



THE CIRCULATION OF ARAB FILMS IN TÜRKİYE: SOUND, LOCALIZATION, AND THE EXHIBITION ECONOMY (1937–1952)

Alican Yıldırım

Sakarya University Faculty of Communication, Türkiye

Abstract

This article traces the localization practices applied to Arab films screened in Istanbul between 1937 and 1952 through the era's periodicals. The banning of traditional Turkish music on radio broadcasts in Türkiye in 1934 significantly altered listening habits. Listeners began tuning into Arab radio stations, primarily Cairo-based stations, with which they felt an affinity, leading to the wider recognition of singers such as Umm Kulthum and Mohamed Abdel Wahab in Türkiye. The article approaches sound and music not as direct evidence of a shared musical tradition, but as indicators that reveal an auditory familiarity constructed over time. Many Arab films were musically localized during their theatrical run. This not only made the films easier to follow, but also shortened running times through newly composed Turkish music. As a result, exhibitors could manage programming and costs more easily. The dataset consists of 144 films screened in Türkiye between 1937 and 1952, identified from newspaper advertisements through a systematic survey of the era's periodicals. Examining this cycle through the concepts of auditory familiarity, auditory regime, and circulation regime, the study draws on advertisements, news items, and interviews rather than film texts.

Keywords: Arab films, Turkish cinema, dubbing, musical localization, auditory regime, circulation regime

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İLETİŞİM: Alican Yıldırım ✉ yildirim1895@gmail.com

✉ Sakarya Üniversitesi Esentepe Kampüsü M2 Binası 3. Kat Serdivan/Sakarya, Türkiye

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ARAP FİLMLERİNİN TÜRKİYE'DE DOLAŞIMI: SES, YERELLEŞTİRME VE GÖSTERİM EKONOMİSİ (1937–1952)

Öz

Bu makale, 1937–1952 yılları arasında İstanbul'da gösterilen Arap filmlerine uygulanan yerelleştirme pratiklerini süreli yayınlar üzerinden izlemektedir. 1934'te Türkiye'de radyo yayınlarında Türk musikisinin yasaklanması, dinleme alışkanlıklarını önemli şekilde değiştirmiştir. Dinleyiciler, yakınlık kurdukları başta Kahire olmak üzere Arap radyolarını dinlemeye başlamış, bu durum Ümmü Gülsüm ve Muhammed Abdülvehab gibi şarkıcıların Türkiye'de tanınmasını sağlamıştır. Makalede ses ve müzik, doğrudan bir ortaklık kanıtı olarak değil, tarihsel süreçte inşa edilmiş işitsel aşinalığı görünür kılan göstergeler olarak ele alınmaktadır. Gösterime girdikleri dönemde Arap filmlerinin önemli bir kısmının müzikleri yerelleştirilmiştir. Böylece hem anlaşılabilirlik arttırılmış hem de yeni besteler sayesinde filmlerin süresi kısaltılmıştır. Bu durum, gösterimlerdeki seans planlamasını ve maliyet yönetimini kolaylaştırmıştır. Veri seti, süreli yayın taraması sonucu gazete ilanlarından tespit edilen 1937 ila 1952 yılları arasında gösterime giren 144 filmde oluşmaktadır. Arap filmleri dönemini, işitsel aşinalık, işitsel rejim ve dolaşım rejimi kavramlarıyla ele alan bu çalışma, film metinlerinden ziyade, ilan, haber ve röportaj söylemine dayanmaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Arap filmleri, Türk sineması, dublaj, müzikal yerelleştirme, işitsel rejim, dolaşım rejimi

Introduction

This article¹ examines the circulation of Arab films in Istanbul cinemas between 1937 and 1952 through a defined corpus identified in periodical sources. In this study, "Arab films" does not refer to all films produced in the Arab world; rather, it refers to a press-defined cycle of films, largely from Egypt, promoted in Turkish periodicals through recurring references to Arab vocal stars, Turkish-language dubbing, and musical adaptation. Focusing on advertisements, news items, and interviews rather than film texts, the article asks how these films were localized sonically, how such localization intersected with programming and exhibition practices, and under what conditions these films became sustainable within Istanbul's cinema economy.

Existing accounts of Arab films in Türkiye have often explained their circulation, and especially their later decline, through a prohibition-centered narrative. In these accounts, the translation of songs into Turkish after 1938 and the regulatory changes introduced in 1948 are treated as decisive turning points. Yet recent scholarship has also shown that this history cannot be reduced to prohibition alone, and that the weakening of Arab film circulation must be understood together with the restructuring of the market, the rise of domestic production, and the changing conditions of exhibition (Cantek, 2025, pp. 186–187, 191, 193). This article builds on that line of inquiry, but shifts the focus more explicitly to sound, localization, and exhibition economy. It argues that the circulation of Arab films in Türkiye cannot be explained solely through prohibition, nor through a simple model of cultural proximity. Instead, it must be understood through the interaction of historically formed listening habits, localization practices, and the operational logic of cinema exhibition.

