public discourse began to interpret all things Turkish as an integrated part of the AKP government's policy that seeks economic and geopolitical gain in the region. Proponents and opponents of a larger Turkish role held television drama series, news programs, and statements by politicians, almost on the same par, as direct symbols of Turkish political and economic influence and intervention.

### **Arab Discourse and TRT's Arabic-Language Channel**

Arab media discourse about the launch of TRT-7-al-Turkiyya in 2010 mirrored Arab news media coverage of Turkey's foreign policy: It received a largely warm welcome, with the major exception of Saudi-owned media. The spectrum of coverage of the launch of Turkey's Arabic-language channel ranged from al-Jazeera's exceptionally positive coverage to the cynically critical reaction of the London-based, Saudi-funded pan-Arab daily *al-Hayat*. Al-Jazeera gave extensive coverage to the launch in a dedicated episode of *Hiwar Maftuh* [Open Dialogue] that was shot in TRT-7-al-Turkiyya's studios in Istanbul and hosted several Arab public figures. At the other end of the spectrum, *al-Hayat* was critical of the channel,

reflecting initial official Saudi unease about the popularity and rise of a rival and more appealing Sunni power in the Middle East. *Al-Hayat* criticized the channel's editorial line, which "heavy-handedly forced praise of Turkey onto the content of programs" in a way not done by other channels (Ussi, 2010, para. 5). *Al-Hayat* was also critical of al-Jazeera's coverage of TRT-7-al-Turkiyya's launch and its interviews with Arab pundits, who praised Erdoğan as "the Arab leader" and "the knight of Anatolia." It described the channel's political talk shows as contests on which Arab pundits "can shower more praise on Turkey and its foreign policy . . . without hosting anyone who would offer an alternative viewpoint" (Ussi, 2010, para. 5). Other news outlets speculated on whether the channel reflected a neo-Ottoman policy and quoted heavily from Turkish sources evincing that Ankara's soft power went hand in hand with its geopolitical aspirations. A Lebanese commentator opined that the repetition of the name "Istanbul" in several of the titles of the channel's programs is a neo-Ottoman strategy in its evocation of the historic importance of the city, the imperial Ottoman capital, as opposed to Ankara, the republican Turkish capital (Khair, 2010).

Arab media's geopolitical readings of Turkish popular culture took a similar tone. One of the most interesting examples was the reaction to the film and television series *Valley of the Wolves*, which caused a diplomatic row between Turkey and Israel. Dubbed into the Syrian dialect, *Valley of the Wolves* (Abu Dhabi TV 2007–2012) tells the story of a righteous and powerful Turkish intelligence officer who unravels plots against Turkey. Some of the installments dramatized Turkish-Arab solidarity, as they were set in Iraq, Syria, and Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. When the show led to Turkish-Israeli diplomatic tensions due to negative and problematic depictions of Jews and Israelis ("Turkey TV," 2010), Arab news media hailed the series' anti-Israeli themes and celebrated its counterhegemonic reversal of Hollywood's routine representations of Arabs and Muslims as villains (see Yanik, 2009). It also caused the same exceptional reaction from Saudi media, whose commentators were skeptical of images of Turkish regional heroism. Reflecting Saudi anxiety toward Turkey, the Saudi-owned *Al-Hayat's* take conflated Turkey with the series' protagonist, and wondered "whether the world really needs a Turkish Rambo?" (Ya'qub, 2010, para. 3). This stance contrasted the usually positive reaction to Turkey's soft power as "the rubric of this new multi-faceted diplomacy aiming to establish Turkey as a pivotal state and a great power in the new international order . . . [which has resulted in] a rereading of history, geography and the future," as one Lebanese journalist put it (Khoury, 2008, para. 1).

### **Neo-Ottomanism: Constituents and Constraints**

Turkey's regional rise is perhaps best understood as a process of pragmatic adjustment rather than an ideological shift. Indeed, scholars have claimed that Turkish Middle East policy, from Atatürk to the AKP, has been shaped more by pragmatism than ideology. Danforth (2010), for example, has argued that "scholars have overemphasized the role of domestic identity and ideology in determining Turkish foreign policy" (p. 85). On the other hand, Kirişçi (2011) saw a shift in the way Turkey abandoned its previous "zero-sum understanding of international relations in favor of a liberal idea of opening and interdependence" (p. 44). Others have pointed to commonalities between Kemalism and neo-Ottomanism, including Turkish patriotism, republicanism, and state-centrism (Taşpınar, 2008). Neo-Ottomanism, then, should be considered as a natural component of Turkey's growing economic and political clout and its expanding sphere of influence in Middle Eastern and global affairs. Media and popular culture reflect this status, and they contribute to Turkey's soft power. International communication capacity is necessary for

projecting power and influence, and states on the rise have historically developed their media capabilities. TRT has channels and programs not only in Arabic but in English, Farsi, Kurdish, and various Turkic dialects ("TRT's Multilingual," 2010).

