

FLIPPING THE SCRIPTS:

POP CULTURE AS ALTERNATIVE SUBJECT AND DATA SOURCE IN MENA STUDIES

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In February 2012, Turkish director Faruk Aksoy's *Fetih 1453* (*The Conquest 1453*) sold 2.2 million tickets in its first week of release. A blockbuster-style film presenting a fictionalized account of Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II's conquest of Constantinople, now Istanbul, *Fetih* would become the most watched film in Turkey's history. Then-Prime Minister (now President) Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's reported enjoyment of his advanced screening of the film is unsurprising given his penchant for touting the glories of his homeland's imperial past and for surrounding himself in Ottoman symbols.¹ Some of Erdoğan's supporters lovingly refer to him as "my sultan";² his detractors use the same term derisively.

It is no coincidence that a film lauding the victory of virtuous Ottomans over Christian infidels—one scene inaccurately depicts the mostly celibate Byzantine emperor Constantine XI as a hedonist and another omits his beheading—came out soon after Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) won its third parliamentary majority. At that moment, the AKP's initial enthusiasm for Turkey's EU accession process had been replaced by a foreign policy doctrine of "strategic depth,"³ intended to correct decades of Western orientation that neglected Turkey's (Muslim) neighbors to its east and south. As a reflection of the rhetoric being used by the AKP to legitimize its role as a great Muslim power in the region, Ottoman themes spilled over into films such

as *Fetih*, as well as novels, television shows, music, and even cell phone commercials. The rediscovery of an Ottoman past, effectively erased by Turkey's founders in their efforts to establish a modern and secular republic, was in full swing in politics and pop culture.

The explosion of imagery celebrating imperial glory in entertainment media would have been unthinkable, even embarrassing, in NATO member and EU candidate Turkey prior to the AKP's rise to power. So would any public symbol of what my new book terms the "Ottoman Islamist" understanding of Turkish national identity the AKP seeks to disseminate,⁴ in part by producing and policing pop culture content. Far from being just a form of entertainment, or a "circus" provided to distract and placate an otherwise rebellious population, cultural media such as TV, film, novels, and music are familiar and powerfully resonant resources that shape, and can be used to shape, competing understandings of identity.

***“Forms of pop culture not only reflect prevailing social norms and the regimes that seek to promulgate them as the AKP does, but can also be used to challenge and even mock them.*”**

In Turkey and elsewhere, pop culture is in need of greater focus by scholars as a platform wielded by government forces, as well as those who protest

against them. Forms of pop culture not only reflect prevailing social norms and the regimes that seek to promulgate them as the AKP does, but can also be used to challenge and even mock them. From a barrio's graffiti to *The Truman Show's* queasily idyllic suburbia, from Pussy Riot's irreverent lyrics to Bassem Youseff's searing satire, pop culture constitutes a site in which beliefs about what key political issues are and how they should be approached are disseminated, shaped, and contested. As much as state-society struggles take place at the polls and in the streets, debates over political and social orders also spill over onto the page, the stage, and the screen. These vernacular platforms of contestation can be of particular utility to scholars studying repressive regimes in which elections and public demonstrations are often ineffective and costly channels for opposition challenge.

Because television serials in Turkey are filmed and broadcast quite rapidly, their content can reflect and respond to ongoing political debates. One week after the March 2014 death of Berkin Elvan, an Alevi teenager who was shot in the head by a tear gas canister while out to buy bread, an episode of "The O.C."-themed "*Medcezir*" ("Tide") subtly but powerfully addressed the controversy. Berkin was injured in the highly disproportionate use of police violence during the 2013 Gezi Protests, and the coma in which he lingered for nine months became the focus of grief and rage, compounded by the government line that the boy's non-Sunni, leftist background proved he was a terrorist. In countering this narrative, the episode included a brief scene in which father-figure protagonist Selim stops his car and gets out to caution a young boy carrying a loaf of bread to move to the side of the road away from potential dangers.⁵ From this perspective heroic behavior means protecting an innocent child, with the loaf of bread serving as a sort of affective heuristic: a symbol that is immediately recognizable, politically salient, and emotionally evocative for the audience. Immediately following the airing of the episode, social media users

praised the show's producers for deftly inserting a critique of Gezi's police violence and polarizing narratives into an otherwise ordinary night of television.⁶