The periodical evidence examined here complicates the issue further. It shows not only that Turkish musical adaptation cannot be reduced to a ban-driven response, but also that the practical force of prohibition was uneven. Some films continued to circulate with Arabic songs, and in exceptional cases the same title could appear simultaneously in Turkish-song and Arabic-song versions across different cinemas. This

¹ This article is based on the author's master's thesis titled *Türkiye'de Dublaj ve Sinemamıza Etkisi [Dubbing in Türkiye and Its Effects on Turkish Cinema]*, completed at Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University, Institute of Fine Arts, Department of Cinema and Television, Cinema-TV Program, in 2017.

article therefore does not simply reject a prohibition-centered narrative; it also shows that the circulation of sonic versions was differentiated in practice. From this perspective, Arab films circulated not simply because they were available, but because certain sounds, singers, and musical forms had already become recognizable and workable within a specific exhibition environment.

The theoretical framework of the article is built around three concepts: auditory familiarity, auditory regime, and circulation regime. Although the term appears in different contexts in the literature, it is used here in a specifically historical and circulation-oriented sense. As used here, auditory familiarity does not refer simply to individual taste or to a general sense of sonic recognition. Rather, it refers to a historically produced threshold of recognition that made certain voices, musical idioms, and sound patterns acceptable, legible, and commercially workable in circulation. In this sense, the concept differs from Straubhaar's model of "cultural proximity," which explains media choice primarily through shared language, ethnicity, or cultural background (Straubhaar, 1991, pp. 39, 51). The Turkish case examined here cannot be reduced to such direct cultural affinity. Instead, it reflects a more layered historical formation shaped by radio broadcasting, dubbing practices, musical adaptation, and exhibition routines.

This perspective also helps situate the Turkish case in relation to the regional dominance of Egyptian cinema. As Viola Shafik argues, after the transition to sound cinema, Egyptian cinema consolidated its position in the Arab market partly through a star system built around popular singers such as Ümmü Gülsüm (Umm Kulthum) and Muhammed Abdülvehab (Mohamed Abdel Wahab). The prominence of these singers enabled films to travel across Arab countries despite dialect differences and helped Egyptian cinema secure a hegemonic position within the regional market (Shafik, 1998, pp. 24–26).

Although Shafik's explanation is important in terms of production and regional market logic, it does not fully explain the circulation of Arab films in Türkiye. This is because Egyptian cinema's circulation across other Arab countries was largely based on a shared Arabic-language sphere and forms of cultural proximity that do not apply in the same way to Türkiye. In Türkiye, by contrast, the circulation of Arab films depended less on direct linguistic or cultural continuity than on listening habits shaped over time, the familiarity created by radio broadcasting, and the

recognition that particular singers gained before and alongside cinema exhibition.

The term “auditory regime,” meanwhile, is used here as an analytical term to describe sound as an area of institutional organization, informed by approaches that treat sound as historically organized within exhibition practices and shared regimes of audibility. This includes film screening practices, session durations, pacing, and localization strategies including dubbing. Such arrangements affect not only cinema operations, but also the auditory form in which films circulate.

In this context, the concept of the circulation regime, alongside the auditory regime, helps make sense of the institutional logic of film circulation. The circulation regime treats films not as fixed texts, but as structures that move through the advertising discourse of periodicals, copy variants, and cinema networks. Thus, the functioning of the auditory regime, which shapes the rhythm and auditory form of films, and the dynamics of the circulation regime, which determine where and how film copies circulate, become visible as different but related dimensions of the same set of practices.

The use of the concept of regime in this context draws on approaches concerned with how the boundaries of audibility and shared sonic space have been historically organized. In this respect, Rancière’s discussion of the “distribution of the sensible” (2008, pp. 15–17, 147–148), here read in terms of audibility, and Attali’s approach, which treats music as an organizing principle of social orders (2009, pp. 4–10), inform the theoretical background of this framework.

This theoretical framework also helps clarify what reductionist accounts of the period overlook. If prohibition-centered explanations remain important, they do not by themselves explain why some Arab films circulated with Arabic songs, why others were adapted into Turkish musical forms, or why this circulation proved sustainable for more than a decade within Istanbul’s exhibition economy. What this study adds is a more systematic account, grounded in periodical evidence, of how sound localization, singer-centered recognizability, and cinema programming worked together in shaping the circulation of Arab films.

Based on major newspapers and periodicals of the time, especially *Cumhuriyet*, *Tan*, *Akşam*, and *Son Posta*, this article asks why and how songs performed by well-known Arab singers were later rendered in Turkish.

Within this framework, auditory familiarity is traced through recurring labels in advertisements, auditory regime through screening and localization practices, and circulation regime through the year-by-year distribution of releases.