Popular culture also enables a deeper understanding of the dynamics of Arab public opinion of Turkey. For example, the popularity of Turkish television dramas in Greece and Bulgaria and large Turkish economic investments in several East European neighbors affirm that Turkey's charm offensive and branding efforts have been effective to the republic's East and West (see Loutradis, 2012; "Turkish Soap," 2010) and undermine arguments against the adequacy of neo-Ottomanism to describe AKP policies, preferring to define them instead as Islamic. In fact, as one analyst aptly captured it, "Like the imperial city of Istanbul, which straddles Europe and Asia, neo-Ottomanism is Janus-faced" (Taşpınar, 2008, p. 15). The harmony between Turkey's economic growth, foreign policy, and nation branding makes it easier to be effective in the race between regional and global powers for the hearts and minds of Arabs. Frustrated with Western policies toward the region, Arab publics have welcomed the rise of Turkey and its soft power approach based on a cool neo-Ottoman image.

However, the Arab uprisings and the political shifts they brought have proven to be a tricky terrain for Turkish policy makers. Turkish leaders first reacted to the events with their usual rhetorical skillfulness, with Erdoğan initially giving "brotherly" advice to various Arab leaders on the need for reform and then supporting Arab peoples' aspirations and advising them to look at Turkey for "inspiration" (Sailhan, 2011). Perhaps Davutoğlu articulated the neo-Ottoman position vis-à-vis the uprisings best with his "benevolent power" appeal:

A revolutionary spirit, a culture of rebellion has developed in this region. . . . If I were not in this post, or if I were young, I would chant, "Long live the revolution." But as the big power that guards stability in the region, we have to make sure that the people are harmed as little as possible. (quoted in Tuğal, 2012, para. 17)

Turkey's leaders had to perform a tricky juggling act. In his stop in Tunis during his Arab Spring tour, Erdoğan proclaimed that "the success of the electoral process in Tunisia will confirm to the world that Islam and democracy can walk hand in hand," which Tunisians interpreted as support to Ennahda, the Islamic party that eventually won the 2011 elections ("Erdoğan fe," 2011, para. 2). In contrast, on the eve of his visit to Cairo, Erdoğan, in a televised interview, promoted Turkey's secular system, calling on Egyptians "not to be afraid of secularism" (Ediz, 2011, para. 4). In a speech at the Cairo Opera House, Erdoğan praised Egypt's historic importance and future role and was interrupted several times with applause and cheers of "Egypt and Turkey hand in hand" ("Erdoğan: Masr," 2011, para. 23).

A bigger challenge to Turkish policy was the uprising in Libya. Turkey's massive investments and large expatriate community in that country complicated its stance toward the revolution against al-Qadhafi. However, it was the Syrian uprising that posed the gravest challenge to Turkey's foreign policies. Indeed, the fallout between Turkey and the Syrian regime has shown the limits of soft power in influencing relations between states. The remarkable improvement of bilateral relations during the last decade was the most apparent demonstration of the AKP's "zero problems" foreign policy doctrine, as

relations went from the brink of war in 1998 to close economic and political ties a decade later. When the Syrian uprising began in March 2011, Turkish leaders initially called for reform and attempted to pressure the Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad, to make concessions. However, it quickly became clear that Turkey's ability to influence the al-Assad regime was more limited than originally anticipated (Öniş, 2012). Within a few months of the Syrian uprising, relations between the two governments seemed in freefall deterioration. In May 2011, the Erdoğan government permitted a Syrian Muslim Brotherhood opposition leader to give a press conference in Istanbul; in June 2011, Turkey hosted a conference of the Syrian opposition. In July 2011, the Syrian opposition rebel groups' coalition, the Free Syrian Army, was established in the southern Turkish province of Hatay (Tuğal, 2012). In 2012, the two countries were back to square one—at the brink of war. Syria downed a Turkish fighter jet in June 2012, and in the following months Turkey struck targets inside Syria in retaliation to Syrian shelling of border towns (Watson, 2012). By October 2012, the Turkish parliament stepped up the pressure by authorizing military action in Syria as the Turkish president described the fighting there as the "worst case" scenario for the region (Istanbulu, 2012). Turkey also successfully asked NATO to install ballistic missiles on its borders with Syria. These developments amount to a spectacular unraveling of Turkey's vaunted "zero problems with neighbors" foreign policy.

