



2013

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Recommended Citation

Kraidy, M., & Al-Ghazzi, O. (2013). Neo-Ottoman Cool: Turkish Popular Culture in the Arab Public Sphere. *Popular Communication*, 11 (1), 17-29. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2013.747940>

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doi: 10.1080/15405702.2013.747940

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Neo-Ottoman Cool: Turkish Popular Culture in the Arab Public Sphere

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In the past decade, Turkish television drama has enjoyed popular success in the Arab world, fueling wide-ranging controversies in the pan-Arab public sphere. Such popularity is at first sight puzzling. After all, Arabs lived under Ottoman rule for 400 years, and for most of the 20th century Turkey's foreign policy neglected Arab interests. Why, then, would Turkish drama be popular with Arab audiences, especially at a time of unprecedented vibrancy in Arab cultural production? This article grapples with that question via a systematic analysis of pan-Arab discourse about Turkish popular culture, concluding that some Turkish dramas conjure up an accessible modernity while others enact a counter-hegemonic narrative that puts Middle Easterners in the role of heroes. The rise of Turkish television drama in the Arab public sphere offers insights into the geopolitical underpinnings and geocultural consequences of transnational media flows.

The July 20, 2008, edition of *al-Quds al-Arabi*, a London-based pan-Arab daily newspaper with an Arabist editorial line,¹ featured a cartoon titled "Diseases of the Era" that had three side-by-side vignettes. The first vignette from the left presents a dazed looking black and white cow, front leg up, pupils dilated, tongue stuck out, and saliva splashing. The caption underneath says: "Mad Cow Disease." In the middle vignette stands a miserable yellow fowl, looking as dazed as his bovine counterpart, with stars around his head and heavy and red eyelids, a tissue held in one wing and a runny nose, with the caption: "Bird Influenza." The third vignette, to the left of the cartoon, features a dapper man, with hazel colored hair and a well-trimmed beard, in tuxedo and bowtie. The caption underneath the third vignette said: "The *Nour* Television Series!"

By situating the Turkish television series *Nour* [Turkish original: *Gümüş*] as a craze on par with two infectious diseases, the cartoonist underscores the rapidly spreading popularity of Turkish television drama among Arab viewers in the summer of 2008. The cartoon is one of numerous utterances, including cartoons, op-eds, mosque sermons, talk-show debates, and fatwas, spurred by the success of Turkish series with Arabs. Such popularity is deeply paradoxical. After all, Arabs lived under Ottoman rule for 400 years, and for most of the 20th century Turkey's foreign policy countered Arab interests by partnering with the United States, NATO, and Israel. Why, then, would Turkish drama be popular with Arab audiences, especially at a time of unprecedented vibrancy in Arab cultural production? Can television drama overcome centuries of mutual negative perceptions? Or is the paradoxical appeal of Turkish drama to Arabs due to broader cultural and geopolitical factors?

This article grapples with the preceding questions, beginning with a brief historical aperçu of Turkish-Arab relations during the last century and of political and media industry changes in Turkey in the last two decades. We then proceed with an analysis of a corpus of Arabic-language newspaper articles that reflect pan-Arab discourse about Turkish popular culture and conclude that the two dominant genres of Turkish television drama resonate with Arab viewers for related reasons: social drama conjures up an accessible modernity that is not wholly taken from the West, and political drama enacts a counter-hegemonic narrative that puts Turks in particular and Middle Easterners in general in the role of heroes.² In a shifting geopolitical context in which Turkey is assuming an increasingly central role in the culture, politics and economics of the Middle East, the popularity of Turkish television drama captures

the notion of Neo-Ottoman Cool, a deeply ironic notion when Ottomanism served as the antiquated Other for both Kemalist Turkey and the Arab countries born from the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. This research is not concerned with Turkish cultural production and Arab audience reception; rather, it focuses on Arab public discourse about Turkish media to understand how Turkey is discursively reproduced in the Arab public sphere. Against the backdrop of imperial Ottoman history and complicated Turkish-Arab relations in the modern era, the rise of Turkish media in the Arab public sphere offers insights into the geopolitical underpinnings of transnational media flows, best captured by the notion of Neo-Ottoman Cool.