The Aural Construction of Filmgoing: Dubbing, Music, and Localization

Early film exhibition in Türkiye, as in many other countries, was not confined to silence or to a single sound source. Violin or piano accompaniment, live narrators, and sound effects helped establish an auditory regime in cinema halls well before the transition to sound cinema. Sound should therefore be understood not merely as accompaniment to the image, but as a factor shaping the operation of film exhibition.

In this sense, the auditory regime can be read alongside Rick Altman's approach, which defines cinema as an "event" emerging from the interplay of exhibition space, sound, music, and audience practices (Altman, 1992, pp. 1–2, 2004, pp. 15–18). From this perspective, sound is not simply attached to the image; it is materially shaped by the conditions of production and exhibition, from the studio to the cinema hall (Altman, 1992, pp. 15, 23–24). The article draws on this framework to analyze dubbing, music adaptation, and localization as historically organized exhibition practices rather than as secondary additions to a fixed film text.

To understand how this organization shapes narrative flow, music becomes the key site of analysis. Claudia Gorbman treats music as a structure that sustains continuity and guides affective orientation within narrative. The aim here is not to offer a detailed musical analysis in Gorbman's terms, but to explain how localized songs and musical numbers shape pacing and rhythm in circulation (Gorbman, 1987, pp. 4–10, 73, 89). Comparative work by Gürata on Indian films in Türkiye and by Larkin on Bollywood in Nigeria similarly shows that audience demand may be organized through music before plot becomes decisive (Gürata, 2010, pp. 74–77; Larkin, 1997, pp. 406–409). In this respect, auditory familiarity is approached not as an individual preference, but as a historically formed threshold that allows certain sounds to travel.

This dynamic affects not only narrative form but also the conditions under which films move. For this reason, the circulation regime is used here to explain patterned mobility rather than the transfer of fixed texts. Appadurai's account of cultural flows and Lobato's analysis of offi-

cial and unofficial distribution networks provide the main conceptual basis for this approach (Appadurai, 1996, pp. 33–35; Lobato, 2012, pp. 9–14, 27–31). This perspective also resonates with recent circulation histories that emphasize the role of multiple distributors, official and unofficial actors, and changing political conditions in shaping how films move across markets (Mingant, 2022, pp. 2, 9–10; Çam, 2023, pp. 499–500), as well as with Şavk's account of soundtrack borrowing as a relational practice that can connect otherwise separate film industries and audiences through shared sonic material (Şavk, 2024, pp. 175–176).

In this article, however, the auditory regime describes arrangements within screening, while the circulation regime accounts for how and under what conditions copies travel through advertising discourse, copy variants, and cinema networks. The focus is therefore on earlier and institutionally organized localization practices rather than later soundtrack borrowing.

Preconditions of Arab Film Circulation: Sound, Language, and Dubbing in Istanbul (1929–1952)

From the late 1920s onward, cinemas in Istanbul began to be adapted for sound film technology. This shift became visible in the press from September 1929, when reports noted that up-to-date sound equipment had been installed to enable the screening of sound and musical films (*Cumhuriyet*, September 8, 1929). *Shortly afterward, the first sound screening at the Opera Cinema in Pera² attracted strong audience interest (Akşam, October 3, 1929).*

One of the main problems in exhibiting sound films was the spoken language of the films themselves. In the earliest sound screenings, this problem was less acute because dialogue remained limited for technical reasons. However, as spoken dialogue became more prominent, exhibitors in Pera increasingly turned to French-language prints or French-dubbed versions. Given the cosmopolitan structure of the district, French was one of the most widely understood languages in this part of Istanbul, and newspaper advertisements reflected this preference through labels such as "French-language" and "French-language talkie."

² Pera is commonly used in the literature to refer to the area around Cadde-i Kebir (today's İstiklal Avenue) in Istanbul's Beyoğlu district. From the 16th century onward, the first embassies began to open in this area, in a neighborhood long associated with Levantine and non-Muslim communities (Akin, 2002, pp. 2–3).

Writing in this period, Tacettin Cavit observed that cinema owners preferred French-language films because English and German films were not sufficiently understood (Cavit, 1933, p. 13).

With the opening of the İpek Film Studio in 1932, this linguistic barrier began to be addressed through early Turkish-language dubbing initiatives. In the same year, the studio carried out its first dubbing work using a nonsynchronized technique in which voice actors narrated the events on screen (*Cumhuriyet*, September 12–13, 1932). From 1933 onward, the first synchronized dubbing practices also began to appear (*Cumhuriyet*, July 8, 1933). The emergence of dubbing and sound localization in 1930s Istanbul was not limited to İpek Film and the Pera/Beyoğlu circuit. As Ali Özuyar noted, Halil Kamil's Türk Film Stüdyosu, established in Şişli in 1934, also entered the field of sound recording and Turkish-language dubbing, which suggests that these practices were already taking shape within a broader technical and commercial environment (Özuyar, 2021, pp. 56–57, 68–71). Yet the spread of Turkish dubbing did not eliminate multilingual exhibition. French-dubbed imports continued to circulate, and the label "French-language" remained visible in advertisements until the 1950s. As Giovanni Scognamillo noted, later in the decade, as minorities and cosmopolitan Levantines lost influence in the Beyoğlu-Pera area, film selection gradually shifted away from this audience and toward newer populations arriving in Istanbul (Scognamillo, 1991, p. 72).

