

South Asia Analysis Group

Published on *South Asia Analysis Group* (<http://www.southasiaanalysis.org>)

[Home](#) > Re-alignment within the Ummah- Pakistani and Arab Reactions to a Turkish TV series

Re-alignment within the Ummah- Pakistani and Arab Reactions to a Turkish TV series

Submitted by asiaadmin2 on Sun, 09/06/2020 - 10:09

Paper No.6677

Dated 6-Sep-2020

By **Dr. Rajesh T. Krishnamachari**

The popularity of the Turkish drama-series '*Dirilis: Ertugrul*' across segments of the Muslim world is well-attested to. Less analyzed are the conflicting responses of different states and their elites to this cultural phenomenon. In this note, we argue that these irreconcilable responses suggest a significant forthcoming re-alignment of the Islamic world order. Anticipating an end to Pax Americana (i.e. peace enforced by a predominant United States), a new revisionist axis of Turkey-Iran-Pakistan-Malaysia seeks prominence vis-a-vis the Arab/Gulf states, which currently dominate and lay claim to articulating the Muslim voice. This change of praxis away from sectarian - viz. Shia-Sunni schism - considerations will have implications on the broader Middle East and deserves closer attention from Indian strategists.

Background on *Dirilis: Ertugrul* (or *Resurrection: Ertugrul*)

Broadcast also as "*Ertugrul Ghazi*" in Urdu, the series covers a story of Oghuz Turks just prior to the establishment of the Ottoman empire. It focuses on the character of one Ertugrul Ghazi, identified as the father of Osman I, who in turn founded the Ottoman empire. Since little historical evidence remains of either Osman I or Ertugrul, the series blends fictional accounts with populist Islamic motifs to build its narrative. To Indian readers - who can access the Urdu dubbed version on YouTube - the production quality and simplicity of the story line would correspond closest with post-1990s Hindi TV epic-series based loosely on religious/mythological motifs.

The show was broadcast originally in Turkey from 2014 to 2019; it has been available on Netflix in US since 2017 and is being broadcast - to great appreciation - on PTV in Pakistan since April this year. The popularity of the show continues a trend of Turkish TV series (*dizi*) comparing favorably with K-pop and Bollywood in terms of international appeal. Turkish productions - which can offer a taste of European

freedoms while remaining grounded in conservative family values - have found wide resonance across the Muslim world. These productions continue to benefit from a supportive Ankara administration and a sizeable domestic market that dedicates above-average time to watching TV shows.

The Turkish regime (primarily, PM Recep Erdogan and his AKP party) has consistently promoted the series, much like they supported earlier shows of the same genre like "The Magnificent Century" based on Suleiman the Magnificent. In 2017, Erdogan attended the wedding of actress Esra Bilgic, who played Ertugrul's wife in the series. Erdogan has supported the series internally in Turkey - e.g. in 2016, after a rebuke at an awards ceremony - as it appeals to his vote-bank of 'Black Turks' against the secularized elite. He has also promoted the series externally - its implicit message of pan-Islamic unity under Turkish leadership is in sync with the regime's neo-Ottoman hegemonic ambitions.

Difference in Reception to Ertugrul Ghazi in Pakistan vis-a-vis Arab States

In Pakistan, PM Imran Khan has promoted the Ertugrul Ghazi series, citing its potential in spreading Islamic values amongst the youth. Response within Pakistan has been along expected directions.

- Conservatives have applauded the effort, as it ties in their decades-long effort to craft an out-of-India base for their culture; they see this as an antidote to a diffusion of Hindu culture through Indian TV shows.
- Liberals like the physicist Pervez Hoodbhoy have decried the series for its promotion of violence - they would prefer Turks being represented by scholars/scientists like Taqi al-Din and Ali Qushgi; they also worry about perception of their faith being distorted by images of Ertugrul Ghazi beheading Christian knights.
- Other voices within the Pakistani entertainment industry expressed hope that their work gets similar support from the establishment as this foreign production has elicited.
- Conservative netizens trolled actress Esra Bilgic for wearing skimpy clothing on her Instagram posts in sharp contrast to the modesty displayed by her character Halime Hatun on the show; segments of the Pakistani elite - with their westernized lifestyles - in turn mocked these netizens for their supposed naïveté.

Reactions of the Sunni states in the Gulf and beyond have been the exact antipode to the Pakistani one.

- Middle East Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) - which is the largest broadcaster in Middle East and North African market with ~400M viewers - removed Turkish dizi-s from its line-up in 2018; this followed the anti-corruption drive by the Saudi crown-prince Mohammed bin Salman in which most of MBC's board was arrested.
- More direct action followed - there is a direct Saudi and UAE ban on *Dirilis: Ertugrul*; and in Feb 2020, a fatwa was issued from Egyptian *Dar Al-Iftaa* (Center for Islamic Legal Opinion) against viewing the series in any format.
- To further counteract the message, a TV series called *Mamalik Al-Nar* (or Kingdoms of Fire) was launched in Dec 2019 - financed by

Saudi Arabia and UAE to the tune of \$40M - to highlight the suffering brought about in Arab lands by Ottoman rule by depicting the conflict between the last Mamluk sultan in Cairo (Tuman Bey lionized in current Arab historiography as a benevolent ruler on the losing side) and the Ottoman Sultan Selim I (or Selim the Grim in popular imagination).

