

## The “Politicization” of Turkish Television Dramas

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Turkish television has undergone a distinctive transformation since the early 2000s in which new regulations, rapid market growth, and political pressures have interacted with and transformed each other. As Turkey set new records in 2013 for the highest number of journalists arrested worldwide, television dramas have suffered from their fair share of political pressures, while the contemporary political agenda has, in turn, infiltrated the content of television dramas. This article analyzes the ways in which Turkish television dramas appear as a sphere of political contest.

*Keywords: television dramas, Turkish media, politics of entertainment, press freedom*

### Introduction

This article focuses on the transformation of television dramas in Turkey within a highly politicized media environment, one highlighted by the direct and indirect intervention of politicians and the exploitation of such interventions by high-profile media professionals. The *politicization of dramas* can be taken as an umbrella term encompassing several dimensions of the intersection between politics and television, in which particular nexuses can be identified.

First, television dramas have been well exploited by nation-states in building their national identities by defining ideal citizenship or mobilizing national sentiments in countries such as India (Mankekar, 1999; Rajagopal, 2001), Egypt (Abu-Lughod, 2005), China (Rofel, 2002), Brazil (Porto, 2011; Tufte, 2000), and so on. Yoshimi (2003) states that the flow of television reconstructed national memory and identity in Japan during the 1960s by defining morning, midday and evening time slots in which domestic memories were related to the national history through soap operas and dramas in particular. The role played by public broadcasting in constructing national identities may seem banal. On the other hand, the intertwined interests of governments and private broadcasting companies pave the way for redefining the nation’s boundaries via television shows. Porto (2011) demonstrates the extent to which

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Brazilian *telenovelas* echo the hegemonic political discourses of the periods in which they were produced thanks to TVGlobo's support for the government.

Second, the nexus can be highlighted in television dramas depicting social issues. According to Salamandra (2010), Syrian dramas provide particular social and political depictions framed by "the demise of socialism, the perceived failures of nationalism, and the rise of Islamism" (p. 1). Arab-language dramas, *musalsals*, usually raise social issues such as "corruption, the role of religion and extremism in society or the status of women," sometimes "pushing things too far" and annoying officials (Dick, 2005, para. 10). Studies of Brazilian primetime entertainment reveal that these programs have "delved into controversial topics such as racism, homosexuality, abortion, anti-smoking, drug abuse, and the health care infrastructure, as well as specific diseases such as HIV/AIDS, leukemia, and breast cancer" (La Pastina, 2004, p. 302). In a similar vein, Tuftte (2000) argues that "Brazilian telenovelas reflect the extreme polarization in Brazilian social reality" (p. 98) as there is always a class dimension in their *diegesis* and, as such, are not dissimilar to British soaps that tend to deal with mundane issues in terms of class and region (Geraghty, 2002). A recent study addresses the British community drama *EastEnders* as a source of counterhegemonic nostalgia toward public services and "a cultural expression of a social democratic worldview" (Lamuedra & O'Donnell, 2012, p. 1). That is to say, dramas that touch upon social issues or locate characters' personal dilemmas within a broader social context eventually provide particular political frameworks for their viewers.

A more explicit appearance of this nexus can be identified in political dramas that usually portray professional politicians. Political dramas can be regarded as a subgenre, especially on U.S. and UK television, with particular conventions that assemble discourses about politics as a game of power, although the representations vary. These dramas usually represent politicians in a negative light when their ambitions override the common good they are supposed to represent. Both La Pastina (2004) and Coleman (2008) emphasize that politics are illustrated in Brazilian *telenovelas* and British soaps as games of power, complicated by the intertwined interests of politicians and the elites.

In relation to Turkish TV dramas, I use the term *politicization* in two ways: first, to correspond to a recent trend in which television dramas have begun to deal with contemporary political issues, some aiming to convey particular political messages to the audience, while others stand out as political manifestations and, second, to address the ways in which television dramas have become a battleground for groups expressing a variety of political concerns. In Turkey, I argue, the politicization of television dramas is a novel phenomenon, indicative of a broader transformation of the media market and political institutions in Turkey during the last decade, a transformation which initially presumed a relatively isolated media environment with predefined structures of regulation and control.

Until 1990 the Turkish television market was dominated by the monopoly of the public broadcasting company, TRT (Turkish Radio Television Institution). The following 10 years saw the birth and collapse of media conglomerates with growing investments in television production and advertisement. The expansion of the production market since the early 2000s, which implied a growing audience interest, re-addressed television dramas not only as profitable commodities, but also as significant fields of political contest over meaning. This period was also characterized by the handover of

hegemony from the Kemalist elites to the neoliberal conservative Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, or JDP) government (Tugal, 2009), which pursued a decisive political agenda in regulating media content. These changing market conditions for television production, characterized by intense competition, required a particular ability to respond quickly to the demands of the various constituents, such as the audience, channel executives, and politicians. In a similar vein, Lopez (2001) explains how TVGlobo's competition with its then-counterpart, TVTupi, provided Brazilian *telenovelas* with a national character, as it acknowledged the military regime's attempts to rebuild the national identity. That is to say, political context along with the political economy of the media can shape the politics of television dramas.