This earlier multilingual sound culture provides an important precondition for understanding the later circulation of Arab films in Turkish cinemas. This section does not attempt to reconstruct the full prehistory of sound and musical performance in Istanbul cinema exhibition before the sound era; rather, it focuses more narrowly on those developments in multilingual exhibition, dubbing, and sound management that form the most immediate preconditions for the circulation of Arab films. Arab films did not enter an empty exhibition field, nor did they appear as a sudden anomaly. Rather, their circulation extended practices that had already been shaped by multilingual screenings, dubbing experiments, and the management of sound across Istanbul's cinema culture. In this sense, the music-heavy and localized circulation of Arab films should be understood less as an exceptional development than as a continuation of an already established culture of negotiating language and sound in exhibition.

Method and Scope of the Research

This study draws on an extensive periodical survey covering the years 1928–1960.³ Within this broader survey, advertisements published between 1937 and 1952 constitute the primary corpus of analysis. The wider survey range made it possible to identify when Arab films first became visible in the press, to trace the buildup of relevant sound and language practices before that point, and to confirm when this cycle faded from view. On this basis, the article defines 1937–1952 as the operative period of Arab film circulation examined here. The resulting dataset consists of 144 films. This is not a random sample, but a corpus-based dataset including all titles identified through the selection criteria applied in the survey.

The source base consists primarily of newspapers and periodicals consulted in the collections of the Atatürk Library and the Beyazıt State Library. Advertisements form the main body of evidence, but news items, interviews, and columns are also used as contextual material where relevant. Important newspapers of the period, especially *Cumhuriyet* and *Akşam*, were searched systematically day by day, while other newspapers were consulted both to compensate for inaccessible or damaged issues and to verify findings across multiple sources.

Within this corpus, “Arab films” refers not to all films produced in the Arab world, but to a press-defined cycle of films, largely from Egypt, that circulated in Turkish periodicals through recurring sound and language labels. The dataset was compiled by identifying films advertised with labels such as “in Turkish,” “with Turkish songs,” “with Turkish music,” and “with Arabic songs.” The search process was guided primarily by these recurring labels, especially the period label “Türkçe sözlü” (“Turkish spoken”), and was supplemented by auxiliary indicators such as the names of prominent Egyptian singers and the names of composers and

³ This study draws on an extensive survey of newspapers and magazines conducted up to 1960. Within this larger survey, Turkish-dubbed films could be reliably identified only up to 1957, since the advertisement markers used for this purpose, such as “türkçe sözlü” (“Turkish spoken”) and “türkçe” (“in Turkish”), largely disappear from the press after that year. The Arab-films dataset analyzed in the present article ends in 1952 for a related methodological reason: From 1952 onward, the specific labels used to track Arab films in advertisements no longer appear, making it impossible to compile the corpus through the same label-based search strategy. Across the survey, 1,183 foreign films dubbed into Turkish were identified as having been released in Türkiye between 1933 and 1957.

performers associated with Turkish-language musical adaptation. Films labeled “with Turkish songs” but identified as non-Arab productions were excluded from the corpus.

The analytical procedure is based on first screenings only. Repeated advertisements for the same film on different dates were not counted separately in the film list. This makes it possible to identify more clearly the auditory and discursive framework within which each film first entered circulation. In the graphs on composers and singers, however, each advertisement was treated as a separate observation. When multiple names appeared in a single notice, each was coded as an individual record. Spelling variants were standardized using the established forms in the music literature, so that the resulting distributions reflect recurring patterns of visibility in the advertisements rather than inconsistencies of orthography.

This study treats the prohibition narrative in the literature on Arab films as a proposition to be tested against periodical evidence. For that reason, films advertised with Arabic songs were considered together with films whose songs or music were translated into Turkish. The survey revealed that some films circulated on the same date in different cinemas in two distinct sonic versions, one with Turkish songs and one with Arabic songs. These cases are especially important because they show that a film could circulate in more than one auditory form depending on venue and exhibition conditions.

Advertisements are treated here as discursive sources rather than as direct evidence of audience reception. They show how exhibitors, distributors, studios, singers, and dubbing personnel framed these films in public circulation. In this respect, they make visible the institutional logic of exhibition practices even when they cannot directly document audience response. The concept of auditory familiarity is therefore operationalized through recurring indicators in the periodical material: the prominence of famous Egyptian singers in advertisements, the coexistence and changing frequency of labels such as “in Turkish,” “with Turkish songs,” and “with Arabic songs,” and the increasing visibility of Turkish composers and singers in promotional discourse.

