

## **Turkish drama serials as a tool for Soft Power**

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### **Abstract:**

This research utilises the notion of soft power as an analytical tool to examine if the perception of Turkey among Arab students in Qatar has changed? And if so, is this as a result of Turkish initiatives in foreign policy? Or the exposure to Turkish dramas? Or if the two are in some way interrelated given that Turkish political influence and growing economic strength has coincided with the enormous success of Turkish television serials in the Arab world? It primarily centres on university students (male and female) from various Arab backgrounds who are being educated at elite American Universities within Qatar's Education City Campus and employed the use of focus group discussions. This study demonstrates that despite Turkey having utilised multiple strategies to win the hearts and minds of the Arab public, and while still acknowledging the shortcomings and challenges of the soft power theory, Turkish dramas are found to be the main catalyst for an increased awareness of Turkey and its foreign policies among Education City students. Despite an overall political apathy and disinterest in current affairs, the majority of focus group participants were aware of Turkey's changing foreign policy, however, they appeared disinterested in news and current affairs as a whole. Moreover, another key question that has arisen over the course of this research is whether the attraction to Turkish cultural products can influence foreign policy in the Arab world, as attraction may not necessarily be seen as the same thing as power.

**Keywords:** TV series; Turkey, Qatar, audience

### **Introduction**

For the past few decades, drama series have been an ever-popular television format across Turkey, however, more recently they have been increasingly exported with great success. These programmes are now broadcast in over 40 countries across the globe, half of which are from the Arab League (Yanardagoglu and Karam, 2012, p.561). Their popularity first

escalated when the Dubai based, but Saudi-owned satellite channel, MBC, aired the series *Noor*<sup>1</sup> (Gumus 2005-2007) in 2008; but it was back in 2006 that Arab channels first started broadcasting Turkish content. Based on figures published by both the *New York Times*, as well as *MBC's* marketing department, more than 80 million viewers over the age of 15 watched *Noor*. What is of particular note was that 50 million of those were women, and surprisingly for some, even the more traditional countries in the Gulf were attracting large audiences (Kimmelman, 2010; Yanardagoglu and Karam, 2012, p.561). Given the high demand for Turkish content, a large number of broadcasters in the region were quick to purchase and commence screening these serials and before long an estimated 60% of the Arab regions foreign programming was being acquired from Turkey (Yanardagoglu and Karam, 2012, p.561).

### **Research objectives**

The main objective of this study was to examine the role of Turkish television programmes (dramas) in the perception of Turkey among Arab audiences in Qatar – a rapidly developing nation whose people are the world's wealthiest by the virtue of its oil and natural gas reserves. This research centres on university-level students, both male and female, from various Arab backgrounds who are receiving an American education in Qatar's Education City Campus – the home to six elite American Universities (Virginia Commonwealth University, Weill Cornell Medical College, Texas A&M University, Carnegie Mellon University, Georgetown University and Northwestern University).

### **Notion of soft power**

The notion of soft power was first explored by Joseph Nye in his book (1990) *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*. He advanced his theory further in his book (2004) *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. The concept of soft power is today broadly used and has achieved increasing popularity and instigated wide-ranging debate. Nye argues that, the strength of soft power lies in its ability to influence and shape the preferences of others (p.5). Nye (2004) notes that soft power utilises the power of attraction and seduction that everyone is familiar with. He compares this to a relationship or marriage where power is not always in the hands of the larger partner but in the 'mysterious chemistry of attraction' (p.5). For him, the same principle applies in the world of business and international politics. Nye underlines that soft power, in contrast to hard power (military force), are countries' new strategy in international politics since the end of the Cold War. Therefore, the resources that drives a nation's soft power are less a function of material factors such as military force or economic power, but are instead dependent on the attraction a state can generate through attributes that are social and ideational in nature. Nye points out that there are three key resources of soft power:

The soft power of a country rest primarily on three resources: its culture (in

places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority) (2004, p.11).

As success appears to be at the core of the three resources that might contribute to the security, wealth, and welfare of a given nation, one could argue that the notion of soft power is an interesting tool with which to study a country such as Turkey which has significantly improved its economy, relationship with regional neighbours, as well as the country's overall wealth in recent years.

Moreover, by representing or being associated with values that others agree with and want to follow, it is simpler for political figures to lead and achieve what they want through appeal rather than military or economic force (Nye, 2004, p.6). For Nye (2004), soft power is created from how a state utilises its material resources to the benefit of its own society and its neighbours, rather than from the actual possession or accumulation of those resources (p.13). Soft power is not simply the same as having influence, given hard power can also generate influence through threats and payments. Soft power is also not merely persuasion or the ability to affect people by argument either, even though, according to Nye, it is an important part of it. Soft power is defined as possessing the ability to attract, which then can lead to 'acquiescence' (Nye, 2004, p.6). Gallarotti (2010) describes this as 'endearment' (p.20). He goes on to suggest that if a state can attract or endear itself to others - even if this is not an instrumental choice or purposeful action - it will have influence over those states, consequently increasing its soft power as the other nation will try to emulate them '(i.e., adopt their policies, domestic and/or foreign)' (p.21).

Whereas Hayden (2012) describes this 'as a form of symbolic, influence-oriented communication that operates in both the passive and active sense of soft power' (p.43). Hayden (2012) notes that 'attraction is not persuasive per se, but resultant from representation acts that symbolize shared worlds' (p.45). However, he underlines that when talking about U.S. soft power, it is important to emphasise that U.S. trade policies have played a significant role in establishing U.S. cultural products as global leaders.