I therefore use the term *politicization* of dramas to correspond to a transformation process in Turkish television, characterized by the expansion of the television production market, political challenges to the freedom of the press, and the eventual penetration of political content into dramas. In this article, I specifically employ this term to reveal a responsive process in which dramas take sides in an overtly politicized media environment, while at the same time politicians and governmental institutions intervene in drama production. Although this period may seem peculiar to Turkish television history, one can identify several similarities to Egyptian and Syrian *musalsals* and Brazilian *telenovelas* (Hamburger, 2000; Porto, 2005, 2009) in terms of the politicization process.

### **The Crisis of Press Freedom**

Turkish public broadcasting enjoyed a long-term monopoly over the country's television market until the late 1980s when the first private television channel, Magic Box, was launched, benefitting from the unregulated media market of the period. For many years private television channels exploited the deregulated media environment in several respects including occupying bands of their own, paying neither fees nor taxes, deciding the advertisement durations and slots, and constructing the television content with no intervention from any regulating institution. In this regard, private broadcasting enjoyed a free market in the literal sense of the term. The Radio and Television Supreme Council (*Radyo, Televizyon Ust Kurulu*) was established in 1994 to regulate radio and television broadcasting in Turkey through an "autonomous and unbiased public corporation," but even though the Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTSC) was assigned the duty of planning and allocating the channel frequencies among private broadcasters, it did not fulfill this function until 2006 (Adaklı, 2006). The private broadcasting market in the late 1990s was characterized by oligopolization and horizontal and vertical monopolization (Adaklı, 2006). Channel allocations to private enterprises long remained unregulated, causing de facto illegal radio and television broadcasting to occur for more than 15 years (Kejanlioglu, 2004).

The Turkish television market rapidly expanded during the 2000s, transforming the economy and the content of television dramas in various ways (Emre Cetin, in press). The market's value reached one billion Turkish lira (\$6.6 million) by 2008, although it had declined to 700 million (\$4.4 million) in 2010 (ISMMMO, 2010). The growth of the television market primarily led to a programming dependence on dramas, with 66% of television broadcasting in 2010 being allocated to dramas by the five popular private channels (Sozeri & Guney, 2011). As with the *telenovelas* of Latin American and Spanish-language television (Lopez, 2002), dramas became the sine qua non for Turkish television. The content of television

dramas also saw a significant transformation during the post-2000 period, with long running times (around 90 minutes, excluding the advertising slots), thematic diversification, generic hybridity, and repetition (Emre Cetin, 2013). The expansion of the production market was also facilitated by the exportation of dramas to nearby countries, and Turkish dramas have been consumed in a wide region that encompasses the Balkans, the Middle East, the Caucasus, and North Africa. Recent research on the perception of Turkey in the Middle East shows that Turkish dramas are followed by 82% of the viewing public in Iraq and by 55% Syria (Akgun & Gundogar, 2013).

The Turkish media market experienced a dramatic change after the government of the JDP came to power in 2002. According to Sumer and Adaklı (2010, p. 1): "In the history of Turkish politics, no government has ever been this directly involved in how the media operates." Nevertheless, rather than being a sudden move that could be observed immediately after the JDP came to power, the government's intervention in the media gradually increased, peaking at critical periods such as the Constitutional Referendum and the Gezi Park Protests. Cayli and Depeli (2012) highlight how the legal changes to the Penal Code and the Press Code during 2002–2007 were effective in this respect, and the physical attacks and threats against journalists along with various legal cases dramatically increased after 2007. In 2011 Turkey ranked 148 out of 179 countries in the Reporters Without Borders' Freedom of Press Index. Along with the Penal and Press codes, the government also took advantage of tax penalties to control and punish media conglomerates whose publications did not echo government discourses. The Dogan Media Group, one of the largest media conglomerates, was fined more than \$1 billion, the most expensive tax penalty in Turkish history. According to Dogan Tilic, chair of the Association of European Journalists, although the company had some tax issues, the penalty must be regarded as a consequence of the tension between the government and the media group (Onderoglu, 2009).

One could argue that the JDP government secured its hegemony after the Constitutional Referendum in 2010,<sup>2</sup> which the government also considered to be a representation of its support by various social groups, enabling the government to pursue an authoritarian approach, reinforcing the aggressive attitudes held against the media and journalists by these different parties. Consequently, many media professionals (particularly journalists and editors) were dismissed or forced to resign immediately after the Referendum. Danzikyan (2012) notes that silencing journalists has been routine since 2011, with such cases being discussed on websites and independent media for a couple of days before being forgotten until the next case emerges. Kurban and Sozeri (2012) and Cayli and Depeli (2012) highlight the increasing number of journalists who have been dismissed or forced to resign since 2011. This aggression against journalists and media workers (including actors playing in popular television series) peaked during and after the 2013 Gezi Park protests; therefore, this is the period on which we focus.

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<sup>2</sup> September 12, 2010: The date has a symbolic resonance as it coincides with the 30th anniversary of the coup. The referendum was held to amend 26 articles of the 1982 Constitution prepared under the military regime. The amendment to the 15th article was of particular importance as it ended the legal immunity of the generals and enabled the initiation of judicial proceedings. More than 70% voters turned out, 57% of whom voted "yes."