Geopolitical indicators for a new Muslim re-alignment

Over the past 50 years, Pakistan has deferred to the Saudi state on many aspects.

- Its elite - for example, the Sharif family - have established close links with the monarchy.
- Financing from the Gulf - be it in personal capacity as worker remittances or national as oil support - have shored up Pakistani budgets; in turn, the Arab states have benefited militarily (in training for their air forces or in MBS's new multi-national force).
- Customary references to Khadim Al-Haramain Al-Sharifain (custodian of the two holy mosques) line up Pakistani statements on the Saudi monarch; culturally too, Wahabi funding has Arabized Urdu speech in a significant manner.
- The Sunni majority also harbors an emotional connection to the Saudi lands; though opinion on monarchy might waver.

The background above illustrating the close Saudi-Pakistani link further highlights how extraordinarily unusual it is for the Pakistani state to champion *Dirilis: Ertugrul* in face of stringent Saudi opposition. Indeed, the Saudi-Pakistani relations have been tumultuous in past couple of years. There were incidents of personal drama (like MBS lending his flight to Imran Khan for his trip to UN, and rescinding use of the same for the trip back to Islamabad) and broader disagreement (like dispute over the Dec 2019 Kuala Lumpur summit organized by Turkey-Iran-Malaysia, avoided by Pakistan at Saudi insistence). Recent reports have highlighted these differences - expedited return of a \$1B Saudi loan, FM Qureshi's truculent comments on insufficient support of OIC to Kashmir in early-August, COAS Qamar Bajwa's mediatory trip to Riyadh in mid-August etc.

Read in this context, the promotion of *Dirilis: Ertugrul* by PM Imran Khan can be interpreted very differently. The promotion is not about championing of Islamic values (beloved as it is to Imran and his spiritual preacher wife Bushra Bibi) nor is it about the putative decoupling from Hindu/Indian roots; this promotion is about redirecting the emotional connection of the Sunni majority to a different Sunni state viz. Turkey as against Saudi Arabia. If such a connection is established, the Pakistani state would have freedom to pivot away from the current Arab choke-hold and act freely in its self-interest, especially if it demands an alignment with a non-American bloc including China, Iran and Turkey.

There is another dynamic in play in Turkey, Iran and Pakistan, viz. modernist experiments at secularization have faltered in all three places for different reasons.

- Ataturk's actions - beyond all doubt - helped Turkish citizenry with education and women's emancipation steps; yet his deposition of

the Caliphate has arguably diminished Turkish soft power, a fact that is highlighted further by EU's repeated rebuff.

- The Iranian elite witnessed the removal of Mossadegh and the humiliating loss of autonomy to Anglo-American oil corporations at the same time they witnessed benefits of westernization/modernity.
- The Pakistani state witnessed ethno-linguistic concerns trump secular patriotism in 1971; the split cost Pakistan half of its territory.

The realist response to these distressing events, supported by the post 90s rise of a conservative middle class, has been a harkening back to the Islamized past - in particular, the periods of 16th and 17th centuries when the predecessor states of modern-day Turkey, Iran and Pakistan dominated the Muslim world in comparison to Arab/Gulf ones. The current axis seeks to recreate the glory of that era and in doing so, it - by its inclusion of Iran - surmounts the Shia-Sunni schism that has plagued the Muslim world since the developments of 1979 (viz. revolution in Iran, siege in Mecca).

The strategic community in India would benefit from closer monitoring of this new emergent axis. Analysis above alongside ancillary incidents like Erdogan's mention of Kashmir at the UN, Mahathir's intransigent shielding of Zakir Naik despite its impact on Palm Oil exports and the Iranian cancellation of Gwadar project all point to a new strategic chess-board for India, where the pieces and new rules of game are being evolved even as we speak.

[Dr. Rajesh T. Krishnamachari is an analyst based in New York City. Views expressed in this article are personal. He can be reached at tkrajesh@gmail.com [1]]

Tags:

[Turkey](#) [2]

[Pakistan](#) [3]

[Ummah](#) [4]

Category:

[Papers](#) [5]

Countries:

[West Asia](#) [6]

[Pakistan](#) [7]

Topics:

[Islamic Affairs](#) [8]

Copyright ©2012. All Rights are Reserved.

Source URL: <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/node/2676>

Links

- [1] <mailto:tkrajesh@gmail.com>
- [2] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/taxonomy/term/1283>
- [3] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/taxonomy/term/71>
- [4] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/taxonomy/term/1050>
- [5] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/papers>
- [6] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/west-asia>
- [7] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/pakistan>
- [8] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/islamic-affairs>