Yet Nye (2004) acknowledges that soft power is unlikely to have a direct effect on discreet policy goals, but rather on more 'general' long-term goals or 'milieu goals' (pp.16-17). Nye (2004) notes that all power depends on the situation 'who relates to whom under what circumstances – but soft power depends more than hard power upon the existence of willing interpreters and receivers' (p.16). Therefore, one could suggest that the soft power notion for this research is of particular relevance, as cultural, religious, and historic factors appear to be key in Turkey's attractiveness in the Arab World.

### **Popular culture and soft power**

Culture has numerous manifestations and one of them is popular culture which focuses on mass entertainment. In this vein, culture is understood as a means of public relations and a

method to strengthening a country's influence (Otmazing, 2008). The global success of American popular culture shows that it 'has made the U.S. seem to others exciting, exotic, rich, powerful, trend-setting – the cutting edge of modernity and innovation' so much so 'that people want to partake of the good life American-style' (Nye 2004, p.12). Otmazing (2008) notes that Hollywood is the most evident example and is, therefore, the most important American tool to perpetuate soft power, which then gets converted into accessible consumption products and marketed globally (p.77). However, according to Press-Barnathan's (2012), attractive popular culture is not capable of influencing foreign policy as attraction does not necessarily mean the same as power. For Press-Barnathan (2012), citizens will not necessarily make the connection between an attractive TV show, music, or politics, which in turn should translate into a more positive approach towards the other state's policies and political behaviour. At the same time, trying to directly influence a leader's perception with popular culture also fails to work. Press-Barnathan (2012) notes that both Kim Jong-il and Saddam Hussein are believed to have been followers of Hollywood movies, yet their preferences did not translate into pro-American policies. Press-Barnathan (2012) suggest that the popular culture might have a significant political influence in a less direct way. The consumption of a certain country's cultural products might result in the adoption of their culture, which in turn could ultimately shape a country's cultural market and regional discourse, along with its vision of modernity, the world and the international system etc. However, she acknowledges that the idea of the American dream is the best example of American soft power which people across the world have learned about through popular culture. However, there are important limitations to governmental use of popular culture as soft power. For Press-Barnathan (2012) the main issue is that governments cannot utilise soft power resources without diminishing their value or abusing it to a degree. At the same time, cultural commodities are predominantly produced and disseminated by private societal actors who may not deliver the message that the government necessarily wants to convey, as well as fail to deliver a universal message. The growth of the popular culture industry is driven from 'below by economic incentives and not from above, as part of a governmental cultural diplomacy' (Press-Barnathan, 2012, p.37).

Nonetheless, Otmazgin and Ben-Yari (2012) suggest that culture has the ability to be transformed into an object of policy that is seen as manageable through technology and political channels and utilised to contribute to economic and political goals. They note that culture can be similarly treated to other national assets, even though it appears at times more difficult to manage (p.4). 'Popular culture can potentially serve as a tool to convey a state's core values and ideology, and as its front window, selling its attractive culture abroad' (Otmazgin and Ben-Yari 2012, p.31). At the same time, Otmazgin and Ben-Yari (2012) underline that popular culture as soft power can be seen as a by-product of a country's hard power due to the fact that the material success of a country is an important soft power tool itself (Otmazgin and Ben-Yari, 2012, p.35).

## **Turkish soft power and neo-Ottomanist foreign policy**

Turkey appears to have gained growing diplomatic and cultural influence in the Balkans, Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia in recent years (Al Ghazi and Kraidy, 2013; Byrant and Hatay, 2013; Demiryol, 2013; Kraidy and Al Ghazi, 2013). This increasing influence has been highlighted by the Arab Spring which has created an environment conducive to the idealisation of Turkey's model of governance, combined with the growing popularity of Turkish television dramas across former Ottoman territories (Al Ghazi and Kraidy, 2013; Byrant and Hatay, 2013; Kraidy and Al Ghazi, 2013). One could argue that Turkey's regional prowess has been on the rise since the ruling Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi, AKP). came to power in 2002. In just over a decade, Turkey has managed to move 'from an introverted, divided country crippled by financial crises' to be part of the G20 of developing nations, with one of the fastest-growing economies worldwide and aspirations of global leadership (Byrant and Hatay, 2013, p.1). According to Al Ghazi and Kraidy (2013), this rapprochement has been due to Turkey's engagement with Arab publics as part of a soft power-based policy conceived as neo-Ottomanism.

Neo-Ottomanism is a definition that describes Turkey's new national interest and direction in foreign policy, and which has gained increasing momentum under the ruling AKP government. Therefore, one could argue that neo-Ottomanism marks an important paradigm shift from earlier foreign policies. Fisher Onar (2009) states that pro-Kemalist governments in the past cooperated with the military and sought to strengthen 'Turkey's diluted Western credentials in the post-Cold War era by cooperating with Washington and Israel in the Middle East', which has been a dominant theme of Turkey's foreign policy rationales since the 1940s. However, with the rise of the AKP as a political force, 'proactive regional policy and geostrategic thinking have been recaptured' under the label of a reinvigorated neo-Ottomanism (p.12). Furthermore, Yavuz (1998) argues that on the one hand neo-Ottomanism is used as a way to reflect back 'to an invented Ottoman-Islamic past as a Turk-made epoch'. On the other hand, it is a way 'to look forward to a vision of a regionally dominant industrialised, but not necessarily civic and democratic, Turkey' (p.23). Yavuz (1998), notes that by recognising the 'reimagined Ottoman imperial past and culture as Turkish, neo-Ottomanists seek to ethnicize the Ottoman state as the 'glorious' achievement of the Muslim Turks' (p.23).