May 28, 2013 saw the commencement of a month-long series of demonstrations in Turkey. These protests were aimed at protecting Gezi Park in Istanbul's Taksim Square against urban transformation policies which would demolish the park and construct in its place a historic military barracks and shopping mall. Demonstrations swiftly spread across the country and became antigovernment protests formed by groups encompassing Kemalists, Turkish nationalists, Kurds, conservatives, leftists, feminists, LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex) movement, football fans, anticapitalist Muslims, and others. Many protestors were fatally injured due to the inappropriate use of tear gas, and police violence caused several deaths, while a policeman died falling from a bridge during the protests. Television channels overwhelmingly turned a blind eye to the protests for several days, and leading news channels such as NTV and CNNURK were widely criticized by audiences, who accused the owners and executives of siding with the government (Bulut, 2013). The Union of Turkish Journalists declared that 59 journalists were either dismissed or forced to resign during the Gezi Park Protests (Akgul, 2013). Many celebrities and television personalities took part in the protest and explicitly supported it including Halit Ergenc, the actor playing Sultan Suleiman in the popular series *Magnificent Century (Muhtesem Yuzyl, 2011–2014)*, who attended negotiations with the Prime Minister during the protests. The government launched a counterattack by inviting Necati Sasmaz (who plays the media icon Polat Alemdar, the protagonist of the remarkably popular series *Valley of the Wolves*).

In this highly polarized media environment, the popular serial *Leyla and Mecnun (Leyla ile Mecnun, 2011–2013)* was cancelled by the public television channel TRT on the basis of low ratings and high production costs. This came as a surprise as *Leyla and Mecnun* had been ranked among the International Movie Database (IMDB) top 50 and had been on air for three seasons. Eventually, one of the actors, Ahmet Mumtaz Taylan, revealed that a video clip by the actors, shot three months prior to the protests that showed them criticizing the Gezi Park demolition, had annoyed the public channel's executives. Terminating the serial led to wide protests on Twitter with the hashtag *#Leyla ile Mecnun'a Cevap Ver TRT (Reply to Leyla and Mecnun TRT)*. The drama's cast and crew were transferred to another television channel with a new drama, *I Missed Too (Ben de Özledim, 2013–2014)*, but in response to high audience curiosity about the finale of *Leyla and Mecnun*, a character in *I Missed Too* explained the serial's finale to other characters, enabling the audience to reconnect with *Leyla and Mecnun* after its sudden disruption. One television serial was thereby finalized orally within another in a form of reinforced intertextuality, due to increased political tension and censorship. That is to say, political pressures led producers to find creative strategies to deal with this silencing and, in doing so, intensified the interaction between audience and producers in a form of solidarity against censorship. In this regard, one could argue that television dramas gained a political function (along with an entertainment one) in the post-2000 period.

### **Novel Discovery: The Significance of Entertainment Politics**

As well as the explicit and implicit forms of governmental media control, growth of the television market and exportation opportunities led to a kind of reinvention of the significance of the popular as a political arena as well as an economic one. One example is the family.

The conservative values constructed around television families, which depict various family crises in Turkish television dramas, could be described as banal. Families are usually located within a particular neighborhood where they are surrounded by the conservative norms and values of neighborhood communities. The neighborhood norms and values are mainly defined by surveillance and control. In Turkish neighborhood dramas, like the Syrian *musalsals* such as *Damascene Days* (Salamandra, 2005) and *Bab al-Hara*, “[t]he *hara*, the old city neighborhood, appears a utopia of social integration and mutual assistance, where disputes are settled amicably, and class differences barely ruffle the surface” (Salamandra, 2010, p. 3). The expansion of conservatism toward other subgenres such as detective fiction, absurd comedy, and so on can be observed through the increasing promotion of marriage and the family in these dramas. However, while this is of interest, I focus on more explicit types of politicization which redefine television dramas as a form of political contest and reconsider the role of entertainment in the construction of political ideas and in encouraging viewers to take sides.

One can identify various forms of politicization in Turkish dramas, all of which are compatible with the government’s political agenda, which envisaged the restructuring of the state and invited various conservative Islamist sects and groups to become shareholders in the process of the restructuring. However, politicizing television dramas should not be regarded as a top-down process manipulated by powerful political elites. Rather, it consists of complexities of power and exchange among politicians, media professionals, editors, and owners as well as contingent acts and situations. As a consequence, the politicization of dramas can be followed via particular patterns rather than through systematic propagandizing. Elsewhere, I distinguished four trends in the politicization of television dramas: (1) dealing with contemporary political issues, (2) settling accounts with the past, (3) neo-Ottomanism, and (4) piety and the Islamic worldview (Emre Cetin, 2013). These trends predominantly correspond to particular political agendas or projects, to a certain extent the zeitgeist of the period. In the following sections, I discuss the ways in which television dramas cluster around certain political topics, either provoking political tensions or contributing to reconciliation.