The study is limited in scope in two further ways. First, because dubbing practices, film imports, and cinema networks were centered in Istanbul, and because the source base is largely composed of Istanbul

newspapers and periodicals, the article treats Istanbul as a core case rather than as a proxy for the whole country. It does not attempt to provide a nationwide map of circulation. Second, the study does not offer close readings of film texts. It traces circulation through advertisements, interviews, and news discourse, and discusses film content only when it directly bears on sound editing, musical adaptation, or localization practices. For reasons of space, the full list of 144 films is not reproduced in the article; instead, a representative sample is provided in the appendix.

Radio Broadcasting and the Formation of Aural Familiarity with Arab Music

In the 1930s, radio broadcasting in Türkiye was more than a technical innovation. As Ergin points out, radio, framed as a “political education tool,” became an area where cultural policies were directly implemented in the early years of the republic. The most typical example of this is the ban on Turkish music from radio broadcasts between 1934 and 1936. This ban, which clearly revealed what could and could not be heard in the public sphere, also made visible the new republic’s power to shape musical circulation. However, this intervention was not absolute, as listeners increasingly turned to Arab radio stations, particularly those in Cairo, during the ban period (Ergin, 2005, pp. 71–72).

As journalist Ahmet Talat Onay noted, during these years, listeners regularly followed radio stations in Egypt, Haifa, Bari, Crimea, and Yerevan because they broadcast music in Turkish and Arabic. This trend became a widespread listening practice, partly due to the mismatch between listeners’ tastes and the music played on Turkish radio stations after the ban (Özyıldırım, 2013, p. 69). The growing interest in Cairo-based broadcasts led to Egyptian singers such as Ümmü Gülsüm, Leyla Murad, and Muhammed Abdülvehab gaining recognition in Türkiye, thus creating an auditory continuity between radio and cinema.

This continuity was evident in popular magazines even before Arab films were screened in Türkiye. For example, in a 1936 issue of *Yedigün*, Ümmü Gülsüm, referred to as “the crystal-voiced nightingale of Cairo radio,” was reported to be set to begin filming (*Yedigün*, December 23, 1936). That the magazine carried this news so early suggests that cinema was seen as a medium extending into audiovisual form a familiarity that had already been established through radio.

The historical and musical background shared across these regi-

ons may also have lowered the threshold of unfamiliarity for Arab music among Turkish listeners, but this should not be taken as direct evidence of cultural sameness or of a fully shared musical tradition. As Hormoz Farhat notes, the *maqam* system forms the basis of music in Türkiye and in many Arab countries, and it is also present in Muslim-majority regions of western Iran. Before developing its distinctive *dastgâh* system, Iranian music drew on scales and intervals associated with *maqam* practice (Farhat, 1990, p. 23). In the context of this study, such commonality matters not because it proves a unified tradition, but because it helps explain one historical condition through which Arabic performances may have sounded less unfamiliar to Turkish listeners. Radio was therefore not only a space where sounds from different geographies were heard, but also a medium through which a partially familiar musical idiom could circulate.

This historical accumulation was one of the conditions shaping the reception of Arab films in Türkiye. Arab music and star voices had already become familiar to many listeners through radio before reaching the cinema, which helped lower the sense of foreignness when these films entered exhibition. As Gürata argued, in the 1940s, Egyptian films dubbed into Turkish and supplemented with locally performed Turkish-language songs at times functioned as substitutes for Turkish films in exhibition and promotion and were also presented and marketed as “local products” (Gürata, 2004, pp. 72, 74, 77).

Comparable dynamics can be observed in other circulation contexts, although these comparisons do not imply identical historical conditions. Rather, they help frame how musical familiarity may support circulation across linguistic distance. In his discussion of Indian films in Nigeria, Brian Larkin noted that audiences could form strong attachments to films even without understanding the language, partly through the attraction of their musical and affective world (Larkin, 1997, pp. 407, 433). In Türkiye, as Gürata showed in the case of *Avare* (*Awaare*, 1951), songs from the film were localized to the point that they entered Turkish folk and popular music repertoires, reducing the force of the language barrier and contributing to the film’s success (Gürata, 2010, p. 83). Taken together, these comparisons support treating auditory familiarity not as direct proof of cultural identity, but as a historically formed expectation threshold that can facilitate circulation.