Ahmet Davutoglu, who served as foreign policy advisor, foreign minister and Prime Minister of Turkey, has been widely acknowledged as the author of the AKP government's neo-Ottomanist policies. While Davutoglu rejects the neo-Ottoman label, he underlines the importance of Turkish foreign policy to move away from only being Eurocentric but instead to combine pan-Islamist, post-colonial, and pragmatic geostrategic rationales in order to play a more constructive role in world politics. This in turn will allow Turkey to have an enhanced relationship with the U.S. and Europe, as well as serve as a bridge between the West and former Ottoman territories such as the Balkans, Caucasus and the Middle East (Byrant and Haray, 2013; Fisher-Onar, 2009).

These significant changes in Turkish foreign policy were highly welcomed by the Arab world and resulted in (then) Turkish Prime Minister, Erdoğan, gaining popularity across the Middle East (Benli Altunisik, 2008). Moreover, the new political direction of Turkey has not only improved the country's political relations but also paved the way for important business deals, the formation of free-trade zones, as well as the eliminating or easing of visa restrictions with Arab neighbours (Gürzel, 2014, p.101).

The reinforcement of positive relations with Turkey's neighbours has become an essential political reality for the AKP government, helping the nation to facilitate and strengthen its position as a dominant regional power, as well as further revive and cement its cultural influence in the region. Kirişçi (2011) describes Turkey's newly gained appeal as the 'demonstrative effect' which places Turkey in the position of being seen as a 'work in progress' that makes it appealing to Arab countries and which can see themselves in Turkey's imperfections (p.40).

However, Byrant and Hatay note that countries who have successfully used soft power to achieve their foreign policy goals have a clearly defined mission that moves both diplomacy and the motors of soft power forward. For Byrant and Hatay (2013), what makes American soft power effective is the overwhelming belief of Americans in their ideology of freedom regardless of their political orientation (p.19). Whereas the weakness of Turkish policy is that it does not have a unifying ideal or goal. The neo-Ottoman label might be suggestive of a revival of Turkey's 'greatness' which might turn the myth into a mission and unifying ideal; however, selling this idea to many of Turkey's neighbours is problematic (p.19).

### **Limitations of soft power theory**

Demiryol (2013) argues that the notion of soft power, despite its popularity as a theory, has a number of conceptual issues. The theory fails to explain how soft power is produced and reproduced and who is considered to be its target audience; ordinary audiences might be receptive to the cultural power of another country, whereas the decision-making elite might be resistant to such influences. Therefore, for Demiryol (2013) it is important that soft power analysis should differentiate between low soft power targeted at the general public and high soft power targeted at the elite (p.3). He also stresses that the concept of soft power does not clarify how potential power is transformed into actual power, as well as fails to pay sufficient attention under which circumstances countries alternate between soft and hard power (p.1). For Demiryol (2013), the idea that an open-minded foreign policy can be both the source and the implication, as well as the cause and the impact of soft power, is a rather ambitious claim (p.3). Nonetheless, he acknowledges that soft power works indirectly by shaping the environment of policy rather than the 'immediate cost-benefit calculation of decision-making' (p.4).

For Gallarotti (2010), an important theoretical component that remains under-developed is the relationship between soft power and hard power (p.33). The soft power

theory fails to explain how hard power resources contribute to the attractiveness of a state and therefore to its soft power. Hard power resources (military and economic power) as well as industrial capacity, technological know-how, infrastructure, and the nature and size of a given population, could also generate soft power. For Gallarotti (2010), the relationship between hard and soft power is complex and interactive with neither being substitutable, nor rigidly complementary. Gallarotti (2010) suggests that some hard power resources will compound the effectiveness of soft power and vice versa. For instance, giving arms and economic aid to allies will foster reciprocity and bonds that can enhance a nation's image and influence. The possession of hard power itself can make a nation a role model in a variety of ways and generate significant soft power by creating respect and admiration (Gallarotti, 2010, p.33). A country's economy can also generate soft power because economic policies can be endearing to others.

Furthermore, for Yörük and Vatikiotis (2013) the main theoretical issue with Nye's soft power notion is the movement between the soft and hard poles of power. They claim that Nye notes the relationship and reinforcement of hard and soft power but 'his theorization does not probe into this interaction' (p.2367). They go on to state that, '...Nye's geopolitical theory does not relate sufficiently the practices of soft power with concrete aims' (p.2367). Ferguson (2004) argues that soft power's reach is limited and suggests that cultural imperialism's real engine is hard power. Ferguson (2004) notes that, 'soft power is merely the velvet glove concealing an iron hand' (p.24). Nonetheless, Nye (2004) notes that soft power is hard to measure, difficult to manage and does not touch everyone. He acknowledges that it would be easier for governments to apply military and economic power rather than their soft power resources (pp.1-32, 99-125).

## **Methodology**

This study used focus group research and benefited from the diversity of Qatar's population, which in turn provided an insight into a diverse audience, rather than one consisting of a single ethnic group. Qatar's, and ultimately Education City's (EC), diverse student population made the focus group approach an ideal tool to generate discussion among the various nationalities of the student participants and provided a rather distinctive perspective. Unlike students at Qatar's national University (Qatar University), EC students are taught in a mixed gender environment and experience world class American education on Qatari soil. The combination of their Arab background and Western education allowed this study to offer a rare, yet distinctive outlook, as the students not only provided answers to the research questions from an Arab viewpoint, but their Western education has imparted upon them an ability to be more candid and talk openly about a subject matter that would have been otherwise deemed as culturally unacceptable by either their parents' generation, or for that matter, their less educated and conservative peers. Therefore, this study not only provides knowledge about the role of Turkish television dramas as a soft power tool, but also provides a unique perspective from an audience that are considered (locally) to be the

future decision makers of Arab society. A total of 10 focus groups were conducted, consisting of five male and five female groups of participants. The focus group method was chosen for a variety of social and cultural reasons; however, it is also important to underline that researchers in Qatar require an understanding and appreciation of many local factors – legislation, demographic composition, socio-cultural attitudes and beliefs, and access to individuals and organisations – when undertaking research, regardless of the method(s) applied.