### ***Dealing with Contemporary Political Issues***

*Valley of the Wolves* (*Kurtlar Vadisi*, 2003–2005) can be regarded as the predecessor in the politicization of television dramas, which boldly and deliberately sought to confront contemporary political debates.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the serial kept itself up-to-date by continually referring to and/or re-narrating the political agenda of the time (such as Turkey’s negotiations with the European Union, the Cyprus question, the Kurdish question, etc.). Remarkably, the now-deceased president of Northern Cyprus Rauf Denktas himself acted in the serial, in a discussion with the protagonist, Polat Alemdar, criticizing the hypocrisy of the international public with regard to the recognition of Northern Cyprus.<sup>4</sup> The latter version of the serial *Valley of the Wolves: Terror* (2007) divided the public into pro- and anti-*Valley of the Wolves* groups with its trailer, which revealed that the serial would deal with the Kurdish question from a nationalist

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<sup>3</sup> Coleman (2008, p. 206), in his analysis of British soap operas, classifies this dimension of politics as “issue politics” in the sense that it deals with “issues from real-world political agenda.”

<sup>4</sup> For the infiltration of real political personalities or political issues into television dramas, see Coleman, 2008; Griffiths, 2001; Hamburger, 2000; La Pastina, 2004.

perspective. Other spinoffs, such as the films *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq* (2006) and *Valley of the Wolves: Palestine* (2011),<sup>5</sup> received controversial responses from the international public due to the overdose of anti-Semitism and anti-Americanism contained in them (see Figure 1 for the spin-off *Valley of the Wolves: Ambush*, 2007–). Clearly then, the politicization of television dramas has different transnational consequences as various responses to the exportation of dramas and their feature film spinoffs to foreign countries indicate.<sup>6</sup>



**Figure 1. Polat Alemdar and his companion Abdulhey raid the Israel consulate in Turkey. Valley of the Wolves: Ambush, episode 75.**

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<sup>5</sup> *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq* broke the box office records of its time, with more than 4 million spectators, whereas *Valley of Wolves: Palestine* was seen by more than 2 million people in Turkey.

<sup>6</sup> Dick (2005) points out that U.S. officials asked that the Qatar production *Road to Kabul* (2004), which narrates the story of Afghan and Arab *mujahids*, be cancelled. Officials were concerned that the series could encourage recruitment to Islamic groups. Misrepresentation of Jewish characters in other Egyptian or Syrian dramas such as *Faris bi-la Jawad* (2002) and *Al Shatat* (2003) has annoyed the United States and Israel in the past (Dick, 2005), and tense diplomatic relations between Turkey and Syria were caused by the drama *Ukhwat al-Turab*, which dealt with Armenian genocide (Salamandra, 2005).

*Valley of the Wolves* narrates contemporary political issues such as the Kurdish question and the legitimacy of paramilitary organizations, providing a fictional perspective, while continually referring to real events and personalities in order to attract audience interest. This novel approach triggered a politicizing trend. Although not long running, *Code Name (Kod Adi, 2006)* and *Deaf Room (Sagir Oda, 2006–2007)* focused on the intelligence activities of the state and on the organization and employment of paramilitary groups. *One Turkey (Tek Turkiye, 2007–2011)*, *Sakarya Firat (2009–2013)*, and *Sefkat Hill (Sefkat Tepe, 2010–)* featured soldier-heroes fighting against Kurdish guerrillas in defense of Turkey, stopping plots for an independent Kurdistan, thus depicting the Kurdish question from a militarist perspective. It is important to note that *One Turkey* and *Sefkat Hill* were broadcast on the Islamist channel, Samanyolu, and the popularity of these programs contributed a great deal to mainstreaming these television channels.

On the other hand, these examples indicate the power of nationalist discourses which dominate Islamist channels, a fact usually disregarded in the shadow of their Islamist orientation. Recently, the trailer for *Red Apple (Kizil Elma)*, which portrays the activities of the National Intelligence Service showed the protagonist taking an oath to protect the nation and the state on the Turkish flag, the Koran, and a gun. Interestingly, three dramas which follow this trend (*Valley of the Wolves*, *Sakarya Firat*, and *Red Apple*) were produced by Osman Sinav, who was formerly associated with Turkish nationalism. The explicit political discourses, which were previously specific to Turkish news or talk shows, penetrated fictional programs, as the dramas of this type indicate.

### ***Settling Accounts with the Past***

Turkish democracy has witnessed several military interventions since 1960. The JDP government, members of which suffered from the military memorandum of 1997 (that is, the document written by military leaders aimed at threatening and intervening in Parliament), took various actions to eliminate the military's power over politics. They successfully facilitated the discourse of *settling accounts with military coups* in a form of populism, particularly before the 2010 Referendum, which made way for the chief commander of the 1980 military coup, Kenan Evren, to face trial. Orhon (2013) highlights the growing public interest that paved the way for a more open discussion of the 1980 coup during the 2000s. The increasing number of books, articles, television programs, films, and documentaries about the coup "constitute a popular, though indirect, means for memory politics" (Orhon, 2013, p. 122) such as the serial *My Heart Won't Forget You (Bu Kalp Seni Unutur mu?, 2009–2010; see Figure 2)*, which depicted prison life and torture in the coup years.