READING TURKISH POLITICS THROUGH POP CULTURE

My focus on the politics-pop culture nexus in Turkey began, appropriately, with an Ottoman-themed soap opera and a piece in *Foreign Policy*.⁷ Rather than praise the wildly popular *Magnificent Century* (*Muhteşem Yüzyıl*) as he did the blockbuster *Fetih*, Erdoğan publicly criticized its depiction of Ottoman Sultan Süleyman drinking alcohol and carousing with scantily clad women.⁸ His public criticism and accusations of misrepresenting history provoked AKP members to call for the show's removal from the airwaves; the national air carrier Turkish Airlines dropped it from its inflight entertainment.

Three elements in this case suggest that the relationship between politics and pop culture is a fruitful entry point for enriching our understandings of state-society struggles over national identity. First, the Turkish leader who surrounds himself in Ottoman imagery took a public stance to police the use of such images, ensuring that the well of legitimacy he draws from in rallying support for Turkey's (then) newly activist foreign policy in former Ottoman territories was not polluted content glorifying womanizing or inebriated (read: un-Islamic) behaviors.

Second, Erdoğan's objections elicited responses from opposition parties that reflected their political positions. The pro-minority rights Kurdish party, for example, objected to limitations on freedom of expression, while the secularist main opposition party deployed its traditional complaints about presidential overreach and creeping Islamic conservatism. The leader of the far-right Nationalist Action Party (MHP)—now the AKP's junior coalition partner but at the time of the incident a vocal critic, specifically of the party's outreaches to Kurds—responded by accusing Erdoğan of trying to divert attention from

heated speculation that the government was in talks with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

Third, just a few weeks after threats to ban the series circulated, the main female character Hürrem appeared for the first time covering her hair and praying as a Muslim.⁹ Hürrem was a Christian concubine and eventual wife of Sultan Süleyman, as well as the focus of the show's displays of cleavage, seductive dances, and scheming palace intrigues. Her character's dramatic shift to display conservative dress and Sunni piety—a transformation enabled by the rapid turnaround in filming and broadcasting noted above—seemed to satisfy the serial's critics. An opposition newspaper, however, railed against the nod to AKP pressure, proclaiming that sharia law had descended upon the series. Indicative both of political influence and public demand, *Magnificent Century* remained on the air for two more seasons but suffered a decline in the ratings after the popular actress playing Hürrem left the series and writers responded by casting a much older woman for the part.

From this brief snapshot of one incident sparked by a soap opera, we can see the importance leaders place on policing pop culture content that deviates from the understanding of identity they seek to instill in their populations. Pop culture media, like school classrooms, are powerful sites of nation-building. In this case, a leader intent on disseminating a particular, monolithic proposal for Turkishness controls identity messaging through the airwaves as well as through national curricula. We also see that responses to such regime attempts to police pop culture, both from the opposition and from the producers of the content, serve as useful texts for analyzing actors' specific political and economic interests.

FRAMING THE POLITICAL SCIENCE-POP CULTURE NEXUS

As my current book project demonstrates, pop culture

provides a platform for regime and opposition actors to promote and police their own understandings of appropriate behavior. While some acquiesce and adjust their content, others push back. Parsing regime and opposition production of and engagement with pop culture into separate discussions allows scholars to identify specific ways these actors wield their content.