### **Reasons for choosing a qualitative approach in the case of Qatar**

Qatar is an extremely isolated and very private society. Unlike other Arab nations, Qataris themselves live a particularly secluded lifestyle and do not mix socially with other nationalities, or at times, even with other Qatari tribes. Qatar is comprised of only 270,000 citizens out of a population of nearly two million – the highest ratio of non-citizens to citizens in the world (Fromherz, 2012, p.2; Harris, 2013, p.88). Expatriates encompass the majority of society but the unique factor is that these are parallel societies that do not interact. The conservative nature and fragmented structure that, as a result, limits access to people's homes, was the main reason for choosing the focus group method over other approaches. Even if some Qatari and other Arab households would have granted access to their homes for an ethnographic (e.g. observation) study, due to cultural pressures, it is unlikely participants would have revealed their true thoughts or opinions. Moreover, in Arab households, especially Qatari households, television-viewing often occurs in gender-segregated areas. The male members socialise in the majlis, which is a type of living room specifically set aside for male members of the house and their guests. As a female researcher, I would not have been permitted access to a male-only part of a house. Individual interviews would also have been problematic as some of the research subjects were either former students of mine, or were aware that I am a Professor within Education City. Therefore, one-to-one interviews would not be considered either ethical or reliable, as participants may be hesitant to express their true thoughts and feelings due to my position. Whereas in a focus group setting, these issues could be overcome through group interaction as 'a multitude of interpersonal dynamics occur, through interactions people change their views, and the unit of analysis becomes the group' (Wilkinson, 1999, p.228).

However, one needs to underline that focus groups are still a relatively new approach, particularly in the Gulf region; this is also reflected by the limited amount of literature available on the focus group method used in this part of the Arab world. Nonetheless, despite the study participants initially requiring verbal and non-verbal cues, raising their hands to respond, or expecting to have each and every question addressed to them directly, they quickly grasped and adapted to the dynamics of the focus group discussions and voiced their opinions whenever they felt that they had something to contribute. What this unfamiliarity with the focus group format did lead to though, was each individual speaking more at length about their feelings and opinions, which was as a



result of participants not interrupting those speaking as one would see in a typical open discussion focus group format.

### **Focus group fieldwork**

This research utilised relatively small focus groups (five to eight students) in order to facilitate a comfortable discussion environment. Access to students was also only possible during their lunch hour or after evening classes, which made forming larger groups also somewhat unfeasible. Each focus group discussion took 60–90 minutes depending on the availability of students. The focus groups were held within either Carnegie Mellon University or at Northwestern University's studio building. Both sites are on the Education City campus and accessible by students on foot. Further, each participant was encouraged to form their own group by recruiting friends and classmates from other EC Universities. It is important to note that using focus group participants that already know each other were beneficial as they were able to 'relate each other's comments to actual incidents in their shared daily lives. They often challenged each other on contradictions between what they were professing to believe and how they actually behaved' (Kitzinger 1994, p.105).

Furthermore, the full age ranges of participants were 18–25 from various Arab backgrounds. Two 10-minute clips of the Turkish Television drama *Awdat Mohannad*<sup>1</sup> (original title *Kuzey Guney*, 2011–2013) and *Harem El Sultan*<sup>2</sup> (*Muhtesem Yuzyil*) were used as the stimulus material. It must be noted that the format for the focus group sessions commenced with a discussion about Turkey. The first question addressed to the students was what they thought about Turkey, followed by would they like to go there and why? It was then followed by questions centred around what kind of reputation Turks have among Arabs? Once these questions were exhausted the next question addressed to the group was has your opinion of Turkey changed at all as far as you remember and why and/or how has it changed? The last question prior to the screening of the stimulus material was whether the focus group participants are watching (or have previously watched) Turkish drama serials and their thoughts on them. The format of the focus groups is noteworthy, as it was crucial to obtain the opinions of the participant's views towards Turkey as a whole prior to introducing the visual stimulus given this could potentially sway or change opinion. It should also be noted at this point that this study was part of a larger research that also explored the viewing motivations of Arab audiences in Qatar, the importance of cultural proximity in the appeal of Turkish drama serials, as well as their role as a nation branding tool.

### **Arab students as passive viewers of Turkish television dramas**

It is significant to highlight that one of the most unexpected findings during this research was that the majority of the study participants underlined that they were passive viewers of Turkish dramas; this was as a result of the shows being watched in their households by mothers, grandmother, aunts and sisters. Another intriguing finding of this study was that despite students declaring themselves not to be active viewers of Turkish drama serials,

they were able to demonstrate an in-depth knowledge of various programmes, as well as discuss in a comprehensive manner numerous aspects about their appeal. However, the majority of study participants did admit to having watched the serial *Noor*. The data has also shown that Turkish drama serials were perceived by the study participants as something that housewives find enjoyable to watch. Focus group responses by female participants in particular demonstrated that watching Turkish television dramas was perceived as something embarrassing and shameful. Therefore, one possible conclusion for this paradox might be that study participants were embarrassed to admit that they watched Turkish serials because there were deemed to be uncool as it was something that their parents were watching. On the other hand, male participants described the viewing of Turkish television dramas as a weakness of the female gender, due to the fact that it is trying to fulfil their need for romance and compensate for a monotonous lifestyle. Additionally, the findings have also revealed that Turkish drama serials are perceived among study participants as a women's genre, despite these being scheduled as primetime serials in Turkey.