TURKEY AND THE ARAB WORLD: FROM THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE TO TRANSNATIONAL MEDIA

History gave Arabs a fraught image of Turkey. After 400 years of Ottoman dominion over Arabs that ended post-World War 1, Turkish leader Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's forced secularization drive in the early decades of the republic involved jettisoning the Arabic alphabet and cleansing Turkish of Arabic words (Bengio & Gencer, 2001, p. 55). Secularism, nationalism, and NATO membership during the second half of the 20th century distanced Turkey politically from its Arab neighbors.³ Several factors facilitated a change in Turko-Arab relations, including the 2001 launch of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, or AKP) by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Abdullah Gül. Self-defined as "conservative democratic"—not Islamist (Taspinar, 2008)—the new party incorporated democratic, that is, electoral, politics in a pro-business platform reflecting the AKP's pious and entrepreneurial constituency in mid-sized provincial cities that came to be known as the "Anatolian tigers" (White, 2012; Yavuz, 2006). The AKP consolidated its power in electoral victories since 2002, and a series of incidents suggest geopolitical maneuvering: the 2003 Parliamentary vote denying the United States permission to open a northern front in its impending invasion of Iraq, the AKP's criticism of Israeli actions, and others. At the same time, Turkey's robust diplomacy signaled an ambitious foreign policy that intensified discussions of "neo-Ottomanism" (Fisher Onar, 2009; Taspinar, 2008).

In the two decades preceding the AKP's rise, Turkish media underwent a structural transformation with two components. The first, occurring since the mid-1980s, is marked by concentration of ownership, dismantling of unions, and commercialization of the airwaves (Christensen, 2007). The acquisition of media companies by large conglomerates corporatized and politicized the Turkish media sphere as new media owners strove to expand their market share and political influence (Bek, 2004; Christensen, 2007). It was "a period of enormous upheaval ... a period of unprecedented transformation in the media landscape of Turkey" (Aksoy & Robins, 2000). The second transformation, occurring since the mid-1990s, entails a transnationalization of Turkish state and commercial media (Aksoy & Robins, 2000; Ayata, 2011; Karanfil, 2009). Seeking to reach Turkish migrants worldwide and Turkic populations in the ex-Soviet republics in addition to projecting influence across borders, transnational broadcasting began with the state organ TRT in 1990. After a 1994 law regularized private television, commercial channels began targeting Turks overseas, at first mostly in Europe, where they eclipsed TRT's programs.

The forces that transformed the Turkish media landscape were also at work in the Arab world. Since the 1990s, the Arab media sector has become increasingly commercial and transnational, creating a pan-Arab public sphere encompassing two dozen Arabic-speaking countries, and at the same time acutely increasing demand for content, which provided Turkish productions an opening into a market that currently boasts nearly 700 satellite channels in addition to national broadcasters. In tandem, then,

parallel restructurings of the Turkish and Arab media industries, by creating “push” (on the Turkish side) and “pull” (on the Arab end) forces, set the ground for Turkish drama to enter Arab media space.⁴

It is in that context that the Saudi-owned, Dubai-based pan-Arab satellite channel MBC first aired *Nour* in the summer of 2008. MBC is the lead channel of MBC Group, a conglomerate owned by a Saudi businessman with family connections to the Saudi royal family. MBC Group is one of a handful of leading multiplatform media companies to have evolved during the last two decades in what is often described as the “Arab satellite revolution” (see Kraidy & Khalil, 2009; Sakr, 2007). This was enabled by a pan-Arab satellite infrastructure developed since the 1960s by the Saudi-based Arab Satellite Organization (ARABSAT), under the aegis of the Arab League. When Saudis gravitated to CNN and other Western news sources during the 1991 Gulf War, Saudi authorities allowed privately owned satellite television channels, the first being MBC. From the beginning, then, long before the importation of dubbed Turkish television series, transnational broadcasting in the Arab world was undergirded by geopolitical concerns. The next sections show how these concerns play out in a slightly different but overall congruent manner in Arab discussions of Turkish social and political television drama. *Nour* and *Valley of the Wolves*, which generated the most heated debates in pan-Arab public discourse, will be analyzed as representatives of the two types.

SOCIAL DRAMA: SOCIAL MOBILITY AND ACCESSIBLE MODERNITY

A significant proportion of Turkish dramas dubbed in Arabic tell stories about the Istanbul elite and their problems with love, sex, marriage, family, money, violence, social class, and organized crime. These social dramas include the revealingly titled *Years of Loss* (*Sanawat al-Dayā'*), *And Days Go By* (*Wa Tamdi al-Ayyam*), *The Lost Dream* (*al-Hilm al-Da'i'*), and *Forbidden Love* (*al-'Ishq al-Mamnu'*) (Al-Yazidi, 2009). Among these, *Nour* was by far the most popular. *Nour* features a rag-to-riches story articulated on a rural-urban axis and driven by romantic and sexual tensions typical of Latin American telenovelas. *Nour* is a young and ambitious woman from the Turkish hinterland who struggles to integrate with the rich Sadoğlu clan when she weds Muhannad, the chief male protagonist featured in the cartoon described in the introduction, and grandson of the Sadoğlus' patriarch.

