

A EURASIAN INVASION

After seizing audiences across the Arab world, soap operas from Istanbul are poised to shake up the region's TV industry.

By Ian Munroe Dubai

The final ratings confirmed what legions of fans from Algiers to Amman already knew: “Noor” (light) has become a bona fide phenomenon. The Turkish-made serial, which was filmed in 2005 and broadcast in Arabic for the first time this year, captured 85 million viewers when the last episode aired at the end of August.

Across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), “Noor” pulled in 40 million viewers in the weeks leading up to the finale. In Saudi Arabia, which has the Gulf's largest television audience, one in seven viewers tuned in to the show regularly. Enterprising street vendors sold t-shirts and other memorabilia emblazoned with the lead characters

from “Noor.” Maternity wards in Riyadh and in the Palestinian town of Hebron even reported a jump in the number of newborns bearing the names of the show's starring couple.

All this for a soap opera about rich newlyweds living on the Bosphorus. “Noor” is the story of Muhannad, a successful businessman played by a basketball pro turned model turned actor, and his beautiful wife, an aspiring fashion designer from a less affluent family (after whom the show is named). The series begins as Muhannad's father arranges the couple's marriage, and then tracks their trials and tribulations.

Although their marriage was arranged, Noor and Muhannad stick to

less traditional husband and wife roles than is the norm in most Arab countries. Muhannad supports his wife's career. The characters drink alcohol and there are allusions to sex outside wedlock.

These taboos have ruffled a lot feathers off screen. Newspapers in the region reported that “Noor” sparked divorces in Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Syria. Saudi Arabia's trade ministry also raided shops to confiscate “Noor” themed kitsch, saying it violates Islamic values (if the shopkeepers continued to sell the goods, they were told their stores would be closed).

But most of the criticism emanated from mosques. The grand mufti of Saudi Arabia issued a *fatwa* against watching the show, as did Bahrain's Sheikh Isa



Qassim, a top Shi'a clergyman. "Noor" is making people lose their spirituality and ethics," Qassim proclaimed. "Isn't it mocking Allah? Isn't it spiritual suicide?" There were also protests. After a Friday sermon in Saudi Arabia's Baha region, a local tribal leader smashed his satellite dish to show just what he thought of the show, then called on others to follow his lead.

Local media noticed the soap opera's popularity. Then international news outlets picked up the story. From Russia to

New Zealand, reporters rhapsodized about why "Noor" had resonated so widely in Arab society. *The Washington Post* dubbed "Noor" a "subversive soap." NBC News said the series had brought the Middle East a step closer to gender equality. Several articles, citing Turkish diplomats, predicted that Noor's caché would prompt 60,000 more GCC tourists to visit Anatolia this year.

"People have become extremely hooked – it's a bit too much," says Hana Rahman, editor of Waleg.com, a Tunisia-

based pop culture blog that has about 750,000 readers in MENA. "The thing is, with our Arab society, men are dominating the roles of women and they just want them to stay at home and take care of the kids," she adds. "Women have become exposed to how they're being cheated."

The big idea. For Saudi-owned MBC Group, a major pan-Arab broadcaster that bought the rights to "Noor," dubbed it into colloquial Syrian Arabic and beamed it into living rooms across this part of the world, turning the show into a hit was a strategic coup. MBC is banking on Istanbul-made dramas to cement its hold on the Arab television market. "Noor" is the third such series it has aired. Another one called "Sanawat al-Day'a'a" (The Lost Years) also wrapped up in August, and the broadcaster says its last episode drew in 67 million viewers.

Although MBC won't comment on the controversy "Noor" has stirred up, the company's head of marketing, Mazen

60,000

The number of GCC tourists expected to visit Turkey, where Noor was filmed, this year.

67 MILLION

The number of viewers who watched the finale of "Sanawat al-Day'a'a" in August of this year.

85 MILLION

The number of viewers who tuned in to the final episode of "Noor" in August.



'You should be able to put your hand on something you think will be a hit from Turkey or other markets'

Hayek, doesn't hesitate to emphasize the impact he expects Turkish serials to have on the region's TV industry. "MBC Group created a new genre at the end of the day," he says. "The way you're able to put your hand on the recent format produced in Hollywood, you should be able also to put your hand on something that you think will make a hit coming from Turkey or other markets."