### **Turkey is gaining increased visibility through the presence of Turkish dramas on Arab television**

I remember when I was really young, my dad went to Turkey for a business trip and when I would call him on the phone, and say I'm in Turkey, I'd imagined Turkey as this desolate, uncivilized place as a 7-year-old. I never really bothered when I was a young teenager to see if that imagination was correct, but then when I was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, that's when television started including Turkey, so I said, oh, my God it's such a beautiful place, and it made me feel like I wanted to go. But at the same time, not only shows that are on television, but there is this other show that is Saudi, and it promotes social reform in a sense, and the host does that by comparing other countries and the good they have done. One of the countries that is featured is Turkey. He showed for instance how Turkey produced their own computer, I believe. And also from the humanitarian side, recently they had one of the best – taking care of Syrian refugees from Syrian refugee camps. It showed the country in a light that made it seem more beautiful, humanitarian, and more progressive in an economic sense (Female, Saudi).

This female student from Saudi Arabia quite vividly describes how her perception of Turkey has changed, while she also manages to encapsulate in many ways the overall findings of this study. The majority of focus group participants stated that their opinion about Turkey had changed in recent years due to Turkey gaining increased visibility through the presence of Turkish dramas on Arab television.

The vast majority of students also stated that their awareness of, and interest in, Turkey was first triggered by their exposure to Turkish dramas, which then ultimately prompted both them and their families to visit Turkey and take a greater interest in the country as a whole. This study validates the premise that Turkish television dramas appear to have created an awareness of a country that for many Arabs was not considered important or relevant until recently. Exposure to Turkish dramas appears to have contributed greatly to increased interest in Turkey within the Arab public sphere.

We Qataris generally travel to the U.K. or France cause most of our families have homes there, but now people discovered Turkey. They see that it is also beautiful and it has the best of both worlds. My mother and aunts really enjoy shopping in Turkey. I know for a fact that the main reason why they wanted to visit couple of years back was to visit Noor and Mohannad's mansion. I also have couple of relatives who bought houses in Istanbul (Male Qatari).

One could argue that Turkish television serials and their stars have turned Turkishness into a commodity that Arab audiences want to experience. The Turkish lifestyle is perceived as something that can be achieved through everyday consumerism. Turkish television dramas not only create a positive image and relatable modernity to Arab viewers, but at the same time generate interest in Turkey, so much so that it leaves many wanting to travel to the country to experience the Turkish way of life and visit the locations they see on screen. This in turn is creating an increased awareness about Turkey as a whole. Also, it is possible to suggest that the success of Turkish dramas is in many ways linked to Turkey's hard power, as the foundation of its film and television industry, along with a rapidly growing consumer society, has enabled the country to produce and export cultural products with better production values than other countries in the region. Turkish television dramas as soft power appear to be a by-product of the country's hard power due to the fact that the material success of Turkey is an important soft-power tool itself.

The production value and quality of actors in Turkish shows is so much better than in Arab productions. The actors and locations are more beautiful. Everything looks of better quality (Female, Iraqi).

Nonetheless, this study was not able to make a clear link between Arab audience's attraction to Turkish television dramas and this attraction being translated into a more positive approach towards Turkish policies and political behaviour. However, as stated before, the study clearly demonstrates that Turkish television dramas have generated interest and awareness about Turkey which coincides with Turkish foreign policies that resonate with Arab interests. However, as the responses from various Arab nationals in this study illustrate, Turkish television dramas have had a decisive impact on the visibility of Turkey in the Arab world.

The first time I heard about Turkey was through a textbook when we were learning about the history. I didn't really have an opinion. I didn't know much about it except for books, but then as that soap opera started becoming more relevant here, I started learning more about it. My opinion hasn't really changed; it's just that I've started getting one (Female, Qatari).

### **Turkish history and culture; an important soft-power tool in creating a positive perception of Turkey**

An important factor that was addressed by the majority of focus group participants, and one that defines the positive image and perception of Turkey, was the country's history and culture in combination with its natural beauty. More than half of the focus group participants claimed that they have visited the country, while the remainder stated that they had family who had visited and/or that they were also interested in travelling there. Even though a number of students noted that their perception about the country - especially in respect to its nature and cultural richness, was drawn largely from the images portrayed in Turkish dramas - the vast majority of focus group participants actually stated that they had travelled to Turkey fairly recently, with only a very small number actually stating that their visit to the country occurred several years ago. This all goes to support the notion that an interest in Turkey for these students is something that has developed fairly recently. This is also reflected in the figures released by the Turkish Tourism Authority, which illustrate that the number of Arab tourists visiting Istanbul has almost doubled in the last six years rising from 10% to 20% of all visitors to the city. Whereas visitors from Qatar increased by 60.6% in 2014 (Dalan, 2015).

It's a very nice country with a fascinating culture. They have a great history. They are developing very fast. It's a great country that is very cosmopolitan (Female, Egyptian).

Turkish culture and history appear to have a strong appeal, as the majority of students mentioned this as their very first response in regards to their thoughts about Turkey. Many stated that Turkey's rich culture, its Ottoman heritage and the impressiveness of its museums, mosques and old palaces was something that they were greatly impressed by.