Set in Istanbul against the backdrop of the Bosphorus and dubbed in spoken Syrian Arabic, the series' more than 150 episodes became a transmedia event in the Arab world. According to MBC's in-house viewer ratings, more than 84 million Arabic-speaking viewers watched the last episode of *Nour* on MBC (“84.5 million,” 2008), making it one of the most popular programs on Arab television and a social sensation. Stories circulated about the popularity of merchandise bearing images of the stars of *Nour*: “From the souks of Tunis to the markets of Occupied East Jerusalem, T-shirts bearing pictures of the glamorous Muhannad and *Nour* are selling like hot-cakes,” reported Agence France Press, quoting a street vendor near Damascus University saying that he sold more than 500 pictures of the stars a day near the campus (“Failed Turkish,” 2008). Other reports discussed the impact of the popularity of the series on business and tourism and reported a record increase in the number of Arab tourists visiting Turkey. In 2009 there was a 21% rise in the number of tourists from the United Arab Emirates to Turkey and 50% increase from Morocco (Bilbassy-Charters, 2010). Some journalists began to see the “Turkish invasion” of Arab television as a threat to Egypt and Syria, the two dominant Arab television drama production centers, with one Syrian critic arguing that Syrian serials had received a “knockout blow from Turkish ...series” (Uthman, 2008). This critique is ironic because dubbing into the Syrian colloquial helped popularize Turkish drama across the Arabic-speaking world, after the previous success of Syrian

drama ("The viewer," 2008). According to Arab commentators, the mix of popularity and controversy that met *Nour* and other Turkish series can be understood in three main registers: style and aesthetics, gender and spousal relations, and social values.

Style and Aesthetics

Arab commentators argued that Turkish series had higher production values and scored better than their Arab counterparts in their portrayal of style, beauty, and fashion. In Syrian and Egyptian *musalsalat* [serialized dramas; sing: *musalsal*], actors' and actresses' dress and make-up are over-done, especially in domestic scenes.⁵ In Syrian drama, it is a common occurrence for a female character to wake up with full make-up and hairdo. Many Syrian actresses appear to have surgically puffed lips and chiseled noses, marking stars and the characters they play as inaccessible. In contrast, Arab commentators argued that Turkish dramas depict modernity as way of life accessible to average viewers, not only stars and celebrities. Turkish drama has influenced Arab fashion trends, beauty tips and interior design. In Jordan, hairstyles bearing the names of *Nour* and Muhannad rose to popularity for women and men (Badr, 2008). The pan-Arab daily al-Quds al-Arabi reported that Jordanian girls' "obsession" with Turkish drama fashion is not limited to clothes and hair but also to eyebrow tattoos and hair coloring, like female stars in *Nour* and *Years of Loss* (Al-Sheikh, 2008). There were also reports about the popularity of Muhannad's leather jackets with young men and household items such as bedclothes with Muhannad and *Nour* themes (Afra, 2008). *Nour* was clearly a pan-Arab transmedia event.

One Arab critic contrasted the Turkish *Nour* with the Syrian *musalsal*, *Bab al-Hara* (The Neighborhood Gate), which topped drama ratings across the Arab world in 2006 and 2007 before the advent of Turkish drama. *Bab al-Hara* ran for five seasons, ending in 2010. It is the most popular series in the Syrian drama genre known as *al-bi'a al-shamiyya* (the Damascene environment), nostalgically evoking and imagining early 20th century neighborhood life in Damascus, with controversial representations: glorification of chivalrous men engaging in leadership and violence, set against portrayals of women as subservient and humiliated. The episodes are shot in a studio and most of the scenes are indoor. All these details contrast with a Turkish *musalsal* like *Nour*, which "looks to the future and addresses the mind of the viewer in the 21st century." It ignores old, "shabby" neighborhoods and focuses instead on modern, attractive characters, beautiful mansions and captivating scenes of Istanbul and the Bosphorus (Al-Yazidi, 2008).

Some writers did criticize *Nour* on social and stylistic grounds, arguing it was repetitive and predictable with its exaggerated depictions of "sobbing, violence, torture, chases, rape, kidnapping, concentrated use of guns and daggers which result in repeated visits to hospitals and jails. There are also repeated incidents of divorce, marriage and fights over custody ... and ... imposed touristic scenes" ('Abdulhamid, 2009). There was also religious discourse attacking *Nour* on moral grounds. Such critique, however, was a discordant note in an otherwise positive discourse about the appeal of the production style in Turkish drama.