**Figure 2. The "political" period drama *Remember Darling* depicts the true story of 17-year-old Erdal Eren who was executed by the military government of the 1980 coup. Erdal Eren is taken to gallows by the military officers. *Remember Darling*, episode 68.**

However, the infiltration of political history into television dramas existed before *My Heart Won't Forget You*. Expansion of the television market led to the creation of expensive productions such as period dramas. In programs such as *Rose Embroidery on My Hoop* (*Cemberimde Gul Oya*, 2004–2005), political history served as a social background for the characters. They were portrayed as political activists, affiliated leftists or rightists, or at least as ordinary people who felt the impact of political conflicts in their personal lives. *Remember Darling* (*Hatirla Sevgili*, 2006–2008) situated the main characters within the political context of a long period running from the 1950s to the 1980s, as they suffer from falling in love with someone from an opposition political movement, being attacked or arrested because of their political views or activities, or being forced to take sides in a polarized political climate. The depiction of the 1960 and 1980 military coups, which dramatically transforms the lives of the characters, is reiterated in other examples such as *I Loved Him So Much* (*Ben Onu Cok Sevdim*, 2013) and *Autumn Roses* (*Guz Gulleri*,

2010–2011). Remarkably, the representations and discourses of these dramas on politics, political identities, and military interventions are diverse and multifocal in terms of the ways in which they construct history, personalities, and characters. The trend of “settling accounts” with the past in television dramas usually addressed military coups as they have remained, as a result of possible pressures from the military, underdiscussed until the mid–2000s.

### ***Neo-Ottoman Fashion***

Saracoglu (2013) notes that the JDP’s ongoing negotiations with the Kurdish movement and its neoliberal and Islamist outlook obscure the party’s nationalist character, which only becomes visible in its foreign policies. According to Saracoglu, neo-Ottomanism could not be explicitly manifested by the government authorities due to their need for internal and external political stability; instead, it has been transferred to the field of ideologies via the unofficial institutions of academia and the media. Challenging the hegemony of Kemalism (and thus, indirectly, that of republicanism and secularism), the JDP adopted the legacy of the Ottoman Empire and presented itself as the successor to the Ottoman past. White (2002) describes neo-Ottomanism as “a widespread nostalgia for things Ottoman” (p. 30).

Although neo-Ottomanism has been on the Turkish cultural agenda since the 1980s “combined with a version of laissez-faire Westernism” (Navaro-Yashin, 2002, p. 124), the contemporary neo-Ottoman revival owes a great deal to the JDP’s ambition to play a leading role in the Middle East and the way in which the party has re-invented the Ottoman origins in order to distinguish itself from Republicanism and “secular” Kemalism. As White (2013) notes, “Turkey’s Ottoman past, long ignored under the Kemalist regime, now romanticized and consumed uncritically, has become a touchstone for these desires” (p. 12). The cultural re-invention of Ottomanism has had a wide impact on several fields, including fashion, style, consumption, architecture, music, and popular culture.

The television drama *Magnificent Century* (see Figure 3) depicts the 16th-century Ottoman court in which the wives of Suleiman the Magnificent compete in attracting the Sultan’s attention and fight over the succession for their children. Aside from some earlier examples such as *Scrubbird* (*Calikusu*, 1986) and *Leaf Cast* (*Yaprak Dokumu*, 1988), which draw on the dilemmas of Turkish modernization during the late Ottoman period of the 20th century as a background for the main characters, *Magnificent Century* can be addressed as the first drama that focuses on the life of the Ottoman dynasty.



**Figure 3. Accession to the throne ceremony of Suleiman the Magnificent. Magnificent Century, episode 1.**

The serial's success encouraged others such as *Once upon a Time Ottoman: Rebellion (Bir Zamanlar Osmanli: Kiyam)* in 2012 and *Fatih* in 2013. The impact of this neo-Ottomanism went beyond the Turkish context to reach Arab countries, thanks to the exportation of these programs. As well as the Ottoman series themselves, neo-Ottoman fantasies are also promoted via other exported dramas such as *Valley of the Wolves* and *Noor* (Buccianti, 2010; Kraidy & Al-Ghazzi, 2013). Kraidy and Al-Ghazzi argue (2013, p. 27, emphasis in original) that coverage of the dramas' male protagonists "establishes them as *cool neo-Ottomans* more alluring and muscled versions of the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan" for the Arab public. Notably, neo-Ottomanism is a way to culturally refer to Islam in response to the "secularist" emphasis of Kemalism. Walton (2010) suggests seeing neo-Ottomanism as a negotiation between broader public discourses and pious sensibilities. Furthermore, the Ottoman past shared by other countries facilitates imaginations concerning the *ummah* (Muslim society) as a single, unified entity. In this regard, the dramas of the neo-Ottoman trend also give an account of the notions of Islamic piety which have emerged in Turkish television fiction.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> In contradiction, however, conservative reactions against Turkish dramas emerged in many Arab countries (Kraidy & Al-Ghazzi, 2013; Mohamed, 2012) and Pakistan (Jawad, 2013), complaining that the programs represented a threat to Islamic values.

### ***The Infiltration of Islamic Piety***

The issue of piety has, on Turkish television, mostly been limited to religious talk shows in which academics of Islamic theology talk about certain topics, tell parables, answer audience questions regarding everyday dilemmas in practicing Islam, interpret Koranic verses, etc. While religious talk shows have conventionally been launched on mainstream channels during Ramadan, in recent years piety has infiltrated television in forms other than Ramadan shows. Morning talk shows (so-called women's programs), in which psychologists, GPs, and solicitors are questioned about the topic of the day and the problems of the invited guests or studio audience, began to include Islamic theologians among the permanent staff of the programs alongside other professionals. Adaklı (2009) highlights how Turkish television has experienced an increase in the number of pious themes and representations of symbolic elites of Islamic communities, rather than an increase in the number of specifically pious programs. Ferjani (2010), in relation to Arab satellite television, also describes a process in which "traditional preaching coexists with new forms more in tune with commercialized Islam" (p. 91).