Not only did the Syrian crisis reveal the limits of soft power, it put Turkish leaders in a dilemma of balancing their usual rhetorical ethical stance with self-interest *realpolitik* policies (Öniş, 2012). In fact, the Syrian infighting affected a number of core Turkish national interests, primarily Turkish fears over the cessation of the Syrian Kurdish areas, the potential spillover of sectarian tensions between Alawites and Sunnis into Turkey, and the economic impact of the crisis on southern Turkey. This dilemma also has revealed a gap between Turkish hawkish rhetoric against the Syrian regime and actual cautious policies in face of a highly volatile and unpredictable conflict—exposing Turkey to criticisms that, "despite its pretensions to regional leadership," it failed to articulate and push for a coherent position of its own (Tuğal, 2012, para. 21).

On the Syrian side, the official press also dramatically shifted its tone toward Turkey from praise of Erdoğan's anti-Israeli discourse to attacking and dismissing him as a delusional neo-Ottoman leader. Not surprisingly, Syria's new hostile attitude was articulated through attacking Turkish soft power and underscoring the Syrian role in improving the Turkish image. As one article in the official Syrian *al-Watan* daily contended:

What surprised the Syrian citizen is the transformation in the Turkish role, which entered the Arab home through the Syrian gate. [Syria] prepared all the means of success and acceptance for Turkey to brighten its dark historic image imprinted in the psyche of the Arab citizen. (Yousif, 2011, para. 4)

In one sentence, the article reproduced the stereotypes of the Turks mentioned earlier in the article, accusing Erdoğan of falling victim to "the memory of his Ottoman forefathers and to nostalgia for the *fez*, impalement, mandatory army service and hangings, which our public squares still remember of the dark days of the long Ottoman rule over our Arab nation" (Yousif, 2011, para. 3). It also underscored Syria's role in dubbing Turkish dramas in its national dialect. The Syrian press attacked Turkey mainly by

delegitimizing one of the main symbols of Turkish soft power in the Arab world: Turkish television drama. One article attacked the *Valley of the Wolves* series because of its exaggerated scenes of violence and glorification of the Turkish state through imagining adventures by characters “with ambiguous Ottoman features but wearing modern clothes” (Al-Sayid, 2011, para. 4), according to Syrian regime newspaper *Tishreen*. It also attacked drama series such as *Nour* as inappropriate to Arab audiences and for exemplifying Turkey’s identity crisis between East and West (Al-Sayid, 2011). Another *Tishreen* article accused Turkey of “the most grotesque forms of racism against Syria and the Syrian people” (Asa’d, 2012, para. 4). The updated Syrian reaction indicates the ephemeral effects of soft power as opposed to the *longue durée* of collective memories that resulted of hundreds of years of Ottoman rule over Arabs.

Despite Turkey’s attempts to revive its “zero problems with neighbors” policy, Turkish relations with its neighbors are now mired in multiple problems. Also, arrests of Turkish journalists under suspicion of being conspirators against the government, festering tensions with Turkey’s Kurdish minority, and Erdoğan’s sometimes authoritarian style may lead to the conclusion that Arab government media repression is serving as a model for the AKP authorities rather than the other way around. Several Turkish academics and commentators are vehement in their rejection of considering Turkey a model for the Arab Spring countries. Tuğal (2012) criticized the framing of the Turkish rise as a matter of soft power because it “disavows any neo-Ottoman imperial ambitions” and draws an unnecessary “smiling face” on Turkish policy (para. 2). He also contended that it is Saudi Arabia rather than Turkey that is succeeding in shaping the Arab uprisings in its image. Others claimed that neo-Ottomanism is fueling a “pathological” Turko-centrism that is leading to “deluded public perceptions” of the actual extent of Turkish power (Bacik, 2012), and some pointed out that the skillful oratory of Erdoğan contrasts with the lack of a strong Turkish decision making. In the words of Czaika (2012), “the more he [Erdoğan] huffed and puffed, the more obvious it became that he was not blowing anyone’s house down” (para. 1). Thus, realists argue that little has changed in Turkish foreign policy under the AKP, pointing out that, despite its populist anti-Israeli rhetoric, bilateral trade with Israel has increased an average of 14.6% per year since the AKP first came to power in 2002 (Czaika, 2012). In contrast, advocates of a more constructivist approach to the study of international relations highlight that rhetoric and symbolic gestures about identity matter and eventually get institutionalized in relations between states (Bozdağlıoğlu, 2003). Regardless, Arab discourse about Turkey’s changing regional role suggests that Turkish pronouncements and actions are taken seriously by most actors in the Arab public sphere.