Gender and Spousal Relations

According to Arab journalists and commentators, another ingredient behind the success of Turkish *musalsalat* is their portrayal of spousal relations, with a focus on women. The Arab press noted that several Turkish series feature romantic representations of loving couples, not only young and hip but also old grandparents (Shahin, 2008). On YouTube, the most shared videos from *Nour*, with million-plus

views, are of sensual and romantic scenes. Some clearly target women viewers, with the camera focusing on sensual depictions of the male actors' bodies. Censorship of "inappropriate" scenes during Arabic-dubbing in Syria "in order to protect Arab public sensibilities" ("*Nour* the Turkish," 2008) has prompted numerous Arab fans to download the original Turkish versions of the series and upload them on YouTube in an act of defiance.

Nour is a successful fashion professional whose handsome and romantic husband, Muhannad, regularly expresses love and appreciation to his wife. Arab commentary focused on the popularity of Muhannad, played by the Turkish actor Kivanç Tatlıtuğ, with Arab women viewers. According to several news reports, Arab female viewers' fascination with the series and its star caused divorces in Sudan, Syria, and Saudi Arabia. Salamandra (2012) writes that the success of *Nour* is due to what she calls the "Muhannad Effect," Muhannad's activation of women's viewing pleasure. "The most subversive element of the series," she argues, "was ... the display of a Muslim—yet Turkish and foreign-looking—male body for Arab female consumption" (p. 67). One Western commentator went as far as arguing that Muhannad has become "the standard against which many Arab men are being judged" (Gubash, 2008). Though perhaps too much is attributed to Muhannad, *Nour's* treatment of gender relations was a key trigger of controversy.

Religious and Social Values

The debate about Turkish drama in the Arab world also took up the role of Islam as a bridge between Turkish productions and Arab viewers. Arab journalists contended that the Istanbul elite lifestyle enjoyed by television drama characters does not reflect the situation of a majority of ordinary Turks, who tend to be conservative and observant Muslims (Salha, 2010), or that Turkish musalsalat represented "a distorted image of Western values, which secular Turkey is trying to imitate," an image disconnected from the lives of Muslims both in Turkey and the Arab world ('Abdulrazzaq, 2008). On the other hand, some of the television drama characters are shown to observe Muslim holidays, including fasting during Ramadan and following Muslim religious rituals at funerals and weddings. Since most Arabs and most Turks are Muslims, expressions of religiosity uttered by Turkish characters sound natural in Syrian Arabic.

Conservative Arab clerics, however, took action to fight what they saw as Turkish drama's harmful effects. The Mufti of the Syrian city of Aleppo issued a fatwa banning prayer while wearing shirts depicting stars from the series *Nour* (Badr, 2008). Islamist activists in the southern Iraqi city of al-Nasiriyya laid pictures of the Turkish actor Kivanç Tatlıtuğ on the streets so that people would step on them to express their condemnation of Turkish series' irreligious content ("Iraqis surprised," 2008). In Kuwait, the Ministry of Education issued a decree ordering schools to forbid students from using *Nour*-themed stationery, vowing to form committees to oversee the decree's implementation (Nayef, 2008). Even stronger condemnations came from ultra-conservative Saudi clerics, with Mufti 'Abdulaziz Bin Abdullah al-Shaykh issued a fatwa banning the "debased, corrupt ... and harmful" *Nour*, which in his view encouraged viewers to "commit sin." He also attacked *Nour's* producers as "soldiers of the devil" and accused Arab channels' owners that air *Nour* of having "declared war on God and his Prophet" (Shayma, 2008). However, though Saudi princes and investors control leading Arab satellite channels, including MBC, which aired *Nour*, the mufti's stinging rebuke had no effect whatsoever in stemming the series' popularity in Saudi Arabia or in influencing the programming decisions of Arab satellite channels.

This followed a pattern set by previous controversies—about television comedy, reality television, and music videos—that reveal limits of clerical control over Arab populations and their media diet.

POLITICAL DRAMA: COUNTERHEGEMONIC STORIES AND MIDDLE EAST POLITICS

Turkish dramas with explicitly political themes also resonated with Arab viewers, especially those sympathetic to the Palestinian cause.⁶ The most prominent was *Valley of the Wolves*, a movie and television series that caused a diplomatic row between Turkey and Israel. *Valley of the Wolves* was dubbed into the Syrian vernacular and aired by Abu Dhabi TV between 2007 and 2012. It tells the story of a Turkish intelligence officer, Polar Alemdar (Murad Alemdar in Arabic) who unravels plots against Turkey and retaliates against foreign conspirators and local collaborators in the name of Turkish pride and Middle Eastern solidarity. Some of Alemdar's exploits occurred beyond Turkish borders, notably in Northern Iraq, Israel, and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and both films and television series featured graphic violence against US troops in Iraq and Israeli troops in the occupied territories.