Rather than specific programs devoted to religious topics, piety has recently been incorporated into the content of other programs and genres. Isik (2013) argues that parables told by characters in dramas such as *Valley of the Wolves* and *Crazy Heart* (*Deli Yurek*, 1998–2002) operate as rhetorical strategies for moralized teaching and a culture of piety. Whenever the protagonist gets into trouble, a wise male character addresses the paradoxes and problems of the situation through parables, indicating the solution with reference to Islam. The father of the protagonist in *Valley of the Wolves* and a friend of the protagonist in *Crazy Heart* grant the main characters peace of mind by means of parables, while visiting mosques and listening to *ezan* (the call to prayer) are seen as ways to ensure spiritual purification.



**Figure 4. Zeliha and Bilal walking in public. Peace Street, episode 47.**

It is also worth noting that until recently the veil was regarded as an indicator of Islamism and excluded from television. For instance, despite the fact that *Valley of the Wolves* heavily featured daily Islamic practices and the promotion of religion as a moral source, one of the main characters, the mother of the protagonist Nazife, appears unveiled. This would be highly unlikely for a wife whose husband holds a religious post such as that of *muezzin* (male singer of *ezan*). The portrayal of Nazife was bound by the secular conventions of Turkish television in which veiling had been taboo. Eventually, the drama *Peace Street* (*Huzur Sokagi*, 2012–; see Figure 4), adapted from the novel by Sule Yuksel Senler that widely inspired Islamist youth of the period, introduced the first veiled main character on mainstream television (Emre Cetin, 2013). Although veiled and religiously pious characters were a daily occurrence on Islamic television channels for more than 20 years, mainstream television broadcasting abstained from such controversial representations that supposedly challenged the entertainment element of dramas. While *Peace Street* broke the long-lived taboo of showing veiling, visual representations of a culture of piety through characters praying, religious verbal references (for example, Allah willing, thanks to Allah, Allah saving, etc.), or the wearing of the veil varied in the show's successors. The increasing appearance of piety and an Islamic worldview in television dramas redefined the boundaries between secular and religious for the television medium, as well as implying their mainstreaming, which had previously been ghettoized into the so-called pious television channels such as TGRT, Kanal 7, and Samanyolu.

Thus, in a highly politicized media environment characterized by polarization, whether intentional or not, television dramas that previously had avoided meddling in serious issues began to suggest ways of understanding the current political situation as well as the near and far past of Turkey and religion. The politicization of dramas, therefore, has not been a one-way process. While political institutions and agencies “discovered” the political significance of dramas both in Turkey and abroad, television dramas themselves welcomed the penetration of political topics and controversies into their content in a politicized media environment. That is not, however, to deny the role of direct political intervention.

### **Political Interventions in Television Dramas: Screen Wars**

The number of debates on the content of television dramas (for example, their representations and characters) has increased remarkably over the last decade. One could also argue that dramas had never previously featured so frequently in political and parliamentary speeches. Politicians and members of Parliament and the cabinet have frequently raised concerns about various aspects of dramas such as *Valley of the Wolves* and *Magnificent Century* including violence, protection of the family, and representation of the past. The Turkish regulatory body, RTSC, has implemented penal sanctions against television dramas, including warnings and fines. In this regard, I discuss political interventions in television dramas in two respects: (1) speeches and legal cases by political actors and (2) regulations of the RTSC, members of which are elected by MPs in accordance with the number of seats they occupy in the Parliament (Adaklı, 2009). Although varying examples of these interventions exist, I focus on two cases—*Valley of the Wolves* (henceforth, *VoW*) and *Magnificent Century* (henceforth, *MC*)—that epitomize the ways in which these political interventions take place.

Former cabinet minister Faruk Celik criticized the male audience who preferred to watch *VoW* during the traditional times of prayer on Thursday nights. He was shocked to hear that in one small town

in southeast Turkey, even the *Imam* who led the worship did not attend prayers on Thursday nights. The drama's popularity, which had such a hold over the audience that they ignored their routine prayers, concerned the minister, who felt that the serial represented to some viewers an alternative to pious practice. On the other hand, the parliamentary branch of the Kurdish movement, The Peace and Democracy Party, submitted a complaint to the RTSC in 2010 accusing four dramas (including *VoW* and *One Turkey*) of being unrealistic and anti-Kurdish, promoting hostility, and harming the culture of brotherhood. While *One Turkey* was fined and warned against "promoting violence and provoking senses of racist hate," *VoW* received more than five penalties for "promoting and banalizing violence" and "containing content harmful to the physical, mental and moral development of youth and children and broadcasting it without protective symbols" (Ozkalipci, 2013, para. 3).