Auditory Regime at the Level of Exhibition: Session Length, Theater Economics, and Localization

The literature on Arab films generally emphasizes that the state carried out attempts to localize the music and songs in these films. According to this line of interpretation, Arab films were first exhibited with their original Arabic songs, but following official intervention prohibiting Arabic music, composers of the period were commissioned to produce Turkish lyrics and new musical versions. Meral Özbek stated that this ban was introduced in 1938 following the strong public interest in *Aşkın Gözyaşları* (*Dumu' al-Hubb*, 1936), while Martin Stokes noted that in 1948 both the importation of films from Arab countries and the screening of films with Arabic songs were prohibited (Özbek, 1994, p. 150; Stokes, cited in Cantek, 2000, p. 35).

However, contrary to this prevailing narrative, musical localization in Türkiye did not begin with Arab films. It emerged within a broader repertoire of sound-localization practices already applied to non-Arab foreign films, especially music-heavy orientalist imports. Arab films entered this preexisting exhibition logic rather than originating it. Periodical sources suggest that one of the earliest examples was Ramon Novarro's film advertised as *Şeyh Ahmed*, screened at the Sümer cinema on December 15, 1937. Vedia Rıza, Cevdet Kozan, Nihad Şeref, Cevdet Çağlar, Hasan Tahsin, and Mustafa Çağlar performed the songs in the film, originally titled *The Sheik Steps Out* (1937) (*Cumhuriyet*, December 15, 1937).

Subsequently, films such as *Ali Baba Hindistan'da* (*Ali Baba Goes to Town*, 1937) (*Cumhuriyet*, February 10, 1938) and *Mihracenin Gözdesi* (*Der Tiger von Eschnapur*, 1938) (*Cumhuriyet*, March 30, 1938) were also screened with songs translated into Turkish. Discussing the dubbing and musical alteration of orientalist imports, Ahmet Gürata noted that foreign films were often substantially reshaped through dubbing and local soundtracks, including cases in which Turkish lyrics were written for original songs and performed by local singers (Gürata, 2004, p. 62). These interventions should therefore be situated within a broader localization repertoire that had already begun to take shape alongside synchronized dubbing practices from 1933 onward (*Cumhuriyet*, July 8, 1933).



Figure 1. Advertisement for the film *Ali Baba Hindistan'da*. (*Cumhuriyet*, February 10, 1938).

The approach to translation and localization during this period was based more on adaptation than on direct translation. This was true not only of orientalist imports, but also of many films dubbed by prominent voice actors such as Ferdi Tayfur, including *Lorel ve Hardi* (the *Laurel and Hardy* series, 1927–1955) and *Üç Ahbap Çavuşlar* (the *Marx Brothers* series, 1921–1959). In a later interview, Tayfur described how he differentiated the characters vocally and how the “broken Turkish” associated with them was constructed through research and imitation, including reference to an earlier French-dubbed print and an encounter with an American instructor at Robert College (Başar, 1950). What mattered in these cases was not strict linguistic transfer, but the adaptation of speech and song into forms that would feel more workable and appealing for local audiences.

The advertisement for *Ali Baba Hindistan'da* makes this hybrid exhibition logic especially visible. On the one hand, the notice foregrounds the film’s foreign appeal through the large-print name of its star, Eddie Cantor. On the other hand, it announces that *İstanbul Senfonisi* (*Istanbul Symphony*, 1934), described as a “great film prepared by Turkish artists and distinguished musicians in our country,” would also be shown in the same program (*Cumhuriyet*, February 10, 1938). This pairing suggests that the translation of film music into Turkish should not be understood simply as misleading promotion. Rather, it reveals a hybrid exhibition strategy in which foreignness and local appeal were packaged together within the same matinee program. Arab films would later circulate within this already established logic, but in a more sustained and economically significant form.

These examples indicate that Turkish-language songs for foreign

films did not originate in an official ban, but in a broader set of localization practices shaped by exhibition needs. The translation of music in films imported from the Arab world into Turkish began in 1938, several years after similar interventions had already been applied to orientalist imports. In this context, *Arzu ile Kanber* (music by Sadettin Kaynak), the first Arab film with Turkish music, screened in Turkish cinemas on February 10, 1938 (*Cumhuriyet*, February 8, 1938). By contrast, *Bağdad Bülbülü* (*El Ghandoura*, 1936), which screened earlier, appears to have circulated with Arabic songs (*Tan*, February 20, 1937).

To understand the circulation of Arab films in Türkiye, it is therefore necessary to focus on the auditory conditions through which the cinema experience was organized. The relevant exhibition logic was shaped less by the category of “Arab film” in itself than by the way songs and music were presented in practice. In particular, films featuring famous singers already familiar to audiences through radio were advertised with labels such as “with Arabic songs,” and the singers’ names were highlighted alongside this label.