Tensions arose with negative depictions of Israelis and Jews in *Valley of the Wolves–Iraq*, and Arab media extensively covered the ensuing Turkish-Israeli row. That season centered on what Turks know as the July 2003 “hood event,” when US soldiers led Turkish commandos in Sulaymaniyya, Iraq, at gunpoint, with hoods over their heads, into 60 hours of detention. Though the United States later apologized, Turkish media condemned the incident as an insult to Turkish pride, triggering anti-US protests in Istanbul and Ankara (“Regret over,” 2003). The official website of *Valley of the Wolves–Iraq* described the event as a US attempt “to be the only power calling the shots. To them there is no place for Turks in the region anymore” (“Pana Films,” 2006).

In the film a Turkish First Lieutenant commits suicide after feeling dishonored by the “hood incident,” leaving a note that compels Alemdar to avenge his colleague. Alemdar travels to northern Iraq and observes US forces humiliating the local population. Particular scorn is reserved for a US commander called Sam Marshall, who was responsible for the “hood event” and for raiding a wedding party in northern Iraq and killing the groom and dozens of civilians. An unlikely alliance emerges between the Iraqi bride-widow and Alemdar who together seek revenge against the US officer (“About Film,” 2006). The movie depicts Turkish commandos as unequivocal heroes, Americans and Israelis as unmistakable villains. The Arab press described how the series features Israeli agents kidnapping children and Israelis smuggling body parts. In one particularly contentious episode, as Alemdar storms a Mossad post to rescue a Turkish boy, he shoots the Mossad agent, whose blood splatters on the Star of David of the Israeli flag (“Turkey TV,” 2010).

Israel accused the series of anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic content, triggering a mediatized Turkish-Israeli diplomatic storm in January 2010, which temporarily appeared to jeopardize the two countries' strategic alliance. Israel's deputy foreign minister summoned the Turkish ambassador to Tel Aviv to the Knesset rather than to the foreign ministry, and was made to sit on a low couch, which made him appear on cameras to be on a lower level than the Israeli diplomat. The Turkish flag was removed from the table and the two diplomats did not shake hands for the cameras (“Turkey TV,” 2010). An Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs statement accused the series of showing Jews as war criminals, arguing: “This is unacceptable ... and puts the lives of Jews in Turkey in danger” (“Valley of,” 2010). Furious at Israel's diplomatic rebuff, Ankara demanded an apology, which it received in the form of a letter to the Turkish ambassador. Pana Films dismissed Israeli accusations, pledging that *Valley of the Wolves* would “continue to say the truth and expose the guilty,” and wondering how Israel's leaders could “shell

refugee children hiding under the banner of the United Nations (in Gaza) [but] feel upset when real events are told by Valley of the Wolves?" ("Valley of," 2010).

Arab media closely followed the Turkish-Israeli row, casting Turkey as proactive and Israel as reactive. A headline from this period declared: "A New Crisis between Ankara and Tel Aviv: Erdoğan Threatens Israel and Demands an Apology for Insulting his Ambassador" (Andrawus, 2010). A Lebanese daily opined that Turkey "does not shy away from its frank position towards Israel ...and exposes Mossad as the ghost behind many assassinations and mafias that infiltrate the Turkish state and its agencies" (Hassan, 2010), while a United Arab Emirates paper wrote that Israeli-Turkish relations have "almost reached the brink, especially that the Turkish position is brave and resolute in defending Turkish pride and international standing," and that it would behoove Israel to be more ashamed of the images of the horrific deaths it caused in Gaza rather than of Valley of the Wolves (Na'san Agha, 2010). Valley of the Wolves-Palestine, released in 2011 in Turkey and Europe, revolves around the Mavi Marmara, the Turkish Gaza-siege busting ship stormed by Israeli commandos in May 2010. The deaths of nine Turkish citizens on board caused an anti-Israeli uproar in Turkey and in the Arab world. In the film, Alemdar leads Turkish commandos into the occupied territories to liquidate the Israeli commander of the Mavi Marmara raid. When during fighting an Israeli soldier asks Alemdar: "Why did you come to Israel?" He answers: "I did not come to Israel, I came to Palestine" ("Germany stops," 2011).