Interestingly, the majority of female participants claimed that their opinion about Turkey had changed in recent years and that their desire to visit was because of the beautiful landscapes they had seen on Turkish dramas. Several females noted that their mothers in particular were a driving force in deciding to travel to Turkey, while a number of them stated they wanted to visit the locations that they had seen in the drama series.

Not only was it tourism for our family but it was sort of like a honeymoon destination because of all their romantic shows (Female, Sudanese).

People want to stand on the bridge Mirna and Khalil were standing (Female, Syrian).

Turkish cultural products appear to have significantly contributed to the country's tourism sector. It is important to underline that the waving of visa requirements for Turkey's Middle Eastern neighbours may also have played a significant factor in the rising number of Arab tourists – a factor which cannot be ignored when analysing this data (Kraidy, and Al Ghazzi, 2013; Yanardagolu and Karam, 2013). Yet, one could argue that a desire to know more about Turkey, and to experience where popular programmes were filmed, has significantly added to the increasing number of Arab tourists. In fact, the Ministry of Culture estimated that following the broadcasting of the series *Noor* on Arab television, 300,000 fans visited the mansion where the series was filmed (Yanardagolu and Karam, 2013). Moreover, according to news reports, Arab tourists have not only increasingly chosen to vacation in Turkey in recent years but are also gradually electing to purchase property in the country (Al Monitor, 2014).

Even participants who had never visited the country placed an emphasis in their responses on Turkey's rich culture, history, and beauty of its landscape. One could argue that despite students claiming to be passive viewers of Turkish television dramas, their responses reflect that these opinions appear to be shaped by what they have seen on television. It is important to underline that a key feature of popular culture, or in this case drama serials, is its ability to deliver messages and narratives that can shape people's ideas, thoughts and identities, which one could argue is reflected in the number of Arab students painting a positive image of Turkish society, culture and heritage and expressing a strong desire to visit the country (Otmazing and Ben-Yari, 2012, p.4).

I've never been to Turkey but I'd love to go. The scenery is amazing; it's beautiful. They maintain their traditions no matter what even though everything is changing around them. If I get an opportunity, I will definitely go (Male, Lebanese).

The majority of focus group participants mentioned Istanbul as a place that Arab families like to visit due to its rich history and culture, but also due to the city's large selection of shopping possibilities and eateries. At the same time, it is important to note that the majority of Turkish television dramas take place in Istanbul. The city's skyline, famous Bosphorus Bridge and Ottoman mansions, are prominent features in almost every programme.

My grandparents went last year and did a lot of shopping for my sister's wedding. They really enjoyed the atmosphere in Istanbul. They sometimes travel to Germany or U.S., but they always feel that people, especially at the airport, are rude to them because they are Arabs. In Turkey, they felt as Arabs wanted (Female, Jordanian).

However, as this female Jordanian student underlines, one could argue that Turkey's soft power is not only intrinsically linked to its culture, heritage, shopping, food and beautiful landscapes, but it's the feeling that Turkey projects to its Arab visitors of being welcomed to a city that is as much Muslim as it is cosmopolitan.

It makes you feel proud. Like it's a Muslim city [Istanbul], accomplishments of the Turks from past centuries, Mosques, the Muslim identity. There's a secular identity, but I think it's more planted. You don't have the option. That's native to Turkey or to the Muslim world, but you feel good being a Muslim in a place like Turkey. There's mosques everywhere and sort of the glories of past empires. It is something for other Arab countries to strive for (Male, Palestinian/Canadian).

Furthermore, 'feeling good being a Muslim in a place like Turkey', as this male student quite eloquently describes it, is maybe both a result of, as well as an underlying factor behind, Turkey's growing prestige in the Arab world. Turkey's position as a Muslim powerhouse facilitated by the lack of Arab nations that could win the hearts and minds of the Arab world, as well as the Middle East's growing distrust towards the West, appear to have significantly contributed to Turkey's position in the region. Therefore, one could argue that war, along with political and economic turmoil, has stabilised Turkey's position in the Middle East as a defender of Muslim interests and a regional powerhouse.

Surprisingly, what this study has also discovered is that Turkey's Ottoman history has been perceived as something positive and inspiring. Rather than seeing Turkey's imperial past as a period of Arab oppression, students' have emphasised their admiration for Ottoman history, as it is perceived as a time where not Arabs, but Muslims, collectively mattered.

Young Arabs I have met as an educator over the years have been longing for stability and prosperity in the Arab world. Many are striving to find employment in Canada, the U.S. or the U.K. in order to have a more secure future because they know that they will never be granted permanent residency/citizenship in Qatar, or anywhere else in the Gulf. However, at the same time, they feel discriminated and condemned in the West for being Arab and Muslim. It therefore stands to reason that Turkey's soft power is tied to its ability to project an image of a Muslim, functional, thriving country that offers stability and prosperity at a time where many Arab countries appear to have an uncertain future. According to the soft-power notion, Turkey is therefore aligned with values that Arab students agree with,

however, whether this will make it simpler for Turkish political figures to achieve what they want through appeal rather than military or economic force is difficult to foresee.

### **Turkey perceived as a model system by Arab students**

I think at the end of the day, Turkey has proved to be an example, a great role model for the rest of the Middle East. They successfully combined culture and globalisation, they combined religion with secularism, they combined all those sorts of things, good living conditions, tourism, all those sorts of things that every nation aspires to in terms of development. (Male, Egyptian).