However, the sheer length of the songs in these films often extended their running time, creating practical and financial pressures for exhibitors. For this reason, translating the songs into Turkish, while presented as localization, primarily functioned to shorten films and make screening schedules and costs manageable. Once shortened, these films also became more workable within Turkish exhibition conditions. Film music composer Nedim Otyam explains the situation as follows:

Previously, the dialogue in these films was dubbed into Turkish, while the songs were left in their original form. The films were filled with long songs. Due to the songs that went on and on with images of pyramids, palm trees, and the Nile River, the films were also very long. This was natural for the Egyptians, but for us, it was not economical in terms of studio and film costs, and especially cinema screenings. (Quoted by Erdoğın, 2005, pp. 108–109)

Localization was initially applied mainly to films featuring less prominent singers, while films starring radio-familiar celebrities were usually left out of this practice. Arabic-language song performances, then, were not a standard feature of the films in this corpus; they were a limited case indicating that auditory familiarity clustered around particular singers. In other words, familiarity with a few star names made

it viable for certain titles to be screened with their original songs. That familiarity seems to have offset, at least in part, the extra costs cinema owners faced as a result of longer running times.

The strongest example is Muhammed Abdülvehab's *Aşkın Gözyaşları* (*Dumu' al-Hubb*, 1936). Weeks before it opened, newspapers ran the following line: "Prepare to listen to the voice-king Abdülvehab, amid the mournful melodies of the evening wind blowing across Egypt's scorching deserts" (*Cumhuriyet*, November 1, 1938). The film opened at the Taksim Cinema on November 23, 1938 and drew 120,000 admissions in its first 4 weeks. When it later played at the Azak and Ferah cinemas, the figure rose to 150,000 (*Son Posta*, January 4, 1939). One advertisement noted that Istanbulites came in large numbers despite poor weather (*Son Posta*, January 1, 1939). After this run, the film attracted similar attention in cinemas across Anatolia (Cantek, 2000, p. 33).

Aşkın Gözyaşları (*Dumu' al-Hubb*, 1936) helped sustain the prominence of Arab films in Turkish cinemas, with audiences turning out to theaters to both watch and listen to Egypt's famous singers. Abdülvehab's *Yaşasın Aşk* (*Yahya el hub*, 1938), costarring Leyla Murad, opened on March 15, 1939 (*Cumhuriyet*, March 15, 1939). *Beyaz Gül* (*El Warda el Baida*, 1932) followed on November 11, 1939 (*Cumhuriyet*, November 11, 1939); Ümmü Gülsüm's *Ümid Şarkısı* (*Nashid al-Amal*, 1937) on September 22, 1939 (*Cumhuriyet*, September 22, 1939); and *Vedad, Yanık Esire* (*Wedad*, 1936) on January 19, 1940 (*Akşam*, January 19, 1940). Film advertisements suggest a clear split: While films featuring these star names were promoted and screened with songs in Arabic, most other Arab films continued to circulate with Turkish-language songs.

By 1942, discussions had begun about translating the music in films featuring famous Arab singers into Turkish, mainly because of duration-related technical and economic pressures. That year, a more decisive step was taken, and the music for *Harunürreşid'in Gözdesi* (*Dananir*, 1940), starring Ümmü Gülsüm, was also translated into Turkish. Sadettin Kaynak, who composed the film's music, notes that this move effectively ended the debate between keeping the original songs and reworking them within a Turkish musical idiom. On January 3, 1942, *Harunürreşid'in Gözdesi* played at İpek Film's Saray and İpek cinemas in two different audio versions (*Akşam*, January 3, 1942). Kaynak adds that the print shown at the İpek Cinema, with music composed by himself and sung by Müzeyyen Senar, drew a much larger audience than the original Ümmü Gülsüm

version screened at the Saray did (Kaynak, 1944, pp. 6–17).

Following this film, Turkish music began to be composed for the soundtracks of films starring major singers such as Ümmü Gülsüm, Abdülvehab, and Leyla Murad. Some titles circulated in two versions, one with Turkish songs and one with Arabic songs. However, the dataset shows that these two-version screenings remained exceptional. Advertisements indicate that most Arab films played simultaneously in multiple cinemas in the same audio format. In practice, song language was typically Turkish, a shift reinforced by the success of *Harunürreşid'in Gözdesi*. Put differently, distribution tended to favor the single, economically workable audio version rather than keeping alternative language versions in circulation at the same time.

SİNEMACILIK ÂLEMİNDE BÜYÜK BİR İNKILÂP!
GÖRÜLMEMİŞ BİR YENİLİK!