Some journalists were skeptical of images of Turkish regional heroism and critical of Turkey's hypocrisy, constructing an anti-American and anti-Israeli self-image but also maintaining close economic and military relations with the United States and Israel. Reflecting Saudi anxiety toward Turkey, the Saudi-owned al-Hayat's take conflated Turkey with Alemdar, who "does not understand the Palestinian-Israeli conflict" and "does not seem to be interested to do so."⁷ Rather, the article portrays Alemdar as interested in liquidating the Israeli general allegedly responsible for killing Turkish citizens aboard the Mavi Marmara, without caring to understand the "complexity" of the Middle East conflict (Ya'qub, 2011). Al-Hayat dismissed Alemdar, wondering "whether the world really needs a Turkish Rambo" (Ya'qub, 2011). Another article concluded that soon "we find that the Turkish wolf is chasing the Israelis on television; meanwhile security, political and economic ties between [the two countries] would continue" (Ussi, 2010). Nonetheless, Arab media coverage of the issue bolstered Turkey's status by framing the series as a tool in regional geopolitics. In reality, the significance of Valley of the Wolves resides less in its artistic or factual merits, and more in its reversal of Hollywood's routine representations of Arabs and Muslims as villains and its glorification of Turkish power (see Yanik, 2009). It is therefore narratively counterhegemonic, though the Arab commentariat's reading of Valley of the Wolves in purely geopolitical terms obscures the economic and cultural factors discussed below.

NEO-OTTOMAN COOL: TRANSNATIONAL MEDIA, GEOPOLITICS, MODERNITIES

Several implications can be teased out of the saga of Turkish television drama in the Arab world for the study of transnational media and their cultural and geopolitical dimensions. The argument that extensive transnational flows signify a weak state is not one of them. Indeed, the Turkish state played a role in promoting television drama in the Arab world, recruiting famous actors to promote Turkish exports.⁸ By highlighting cross-border media flows on a regional scale, our case study transcends the West versus Rest binary that still riddles some global communication research in variations of cultural imperialism and bipolar formulae such as "local" against "global." Though a history of imperialism shapes ongoing processes of globalization, imperial dynamics of power, resistance, and accommodation

in culture and politics are arguably most manifest on a regional scale. In East Asia, contemporary transnational cultural trajectories reflect a history of Japanese imperialism, and in Latin America the Spanish language—whose widespread adoption is the most enduring legacy of the Spanish Empire—is the primary enabler of a regional geo-linguistic market.

The populist-commercial logic of contemporary media and popular culture makes it more likely to travel across national and cultural boundaries. As Iwabuchi (2001) argued in the case of Japan's Asian media exports:

Unlike traditional culture, by which the irreducible difference between one culture from others tends to be emphasized, popular culture, though highly commercialized, reminds Japan and "Asia" alike of cultural similarities, a sense of living in the shared time and common experience of a certain (post)modernity which cannot be represented well by American popular culture. The ascent of Japanese dramas is closely associated with the scent of a modernity in Asia that Japanese dramas embody. (p. 56)

As with Japan in East Asia, Turkish popular culture travels well in the Middle East not because of language or because of a face-value cultural proximity: Turkish and Arabic are mutually incomprehensible, some migrated words notwithstanding, and mutual perceptions are still often riddled with hostile stereotypes. Though the Arab world itself can be said to be a relatively seamless geolinguistic market, the Middle East, with Turkey, Iran and Israel, is hardly so.⁹ *Nour's* Arab popularity, then, is deeply paradoxical.

The transnational dynamics described in this article call for a multiple modernities perspective that would acknowledge that Turkey and the Arab world share common histories and memories, and therefore will gravitate towards similar assemblages of the modern. As Iwabuchi argues in the case of Japan's popular culture in Taiwan, the popularity of Japanese pop culture is less attributable to the fact that Japan and Taiwan live in the same historical time—what Fabian (1983) calls coevalness. Japanese pop is "culturally odourless" in Taiwan. Similarly, in the case of Turkey and the Arab world, it is a certain permutation of historical times that cohabitate in the contemporary Middle East, of which Turkey is currently the most appealing example.

