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A Subversive Soap Roils Saudi Arabia

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JIDDAH, [Saudi Arabia](#) -- A Turkish soap opera featuring an independent fashion designer and her amazingly supportive and attractive husband is emptying the streets whenever it's on and has more than doubled the number of Saudis visiting Turkey this summer.

Millions of people -- especially women, apparently -- are tuning in nightly to find out whether the couple will stay together or be torn apart by jealousies and old flames.

But "Noor," the story of a multi-generational, upper-class Turkish family, has also sparked a backlash. The show has become the subject of angry Friday sermons in this strict Islamic kingdom, and the country's chief cleric recently issued a fatwa calling it "decadent" and sinful to watch.

"Noor" has had such a deep influence because, unlike American or Mexican soap operas broadcast here, it is about a Muslim family living in a Muslim country. The show is also dubbed in an Arabic dialect, not classical Arabic, which makes it easier to understand and feels more intimate to viewers.

And then, there's that husband.

The blue-eyed, blond Muhannad, played by Kivanc Tatlitu, a 24-year-old Turkish actor and model, is tall, handsome, romantic, respectful and treats his wife, Noor -- the title character -- as both a love object and an equal.

"Saudi women fantasize about what they're lacking," said Amira Kashgari, an assistant linguistics professor at King Abdul Aziz University who writes about social issues for al-Watan newspaper. "They are almost obsessed with this show because of the way he interacts with and treats his wife."

Saudi Arabia, a deeply patriarchal society, has few role models for powerful, independent women. The kingdom does not allow women guardianship over themselves, whatever their age. They are not allowed to drive and cannot travel without the permission of a male guardian, sometimes their sons.

According to the Saudi-owned satellite channel MBC, which airs "Noor" across the Arab world, 3 million to 4 million viewers in this country of 28 million have been tuning in daily.

"Viewers first fell in love with what is familiar in the show: Muhannad's arranged marriage, the respect shown to elders, the family all living together in one house," said Alanoud Bashir, a radio journalist who has done a show about the series. "But what led to their utter fascination is what differentiates it from their lives -- the romance within the marriage, the open, honest communication between husband and wife. Many women have said to their husbands, 'Why can't you be more like Muhannad?'"

According to several local newspapers, Saudi men have divorced their wives after finding photos of Muhannad on their cellphones or because they found their wives too taken with the Turk with the soulful eyes.

In the series, Muhannad is not afraid to show his soft side, and he showers his wife with flowers, gifts and

surprise vacations after they fight. Several cartoons in the local press show men promising their wives to have plastic surgery to look like Muhannad.

"He has the looks, and he has the romance," said Abdullah Najjar, an engineer with [Saudi Arabian Airlines](#). "It's very difficult to compete with him."

But clerics say the national obsession is unhealthy and detrimental to Saudi society's traditional culture. Al-Eqtisadiah newspaper quoted a prominent cleric, Abdul Mohsen al-Obeikan, as saying the show erodes Muslim values and asking satellite channels not to air it.

Others say "Noor" is dangerous precisely because of the similarities between Muhannad's clan and Saudis.

"When young people, who have all become fascinated with this show, watch Muslims like themselves engaging in premarital relations and having children out of wedlock, that is more dangerous than if they see Westerners doing those same things," said Safiya Ibrahim, an administrative assistant at a cafe where kids paint and read. Ibrahim said Saudi teenagers could come to believe that dating before marriage, which is frowned upon here, is okay because the characters in "Noor" do.

The fascination with the show and the lush scenery has propelled more than 100,000 Saudis to travel to Turkey this year, according to Turkish diplomats, up from about 40,000 last year. The fictional home of Muhannad's family has been rented by tour operators and turned into a temporary museum for visitors. Saudi magazines have featured several spreads of the luxury villa on the Bosphorus in Istanbul where the show was shot and interviewed Saudi tourists there.

The show's finale, after 140 episodes, will be broadcast at the end of August, right before the start of the holy fasting month of Ramadan.

"They're a tightknit family," said Roua Madani, a fan of the show who works in event management. "The couples express the romantic love we're missing in our culture. Even though it's exaggerated, it's good for men to see this kind of love, even if it's just on television."

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