The last version, *VoW: Terror*, triggered a series of oppositional responses among the public. The first groups who felt uncomfortable about the program were the Kurds and some leftist groups willing to resolve the Kurdish question through democratic means and negotiations. At the opposite end of the political spectrum, Turkish nationalists, who view the Kurdish question as a rebellion against the state which must be dealt with by military means, were inclined to silence any public discussion of the issue and were concerned by the increasing visibility of Kurds in the media. Aside from the pro-state talk shows and propaganda docu-dramas of public broadcasting, *VoW: Terror* presented the most explicit fictional reference to the Kurdish question in the Turkish media. Hence, as the first attempt to approach the Kurdish question from an unofficial, yet nationalistic perspective, the serial caused confusion and anxiety among the public, resulting in indirect censorship.

Many people telephoned in complaints to the regulatory body, the RTSC, after seeing the trailer—even before the first episode was broadcast. According to the former head of the RTSC, Zahid Akman, more than 10,000 people complained about *VoW: Terror*, with another 2,000 phone calls supporting the serial (*Milliyet*, 2007). After the first episode was aired, the RTSC invited channel executives in to discuss the series' future. Eventually, *VoW: Terror* was cancelled by the television channel, Show TV, as it could not resist the pressure from the public and the regulatory body. However, Show TV decided to advertise the telephone number of the RTSC when the first episode was on the air, hoping that *VoW* supporters would have an impact on the council. The countercampaign to defend the serial continued online in fan forums and in surveys conducted by two leading newspapers, *Hurriyet* and *Milliyet*. *Hurriyet* celebrated receiving more than one million responses to its survey, which it claimed was a "record for the digital democracy" (Cekirge, 2007, [title]). Of the respondents, 88.1% found the decision to cancel the series wrong and labeled it censorship. Mr. Akman commented, however, that if Show TV had insisted on screening the program, the council would have banned the channel from broadcasting for one month, in accordance with the fourth article of the Radio and Television Broadcasting Law (Sazak, 2007). As it was, Mr. Akman sent a thank-you note to the channel executives for agreeing to cancel the serial.

The production company, Pana Film, protested at this de facto censorship in a press release and a couple of months later produced another version of the serial in response. Some of the nationalist associations established to represent the families of "martyrs," that is, those families whose members had been killed in armed conflict between Kurdish guerrillas and the Turkish Army, such as the Erzurum Martyr Families Aid & Solidarity Association and the Cubuk Terror Victims Aid & Solidarity Association, also

declared their objection to the censorship of *VoW: Terror*. This was followed by many conspiracy theories about the cancellation circulating on fan websites (*Hurriyet*, 2007b; Ipek, 2007). On the other hand, in Diyarbakir, known as the capital of Turkish Kurdistan, the Tourism Advertisement Association warned the production crew that "we are going to sue the crew, if the name of our town is mentioned in *Valley of the Wolves: Terror*" (*Hurriyet*, 2007a). In October 2007, Show TV and Pana Film agreed to show the second episode of the serial as a one-off television show, promising to donate the advertising revenue to the "martyr" families and the Mehmetcik Trust, which was established by the Turkish military to support martyr families, veterans, and disabled soldiers. It is also worth mentioning that *VoW: Terror* was produced during a period when the government officially declared the start of the "Kurdish Initiative," (2009), which was presented as the initial step in the democratic resolution of the Kurdish question. It was speculated that the serial was supported by the government as part of this initiative. However, manufacturing public opinion via *VoW: Terror* failed due to the unexpected controversial public response. Furthermore, the RTSC's enforcement implicitly invited, if not provoked concerned groups in society to take sides regarding the program.

Much like *VoW*, *MC* provoked a response before it was broadcast, but this time from nationalist-conservative groups. The RTSC received thousands of messages from viewers, while politicians and historians drew the attention of the public and producers to the "delicacy" of the topic (Tekelioglu, 2012). Deputy Prime Minister Arinc stated that he felt sorry that in the trailers, the Magnificent Suleiman was shown enjoying his harem and alcohol. He emphasized that the broadcasting bill allowed no "preventive precautions," but that he would immediately consider complaints and implement legal sanctions when the show was broadcast ("Muthesem Yuzyil" Arinc`i Kizdirdi, 2011, para. 5). The RTSC imposed a warning and penalty on Show TV soon after the drama was aired on the basis that the program "was not sufficiently sensitive about the privacy of a historically significant personality" ("Muthesem Yuzyil" Arinc`i Kizdirdi, 2011, para. 4). After a few episodes, the serial was condemned by the youth organization of the Islamic Felicity Party, as well as the nationalist Great Union Party, with a press release read alongside songs of a Janissary Band. Members of the organization criticized *MC*, inviting the government to "claim our history" in response to a television show which "humiliates our glorious history" (Yener, 2011, para. 1). The group also attacked billboards, destroying the posters advertising the serial. Interestingly, the drama's writers took notice of audience responses and revised the plot and characters, particularly Suleiman, the Sultan's scenes with the harem being counterbalanced by scenes of his conquests and war speeches and his depiction as a ruler.