The majority of responses from Arab students reflected Turkey's ongoing effort to see the world from a non-Euro-centric perspective and instead maintain a desire to reconnect with its Arab neighbours to have had an affirmative impact. The majority of focus group participants claimed to have a positive attitude to Turkey and to perceive it as a model nation that Arab countries can aspire to. Turkish society represents, for the vast majority of focus group participants, an ideal fusion of Eastern and Western values which appears to significantly contribute to the forming of their opinion. However, it is important to remind ourselves again that the majority of participants noted that they have been more aware of Turkey in recent years because of the popularity of, and exposure to, Turkish television dramas.

Turkey is a mix of Muslim and Western cultures. I mean a lot of Arab countries dream to achieve what they have achieved and at the end of the day they don't even have petrol dollars. Their success can be reflected on the good they brought to the country itself. They opened all the trade barriers with Syria, Iran and other countries. They've done a lot of stuff. They were actually able to bring in a lot more investors (Male. Algerian).

### **Turkey's Arab centric foreign policy resonates with Arab students**

Turkey's hosting of Syrian refugees, and its open support for Palestine, appears to have significantly contributed to the country's positive image among Arab students. Nye (2008) argues that in international politics, resources that produce soft power arise, in the most part, from the values a country conveys in its culture in the form of, for instance, internal practices and policies and the way it handles its relations with others. Therefore, Turkish foreign policy can be seen as an instrument that has been utilised to mobilise these resources to communicate with and attract the publics of Arab countries. Male students in particular voiced their admiration for Turkey, especially in relation to their help for Syrian refugees; support for Palestine was more often brought up by female students. One could argue that these responses demonstrate that Turkey has established political clout that

might be more significant than their military and economic weight, because their national interests include attractive causes such as aid for Syrian refugees and support for Palestine.

As I said before, the fact that they have taken in so many refugees definitely impacted my view but also Turkish shows. They are doing a great job showing how beautiful and perfect the country is. In the Arab world we are just used to chaos - to see a Muslim country that is organised is so nice. Makes you proud (Female, Syrian).

The AKP government's foreign policies, especially from 2005 to date, have emphasised improving relations with Muslim Middle Eastern governments and societies. At the same time, the country has taken an increasingly active role in regional disputes as a peace broker and defender of Muslim interests – this appears to have been acknowledged and perceived positively by the majority of the focus group participants (Benli-Altunisik, 2008, p.50; Giannotta, 2012). As an individual working and living in Qatar for the last decade, I myself have noticed that despite the Middle East being a highly politicised region, students that I have been exposed to in my capacity as a lecturer have shown political apathy and disinterest in current affairs. From my own observations and through speaking to my students over the years, their disinterest in world affairs is not because they are oblivious and ignorant but because they seem to experience a form of fatigue from never-ending 'bad news', especially when it involves the Muslim world. Therefore, it was unexpected as a researcher to discover that the majority of students were aware of Turkey's changing foreign policy, while they appeared disinterested in news and current affairs as a whole.

I do respect them for standing against Israel and not following others in world politics (Female, Tunisian).

It was also surprising that none of the focus group participants mentioned any of the anti-government demonstrations linked to Gezi Park in Istanbul's Taksim square in the summer of 2013 – an event during which freedom of expression was restricted, journalists were intimidated, and the judiciary was placed under executive control. Even social media sites such as Twitter and YouTube were shut down for a brief period. The focus group discussions were conducted in the aftermath of the Gezi park protest, which, in fact, continued throughout the year. Interestingly none of the focus group participants mentioned anything with regard to the protest movement in Turkey that had occupied the global news in the summer and fall of 2013 (which is when this field research took place). One explanation for this (as underlined earlier) could be political apathy, which would explain why they were unaware of the protest movements in Turkey – protests that some commentators even went so far as to describe as the Turkish spring. However, this does not explain why, in contrast, they were highly aware of Turkey's changing foreign policy.



Another plausible explanation could be that the Arab students have, despite their Western education, retained a tendency to fear criticising authority. Nonetheless, from my own observations, students appeared content and comfortable in the focus group setup and did not create the impression that they were trying to please me as the moderator.

### **Turkey's hard power appears to generate soft power**

In terms of their overall perception of Turkey, the vast majority of male Arab students (in contrast to female participants) highlighted the importance of Turkey's strong military capacity and economic strength, along with its historic and cultural attractiveness when addressing their thoughts about Turkey. Whereas female focus group participants didn't bring up Turkey's military capability or economic strength at all during their discussions.

They have an extreme spectrum in culture. You have European, Asian secular living and lifestyle, tradition and they have great military power (Male, Syrian/Moroccan/Spanish).

One could argue that Turkey's hard power is producing soft power, as the country's military strength is perceived as attractive. Nye notes that 'some countries maybe attracted to others with hard power by the myth of invincibility or inevitability. Hard power can also be used to establish empires and institutions that set the agenda for smaller states' (2004, p.9). Therefore, one could argue that Turkey's military power and NATO membership are seen as attractive because the country is perceived as a peace broker and defender of Muslim interests. Turkey's military capacity is seen as reassuring rather than threatening. One could argue that Turkey's military power is compounding the effectiveness of its soft power and vice versa. Turkey's aid for Syrian refugees and Palestine appears to foster reciprocity and bonds with the Arab world that appear to have enhanced Turkey's image and influence in the region, as reflected in the responses of the study participants. Moreover, the possession of hard power seems to position Turkey as a role-model nation, especially among male students. Turkey's military status is considered a symbol of national success. Therefore, one could argue that Turkey's hard power is creating soft power by generating respect and admiration.