### Conclusion

Turkey’s soft power in the Arab world is perhaps best understood via a conceptual distinction in the communication process between elements of *style and performance* that shape Arab perceptions of Turkish actions on the one hand, and elements of *information* about actual policies on the other hand. The case of Turkey also illustrates the influence of commercial strategies and branding techniques on the ways governments seek to promote their interests. It suggests that the study of nation branding and soft power more broadly should be critically elaborated, historically informed, and politically grounded. Much of the literature on branding seems to suggest a set formula, which if a government follows, ensures the success of its nation brand and the promotion of its political and economic interests—with no regard to the geopolitical context. Critics of this approach to branding have pointed out the concept’s “optimistic

neoliberal rhetoric" (Imre, 2012) and feel-good diffusionist globalization discourse (Chakravartty, 2012) without much attention to historical and political contexts. In light of this, it is important to ask "by whom" and "for whom" is the branding being done (Bolin & Ståhlberg, 2010). In the case of TRT-7-al-Turkiyya, the branded Turkish image is managed in line with government policy. In the case of television drama series, the Turkish culture industry, which is independent from and does not necessarily have good relations with the AKP, is the producer. However, the Turkish government still recruited the culture industry with its productions and glitzy stars in its nation-branding efforts because Turkey's diversity and openness to East and West is a key ingredient of what we have been calling the *neo-Ottoman cool* nation brand. The answer to the "for whom" question is Arab audiences, but ultimately Turkey seeks a global image that communicates that it has become a regional power evidenced by its popular leading role in the Middle East.

Turkey's rising popularity among Arabs, in other words, is due to the persuasive effectiveness of a state-guided strategic communication effort seeking political and economic gain out of the popularity of Turkish television drama series and expressing its commitment to the region by launching a television channel on par with other great powers. Ultimately, the continuation of Turkey's popularity in the Arab world depends on several elements, the most important of which is the combination of an active diplomacy emanating from a country that works politically and economically. The popularity of neo-Ottomanism, then, is both a result and underlying cause of Turkey's rising prestige in the Arab world, facilitated by the less appealing position of competing powers—and not only vis-à-vis the West: Saudi Arabia's clerico-religious system is a liability in the race for the hearts and minds of many Arabs, and Iran's anti-U.S. and anti-Israel vitriol, compounded by the Sunni-Shiite split, has failed to sway large segments of Arab public opinion. This equation puts in question the relation of soft and hard power and the validity of the distinction. In the case of the Middle East, it seems that countries such as Iran with substantial political influence and linkages in several Arab countries such as Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon have a difficulty in constructing a soft selling image; while, in the case of Turkey, it is easier. In other words, for Iran, its strength is its weakness; for Turkey, its weakness is its strength (Vali as quoted in Benli Altunışık, 2010). This raises the question of whether and when Turkey's rise would come to be understood by Arab publics as coercive rather than appealing.

The analysis of Turkish-Arab relations and the role that the media play in mutual perceptions exemplify the need for an academic approach that borrows from international relations, political science, and communication studies to examine the construction and impact of national images. It calls for a scholarly approach that merges the analysis of traditional diplomacy, public diplomacy, branding strategies, popular culture, and rhetoric and relates them to the geopolitical contexts of the processes of international communication. The success of the Turkish government in improving its image in the Arab world is based on its strategic use of all these different processes that therefore are best analyzed together.

This article has argued that while Turkey's foreign policy shifted toward its Arab neighbors, it promoted and marketed its image as at once more powerful and more benign. Media and popular culture have played a decisive role in the discursive reconstruction of Turkey as a friend of the Arabs and as a successful model to be emulated. The growing allure of Turkey—with its glamorous stars, popular



politicians, growing economy, and its leaders' rhetorical *moralpolitik*—promised to deliver nothing short of a reversal of the Arab public hostility toward the Ottoman past, a process that has been portrayed as naturally and simply as a matter of serving a cup of hot Turkish coffee.

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