Nevertheless, reactions against the drama were pursued by other politicians. In late 2012 MP Oktay Saral explained that he had prepared a bill proposing the cancellation of *MC* (*Radikal*, 2012). Mr. Saral also mentioned that he had lobbied for the bill and gained the support of the Nationalist Movement Party, although Parliament never voted on the proposal. Prime Minister Erdogan also criticized *MC* several times:

We would go wherever our ancestors went on their horses. We would be interested in everywhere. However, I suppose, they know our ancestors on the television screen such as in the documentary, *Magnificent Century*. We don't have such ancestors. We don't know such a Magnificent Kanuni [Lawgiver]. We don't know such a Sultan Suleiman. He

spent 30 years on his horse, not in the court as you watch on the drama. We must know it very well, understand it very well. I condemn the directors of those dramas and owners of television channels before our nation. Despite the fact that we warned whom it may concern ... I wait for the courts to make the relevant decision. There shouldn't be such an understanding ... The lesson should be given within the law by the nation for those who ridicule the values of this nation. (*Hurriyet*, 2012)

Following the Prime Minister's statement, Turkish Airlines removed *MC* from its in-flight entertainment system. Aydos (2013) argues that the discontent surrounding *MC* arose due to the representations of sexual relations within the court and harem life. In addition to its moral concerns, the government regarded the program's representation of the Sultan as an insult to the Turkish nation and invited the RTSC to take action against the drama, while implicitly threatening producers and channel owners. The popular forms of the neo-Ottoman trend in TV dramas trigger anxiety and concern for those in power as they promote "entertaining" versions of Ottoman nostalgia. As such, in the case of *VoW*, the government attempted to silence multiple voices and regimes of representation regarding topics which overlapped with their political agenda. Even the trailers triggered reactions against these dramas and increased the tension between the fields of popular culture and politics as the government employed the RTSC as a means of direct control and censorship. Furthermore, such an attitude encouraged individual reactions, as in the case of Mr. Arinc, who clearly indicated that the government would take complaints about *MC* seriously; or following the Prime Minister's statement, a tourism professional in Konya who submitted a denunciation of the drama to the prosecutor, complaining that "*Magnificent Century* humiliates our historical values" (*Milliyet*, 2012); while an Azerbaijani dentist living in Turkey denounced the serial, claiming that the "Safevid state is shown as Iranian despite being Turkish and Alevi" (Dogan, 2013).

The Ottoman drama *Once upon a Time Ottoman: Rebellion* (2012) launched by the public broadcasting service TRT was regarded as a counterrepresentation that would compensate for the discomfort caused by *MC*. However, neither *Once upon a Time Ottoman* nor *Fatih* were able to compete with the high ratings of *MC*, which has recently been exported to China and other countries.

### Conclusion

One could argue that the relationship between freedom of the press on the one hand and television entertainment on the other has been ignored in television studies. The politics of entertainment are usually understood with regard to discourse and ideology: various ideas and messages packed around issues of gender, ethnicity, class, and other social identities. On the other hand, the politicization of dramas has usually been framed by concepts of "nation building" (Abu-Lughod, 2005; Mankekar, 1999), propaganda, or censorship, which do not necessarily help us elucidate the complexities of politics and television entertainment in different cultural contexts. I would argue that increasing political interventions into the content of television dramas, along with the infiltration of political topics, ideas, and issues into dramas, is an indication of the vulnerability of press freedom. In this sense, politicization does not imply a process by which different ideas are able to address each other in an open environment, but rather, in the

Turkish context, the politicization of television dramas is characterized by pressures, interventions, and encounters in which the less powerful side is silenced.

Turkish television has experienced a peculiar period since the early 2000s in which new regulations, rapid market growth, and political pressures interact with and transform each other. As Turkey in 2013 sets new records for the highest number of journalists arrested, television dramas suffer from their fair share of political pressures, while the contemporary political agenda has, in turn, infiltrated the content of those dramas. The gradual transformation of political speeches about dramas from complaints about themes and representations to verbal attacks has had various consequences for the dramas, from cancellation to autocensorship. During the first period of the JDP government, the contest over television content was realized by various actors, however, the second decade has been determined by the government's overwhelming hegemony over television, as the speeches of politicians and the penalties given by the RTSC indicate. Recent attempts to shape and determine media content also have transnational counterparts. The public institutions such as the Office of the Prime Minister and the Directorate General of Press and Information organize joint events and conferences, and launch collaborative programs with leading Arab media producers and journalists who have been enthusiastic about the popularity of Turkish dramas in the Middle East. Nevertheless, to reveal particular mechanisms of government control, further studies investigating television production, decision-making processes, and relations between media and political elites are necessary. Ethnographies with program producers can contribute a great deal to understanding the shadowy nexus of freedom of the press and television entertainment.

Dialectically, the politicization of dramas has allowed alternative voices to flourish in a variety of productions that brought social issues to the agenda. Dramas such as *My Heart Won't Forget You*, *Behzat C.* (2010–2013), and *Lost City (Kayip Sehir, 2012–2013)* suggested critical understandings of various social issues including military coups, the murder of women, crime, and migration, while giving voice to underrepresented, marginalized groups. On the other hand, the decreasing audience interest in dramas such as *I Loved Him So Much*, which are characterized by preaching protagonists with long political manifestos, indicate that explicit politicization may be unpopular and, hence, not long-lasting. Nevertheless, it is difficult to consider the politicizing process of television dramas in a positive way that has contributed to the making of a multivocal television culture. Instead, the intervention of politicians and public institutions, as well as reactive audience responses, indicates the shrinking borders of press freedom that encroach on the television entertainment market, particularly with regard to dramas in the Turkish context.

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