This even extends to the foreign policy realm. In January 2010 Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon expressed his country's objections to the violent portrayals of Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in Turkish nationalist dramatic series *Valley of the Wolves (Kurtlar Vadisi)* by summoning Turkey's ambassador, seating him in a markedly lower chair, and noting in Hebrew to the news cameras that the table between them displayed only an Israeli flag. "Chairgate" marked an increase in tensions between the formerly close allies that erupted with the May 2010 Mavi Marmara flotilla incident, in which an IDF soldiers killed 10 Turkish activists attempting to break the Gaza blockade. At the domestic level, a 2017 executive order banned marriage-themed reality TV shows on the grounds they threatened the integrity of the family,¹⁰ while talk shows interpreting current events from the perspective of Islamic family morals such as *Gate of Affection (Muhabbet Kapisı)* remain on the air. These decisions enable Turkey's ruling AKP to police and promote content in line with its conservative Sunni understanding of Turkishness. On the opposition side, *Mustang* Deniz Gamze Ergüven director's inclusion of an actual radio broadcast of a leading parliamentarian telling women not to laugh out loud for a film scene in which a spirited teenage girl in a conservative household commits suicide challenges the regime's prevailing gender narrative by depicting its potential consequences in such a horrific manner.

In addition to constituting a powerful political resource for state and societal actors, pop culture serves as a valuable empirical window onto state-

society debates and a useful yet understudied, data source for scholars. Novel excerpts, song lyrics, and TV dialogue form particularly handy “private transcripts,” particularly for research on sensitive topics, in repressive regimes,¹¹ and by foreign researchers who may be approached with suspicion. Government and societal reactions to pop culture form an additional useful source of data in such contexts; the advent of Twitter makes social media responses particularly productive to mine in this regard. An analytical lens that considers pop culture as a regime tool of social engineering and an

opposition platform of subversion reveals under-theorized subjects of study and provides a framework for cross-case comparison of various regime and opposition strategies and outcomes. Adding a third, scholar-level tier to this framework enables us to treat pop culture as a nontraditional data source that offers new perspectives on debates to which we may not otherwise have access, particularly for MENA researchers working on politically and culturally sensitive issues in constricted fieldwork spaces.

¹ “Başbakan Beğendi,” *Hürriyet Gazetesi*, 17 February 2012: <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/kelebek/basbakan-begendi-19932306>.

² For a video of the song “My Sultan” (*Sultanım*) shared on YouTube, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WMzI59THDYc>.

³ Former foreign minister and prime minister Ahmet Davutoğlu introduced the concept in a book of the same name. Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik: Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu* (Istanbul: Küre Yayınları, 2001).

⁴ Lisel Hintz, *Identity Politics Inside Out: National Identity Contestation and Foreign Policy in Turkey* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁵ “Berkin Elvan Unutulmuyor,” *Yarın Haber*, 15 March 2014: <http://www.yarinhaber.net/guncel/12469/berkin-elvan-unutulmuyor>.

⁶ “Medcezir’de Berkin Elvan Göndermesi,” *Türkiye Gazetesi*, 16 March 2014: <http://www.turkiyegazetesi.com.tr/gundem/141397.aspx>.

⁷ Lisel Hintz, “Reading Turkish Politics from a Soap Opera,” *Foreign Policy*, 7 December 2012:

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/12/07/reading-turkish-politics-from-a-soap-opera/>.

⁸ “Turkish PM Talks Ottoman Empire, Slams Turkish TV Show,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, 25 November 2012: <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-pm-talks-ottoman-empire-slams-turkish-tv-show---35405>.

⁹ “Muhteşem Yüzyıl’da bir İlk: Hürrem Sultan Namaz Kıldı,” *Milliyet Gazetesi*, 20 December 2012: <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/muhtesem-yuzyil-da-bir-ilk---hurrem-sultan-namaz-kildi-magazin-1644345/>.

¹⁰ “Evlilik Programları Yeni KHK ile Yasaklandı,” *Hürriyet Gazetesi*, 20 April 2017: <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/evlilik-programi-khk-ile-yasak-40442535>.

¹¹ Ted Hopf, *Social Construction of International Politics: Identities and Foreign Policies, Moscow, 1955 and 1999* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 35. Hopf adapts James Scott’s use of the term “hidden transcripts” to literature. James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990).