In this logic, contradictions in the AKP's rhetoric (Fisher Onar, 2011; White, 2012) are not, as some critics allege, evidence of political hypocrisy and a "secret agenda" but rather symptoms of a struggle to elaborate a Turkish modernity that is selectively both Western and Islamic. As White (2012) recently argued:

The AKP in its contradictory discourses supporting universalist principles of human rights while at the same time curtailing freedom of speech and openly opposing lifestyles that do not conform to a conservative worldview ...[T]hese contradictions ...express the dual nature of political and social life as open to innovation while being communally limited. (p. 17)

As several scholars have noted (Bozdağlıoğlu, 2008; Fisher Onar, 2011; Keyman, 2007; Özyürek, 2006; White, 2012), Turkish modernity is politically and culturally hybrid. After decades of Kemalist state-led modernization based on nationalism and secularism, Turkish modernity has shifted as religion has become more politicized, economically grounded (in the rise of Anatolia's pious bourgeois medium-sized business owners), and the primary basis for demands of cultural recognition (Keyman, 2007, p. 216). Secularism, once a pillar of Turkish modernity, has been in crisis since the 1990s, as a political Islam

claiming to be modern, and hence legitimate, is fueled by economic growth and a rising profile abroad. Sacralized, de-privatized, and, so to speak, “monetized,” religion is now a building block of Turkish modernity. The ongoing syncretism of Turkish modernity, now with a religious element that remains contested by a secularist legacy, resonates with similar searches for a negotiated Arab modernity. The elaboration of a selective modernity adapted to local historical and social realities often takes shape in contentious debates around popular culture and its imputed effects on society. Such was the case with the reality television controversies that rocked the Arab public sphere in the preceding decade (Kraidy, 2010).

Neo-Ottoman Cool, then, is grounded in a Turkish modernity that has been attractive to Arabs because it manages to combine a variety of hitherto separate and seemingly contradictory political, economic and socio-cultural elements in one seductive “package,” what one Arab columnist captured as “[A] European, Islamic, Secular, Capitalist Turkey” (Khoury, 2009, emphasis added). Clearly a manifestation of what Latin American scholars such as García-Canclini (1994) and Martín-Barbero (1993) call *tiempos mixtos*, or mixed temporalities, Turkey appears to have momentarily pulled off a juggling act—the elaboration of a uniquely Turkish modernity—which resonates with Arab popular aspirations. Arab reactions to Turkish television drama and its treatment of social and political issues support our contention.¹⁰

The pan-Arab success of Turkish drama enables a deeper understanding of Arab public opinion of Turkey. Arabs face Turkey with a combination of desire and anxiety, akin to the ways in which Taiwanese, Koreans and others viewed Japan and its television dramas (Iwabuchi, 2004).

Nonetheless, Arabs have been so disappointed and resentful toward the United States after Iraq, Afghanistan, and continued US support for Israeli policies that the mere promise of a non-Western power rising in their neighborhood endows neo-Ottomanism with significant allure. For many Arabs, the rise of Turkey holds the promise of literally de-centering Western power in the Middle East, that is, removing the West as the necessary central mediator between different countries and cultures in the Middle East. The re-centering of Turkey as a pivotal state and a great power that coincides with a reduced Western role is a foundation of the political, economic, and socio-cultural capital that fuels Neo-Ottoman Cool.

In this context, Turkish drama conjures a twofold model of masculinity that echoes a dual model of power. *Nour's* Muhannad and *The Valley of Wolves' Alem*dar are two faces of the same coin. Whereas Muhannad is understood as a domestic, attractive, though silent and passive husband (see Salamandra, 2012), Alemdar is the martial, fearless, vocal and pro-active commando. They are conquerors, one operating through sexual seduction, another through military aggression. Arab discourses about the two male protagonists establish them as icons of a Turkish, and by extension, Middle Eastern modern masculinity. If the trope of neo-Ottomanism was invoked by Arab pundits concerned about the return of regional Turkish influence (hence the “Ottoman”) but in a different, that is, diplomatic, cultural, and economic—guise (hence the “neo”), then coverage of Muhannad and Alemdar establishes them as cool neo-Ottomans, more alluring and muscled versions of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

At the same time, the transmedia campaigns built around television series and their stars turn Turkish identity into a commodity to be personally consumed, nostalgically by some within Turkey (Özyürek, 2006), “aspirationally” in the Arab world. Since the late 1980s, Turkish modernity has been enacted through everyday life consumerism, which articulates disparate religious, economic, and political

elements of the “package” of Turkish modernity. *Nour* and Valley of the Wolves are linchpins of multiplatform marketing campaigns for a gamut of products including clothing, accessories, perfume, jewelry, and furniture. *Nour*'s targeting of upwardly mobile women and Valley of the Wolves' catering to young adult males, presumably angry and politicized, not only makes them appealing vehicles for advertisers, but also enables different segments of Turkish society to interact with social and political issues through consumptive practices, much as Özyürek (2006) describes the nostalgic consumption of the symbols and tropes of the early formative years of Kemalism. In this context, the popularity of Turkish series in the Arab world can be read as the result of twin forces. On the one hand, Turkish capitalist growth requires the successful marketing of lifestyle consumerism grafted onto themes and stars from television for continued expansion. On the other hand, the growth of consumer society in the Arab world and the tantalizing possibility that a local modernity is accessible through consumption fuel the growth of these media markets.