Turkey's economic growth, particularly among male students, is perceived as appealing and important in their overall perception of the country. Turkey's economy, which is another factor of its hard power, generates soft power because its economic achievements are perceived as endearing by Arabs that are struggling to achieve economic stability in a region that is marked by never-ending conflict. Turkey's economic primacy is admired and respected and perceived as a role model for Arab nations.

## Conclusion

This study has found that Turkish television dramas appear to have been the main catalyst for an increased awareness of Turkey and its foreign policies among Education City students. Awareness and interest surrounding Turkey was first triggered by Arab students' exposure to Turkish dramas that ultimately prompted them and their families to visit the country and become greatly observant towards Turkey as a whole. Turkish history and culture, in combination with the beauty of its nature, holds strong appeal as the majority of study participants mentioned this as their very first response in regards to their thoughts about Turkey. The country's rich culture and Ottoman heritage and the impressiveness of its museums, mosques, and old palaces were something they were fascinated by. Rather than seeing Turkey's imperial past as a period of Arab oppression, students' have emphasised their admiration for Ottoman history, as it is perceived as a time where not Arabs, but Muslims, collectively mattered.

Female participants' opinions (in particular) changed in recent years and their desire to visit Turkey was driven by the beautiful landscapes they had seen on Turkish dramas, which appears to have offered a significant boost to the country's tourism sector. Moreover, Turkey is perceived as a model nation that Arab countries aspire to become, as its society represents an ideal fusion of Eastern and Western values, which also contributes greatly to the overall positive opinion of the country. Turkey's hosting of Syrian refugees and its open support for Palestine has resonated with the majority of Arab students and cemented Turkey's image of a peace broker and defender of Muslim interests, with its military capacity being seen as reassuring rather than threatening.

Interestingly, despite an overall political apathy and disinterest in current affairs, the majority of study participants were aware of Turkey's changing foreign policy, while they appeared disinterested in news and current affairs as a whole. At the same time, Turkey's economic success in recent years contributed to the Arab admiration for the country's achievements in becoming a regional powerhouse. However, it is important to note that the enormous success of Turkish television dramas is also a result of Turkey's improved economy and developing trade relations with the Arab world, which has enabled them to produce content of an international standard and establish growing business ties. Turkish television dramas appear to have played a decisive role in the construction of a positive Turkish image among Arab students that is seen as a friend of Arabs and successful model to emulate.

From the data gathered, this research demonstrates that Turkish drama series have significantly contributed to the rise of the country's soft power, even though the drama sector's financials have been far from soft, representing a major economic/trade interest with important repercussions for tourism. Although unplanned, the international success of Turkish dramas has fallen nicely into the soft-power strategy of the AKP government. Turkey's culture, political notions and policies are considered attractive, which is the essence of soft power. Even though the soft power theory appears to be a useful instrument

to explore and explain Turkey's recent prestige in the region against the backdrop of the enormous success of Turkish television dramas, it ignores the importance of hard power to actually generate soft power. Without the drastic improvement of the Turkish economy in the last decade (which also significantly contributed to the growth and expansion of the television sector), Turkey wouldn't be able to generate any soft power, or in fact wouldn't have any soft power resource to explore. Also, one could argue that soft power generated through Turkish television dramas is in fact outside the control of the government and are a coincidental occurrence, which in many ways illustrates an opposite world view to that of the Islamic conservative AKP. Penalties enforced by the government-controlled broadcasting watchdog RTÜK (Supreme Board of Radio and Television in Turkey) in recent years, demonstrate the Turkish government's increased efforts to impose a more conservative worldview on the drama industry (Hurtas, 2015). Yet this study found that one of the key elements that makes Turkish drama serials appealing to Arab audiences is their ability to touch on subjects that are considered taboo in the Arab world. By doing so, they fill a void that Arab media is failing to satisfy. By censoring television dramas, Turkey is doing precisely the same as Arab media, which could potentially result in Turkish drama serials losing their appeal in key foreign markets.

Nonetheless, the notion of soft power has been an interesting tool to examine the interplay between foreign policy and cultural products and how these appear to shape perceptions among Arab students in Qatar. It is important to underline that soft power appears to be a concept that works in theory but fails to examine the underlying reasons for having soft power in the first place, which in many ways leads back to hard power. However, it is possible to argue that the popularity of Turkish television serials might have a significant political influence in a less direct way. The consumption of Turkish cultural products, which illustrates a liberal take on social and religious issues, might result in the adoption of certain cultural views, as well as the shaping of the Arab cultural market, regional discourse, the view of modernity, the world, and the international system.

### **Biographical note:**

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## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> *Noor* (Gümüs 2005-2007) is a drama that tells the story of Mehmet and Gümüs whose marriage is arranged by Mehmet's grandfather following the death of his girlfriend in a car accident. Gümüs, who has been in love with Mehmet since childhood, discovers that his feelings are not mutual. However, in the end, Mehmet falls in love with her and her childhood dreams come true.

<sup>2</sup> *Awdat Mohannad* (Kuzey Güney, 2011–2013) is a drama that tells the story of two distinctly different brothers who fall love with the same girl. The brothers are involved in a car accident during which an innocent pedestrian is killed. Although the older brother, Güney, is driving the car, the younger brother, Kuzey, takes the blame and goes to prison because he decides his brother is a brighter student and has a better future. The series commences four years on just as Kuzey is being released from prison.

<sup>3</sup> *Magnificent Century* (Mühtesem Yüzyil, 2011–2014) is a historical drama focusing on lives of Sultan Süleyman and his wife Hürrem. The series has been sold to 47 countries (Williams, 2013).