"It's like the Telenovelas, the Mexican [dramas] in the '80s that vanished,"

he adds. "We created from scratch a whole new category."

Hayek is tight-lipped about the programs MBC will run in the coming months, but he confirms two other Turkish dramas are on tap for October. According to *The Financial Times*, MBC has bought nearly a dozen serials from Istanbul-based firms and may launch its own TV productions with Turkish actors.

If nothing else, "Noor" has proven beyond any doubt that Kamal Ataturk's

secular republic, its mix of Muslim roots and Western influences, is fertile ground for making television that can light up Arab audiences. Turkish society is similar enough to get Arab viewers to identify with TV characters, but European enough for those characters to seem edgy and exotic.

Think of it as a new twist on a classic recipe. "Before, Arabs would watch, over and over, reruns of *Dallas* and so forth. You know, things that had been in and out of the Western screens for years," says Jamal Dajani, a media analyst and director of Middle East programming at San Francisco-based Link TV. "They're pretty cheesy," he adds. "But this is not something new. Love, cheating, lust, ... people breaking up, getting back together. It's the same old successful formula. It's tried and tested."

Real-world pressures. The TV industry moves at a fast clip, especially in the Middle East where the number of free-to-air, satellite channels has skyrocketed six-fold since 2003 to more than three hundred. Most households now own a digital receiver (between 75 percent and 95 percent of them, depending on the country). As the region's population has grown and become more affluent, its television industry has flourished.

The region's TV business is also becoming increasingly cutthroat. There are more salespeople clamoring to sell commercials, and the jump in new channels has outpaced advertiser budgets according to a recent Booz Allen Hamilton report. Broadcasters are rummaging for ways to help them stand out, and dramas are in high demand. They eat up more ad revenue than any other form of TV programming (such as films, news or sports). And second-run exclusive ad rates – for shows imported from Turkey for example – nearly doubled between 2004 and 2007.

What better way to stand out from the pack than by finding a new market to buy soap operas from? So long as the audience likes what it sees. And in the case of "Noor," the show's ratings were so good that the broadcaster moved it to MBC4, a channel that usually offers American-made programs. During its



Istanbul soaps aren't necessarily set to become a permanent fixture from the Maghreb to the Gulf

four-month run, MBC also jacked up its advertising prices on “Noor” by more than 40 percent, from 18,500 dirhams (\$5,000) to 26,000 dirhams (\$7,100) per 30-second spot.

Going Turkish is also a great way for broadcasters to get a leg up on TV production companies in the region. Egypt, which has a 90-year-old cinema industry, churns out two-thirds of Arabic serials. But they’ve been criticized for their second-rate quality. Syria and Kuwait are gaining ground, but broadcasters would be happy to find more suppliers.

In fact, around the time MBC went to air with “Noor” in May, the company’s chairman announced that Arabic soap operas had become too expensive and that companies like his may start

shopping more outside of the Middle East. “I am delivering a straightforward message to Arab producers,” Sheikh Walid al-Ibrahim told *Laha* magazine. “If they insist on these exaggerated prices, MBC will look for substitutes.”

Looking ahead. Other broadcasters in the region are rumored to be hunting for their own Turkish imports. That wouldn’t come as a surprise, given the pressures that are working on the Middle East TV industry. Istanbul-made soaps, however, aren’t necessarily destined to become a permanent fixture from the Maghreb to the Gulf.

Although the controversy surrounding “Noor” made for great publicity, the outcry against racy shows featuring Muslim characters is no song and dance.

Saudi Arabia’s chief judge recently announced on a state radio program that it’s “permissible” to kill the owners of satellite channels that promote debauchery. As Saudi Arabia has the Gulf’s largest television audience, if it shouts loud enough it could bring down the curtain on the Arabic-dubbed Turkish drama.

Whether shows like “Noor” stay or go will depend, too, on how easy it will be to sell ads for their new incarnations this fall. “As advertisers, we go by the ratings, we go by the [market] research unless there is a politically motivated reason,” says Shekhar Sharma at Initiative Media, a marketing firm that bought ads on Noor. “If you know these programs have a history of being popular – definitely we’ll take it.”

“This is how they can justify next year’s ad rates,” he says, referring to Middle East broadcasters. “All these things are part of the game.” ■