From that perspective, then, Neo-Ottoman Cool is a productive, however ironic, notion to capture both underlying causes and outcomes of Turkey's rising status in the Arab world, facilitated by the political bankruptcy of competing powers: Saudi Arabia's clerico-religious system is a liability in the race for the hearts and minds of Arabs, and Iran's anti-US and anti-Israel vitriol, compounded by the Sunni-Shi'i split, has failed to sway large segments of Arab public opinion. Turkey's allure, with its glamorous stars and its popular politicians, has recently been complicated by Turkey's growing involvement in the Arab uprisings, especially in Syria. Nonetheless, Turkey's position in the Middle East may become more central as Muslim Brotherhood affiliated parties friendly to the AKP's blend of religion, capitalism and electoral politics take over Arab governments. The most singular achievement of the AKP in this regard might be its success in uprooting anti-Turkish sentiment in the Arab world without affecting a deep geopolitical shift, relying instead on media, popular culture, diplomacy and skillful oratory to create the aura of Neo-Ottoman Cool.

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Note:

¹“Arabist” means broadly Arab nationalist, opposed to Israeli occupation of Palestinian land and to Western intervention in Arab affairs.

²Drawn from a larger project, this research is based on an extensive textual analysis of the coverage of Turkey and Turkish popular culture by leading pan-Arab and national Arab daily newspapers and magazines, totaling more than 100 Arabic-language items published during the last decade.

³Turkey was the first Muslim-majority country to recognize the state of Israel; 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 Turkey over its invasion of parts of Cyprus in 1964, Turkey sided with Egypt on the eve of the 1967 Six-Day War and denied the United States permission to use Turkish bases to assist Israel in the 1973 Arab-Israeli war. Because of 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 leader Abdullah Öcalan at a time when the PKK was actively involved in anti-Turkish terrorism constrained the rapprochement. Turkey supported coalition forces in the 1991 Gulf War, signed a military treaty with Israel in 1996, and threatened military action against Syria in 1998 if Damascus continued to shelter Öcalan.

⁴The media flow and shift in perceptions of relations between Arabs and Turks have been unidirectional. Turkey has addressed Arab publics and exploited its popular culture exports for geopolitical advantage. However, no Arab country has engaged with the Turkish public on the level of popular culture because, quite simply, the current geopolitical battleground for influence in the greater Middle East consist of Arab countries.

⁵Turkish dramas are not perfect in that regard. In one episode of *Nour*, the female protagonist appeared with make up as she walked out of a medical operation in the wake of her miscarriage.

⁶The two series *al-Gharib* (The Stranger) and *al-Firaq* (Separation) told stories sympathetic to Palestinians: Separation met with Israeli opposition when its first episode showed scenes of Israeli soldiers killing Palestinian civilians, including children, women, and the elderly. *Al-Firaq's* writers and production team saw the series as a call for peace and coexistence. The Turkish government censored some scenes in the second episode showing the execution of Palestinians, but the Israeli government objected to the series nonetheless. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu himself said that airing Separation on Turkish national television channel TRT was tantamount to a "provocation" and accused the series of incitement to hatred, while Turkish authorities denied that the series had any political agenda (Al-Bayari, 2009). Another musalsal, *Sarkhet Hajar* (A Stone's Cry) also depicted the daily life of Palestinians under Israeli military occupation and explored Palestinian political division and social taboos (Bilbassy-Charters, 2010).

⁷This reflects Saudi anxiety about Turkish competition for leadership of Sunni Muslims in the Middle East, an economically weak and politically unstable Egypt no longer being a serious contender.

⁸The 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. Also, actor Kivanç Tatlıtuğ, who plays Muhannad on *Nour*, 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 January 25 revolution in Egypt forced a change of plans (Al-Qashuti, 2011).

⁹See Straubhaar (1991). For critical discussions of cultural proximity, see Iwabuchi (2001) and Kraidy (2005)

¹⁰The popularity of Turkish television drama in Greece and Bulgaria and large Turkish economic investments in several East European neighbors, cautions against imputing the success of Turkish cultural production in the Arab world to a pan-Islamic identity or solidarity.

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