Eski teamüle uyularak her film gibi türkçeleştirilmiş Mısır filmleri de evvelâ Beyoğlu sinemalarında 3-4 hafta gösterilir ve uzunca bir ara verdikten sonra İstanbul sinemalarına geçer. Yeni teşekkül eden (REKS FİLM ŞİRKETİ) büyük bir titizlik ve titizlikle beğendiği ve türkçesine, dublajına ve müziğine fevkalâde ehemmiyet vererek sayın halka takdim edeceği birinci sınıf türkçeleştirilmiş Mısır filmlerini

BADEMA BEYOĞLU ve İSTANBUL SINEMALARINDA AYNI ZAMANDA GÖSTERMEĞE KARAR VERDİ

BUGÜN MATİNELERDEN İTİBAREN:

Şehzadebaşında — İstanbulda — Beyoğlunda

MİLLÎ — ALEMDAR — ŞİK

Sinemalarında 9 senedenberi Türkiye'de gösterilen bütün MISIR filmlerini gölgede bırakacak bir şaheser. **AYNI ZAMANDA ÜÇ SINEMADA BİRDEN GÖSTERİLMEĞE BAŞLANIYOR.**
Heçkırık ve gözyaşlarla seyredilecek muazzam bir aile faciası

BEYAZ MELEK

Başından sonuna kadar ibret verici sahnelerle dolu bu aile faciasını sayın halkımıza candan tavsiye ederiz. **Baş rollerde:**

HÜSEYİN RİYAZI — ULVİYE CEMİL — SARAÇ MÜNİR — ZEYNEP ŞEKİR

Beste ve Müzik: **SADETTİN KAYNAK** — Şarkıları Okuyan: **SAFİYE AYLÂ** — Dublaj Rejisörü: **MAHMUT MORALI**

İstanbul ve taşra sinema sahiplerinin lütfen **DİKKAT NAZARLARINA:**
Orijinal ve Türkçe kopyası bu sene Yıldız Sinemasında 18 hafta gösterilen KARAVAN filmi bu kere Mısırda yüzlerce arasında büyük bir titizlikle görüp beğendiğimiz 10 filmi (beraberinde hiçbir cenebi film vermemek şartı ile) emirlerinize amade kılıyoruz. En müşkülpeşent sinema müşterilerini bile memnun edecek bu iş, filmlerini müesseselerinde göstermek isteyen sayın sinema sahiblerinin Beyoğlunda Yıldız Sineması üzerindeki Şirketimize hemen müracaatleri tavsiye olunur.

Bu film pek yakında: Ankara ULUS, Bursa TAYYARE, Adana ALSARAY, Mersin GÜNEŞ, Eskişehir LÂLE Sinemalarında gösterilecektir. Seanslar her üç sinemada da saat 11 den itibaren devamlıdır.

REKS FİLM ŞİRKETİ

Figure 2. Advertisement for the film *Beyaz Melek*. (Son Posta, November 5, 1947).

Periodical press data support this pattern: Films such as *Çöl Kızı Cemile Yahut Şeyh Abdullah* (Cumhuriyet, March 22, 1939), *Esir Tüccarı*

(*Cumhuriyet*, September 18, 1947), and *Beyaz Melek* (*Son Posta*, November 5, 1947) were screened simultaneously in multiple cinemas in Turkish-song versions. At the same time, other titles in the same period circulated with the label "Arabic songs," such as *Yetimenin Aşkı* (*Cumhuriyet*, April 7, 1948), whereas films such as *Lekeli Melek* (*Son Posta*, January 11, 1948), *Kara Bah-tım* (*Akşam*, November 11, 1948), and *Kalbime Doğmuştu* (*Cumhuriyet*, January 25, 1950) continued to circulate in Turkish-song variants.

Sadettin Kaynak and the Practice of Musical Localization in Arab Films

Localized songs and musical arrangements in Arab films produced a continuity anchored around certain names. The most prominent example of this pattern is Sadettin Kaynak. Kaynak's work not only helped manage the extended running times of Arab films within the constraints of cinema programming, but also contributed to the formation of a new musical practice by mediating between Arab and Turkish musical idioms.

Sadettin Kaynak's name first appeared in advertisements as the composer of *Arzu ile Kanber*, which premiered on February 10, 1938 (*Cumhuriyet*, February 8, 1938). During the 1940s, he composed music for numerous Arab films, often in collaboration with Vecdi Bingöl as lyricist. According to Dr. Nazmi Özalp, one of the main reasons for this collaboration was the need for longer lyrics because Arabic musical phrasing occupied more screen time than its Turkish counterpart did (quoted in Erdoğan, 2005, pp. 108–109).

Kaynak stated that he calculated duration with the help of a stopwatch while composing. Hikmet Feridun Es noted that, to work this out precisely, Kaynak wrote down his calculations on sheets placed beside the stopwatch on his desk. When asked about his working method, Kaynak explained as follows:

In a film, the length of a song is measured in metres of film stock. There are 52 frames per metre. A film shows 24 frames per second. Now, to create a song that will last 47 metres, some calculations are required. For example, I am currently working on a song that will last one minute and forty seconds in the film. For this, I have a stopwatch in front of me (Es, 1941, p. 7).

Alaeddin Yavaşca, Kaynak's student and a musician, recalled that Kaynak and Bingöl worked simultaneously on syllable-to-melody align-

ment while composing. They first classified syllables as open or closed, then noted the duration of each syllable in 'elif' units. In this way, they tracked vowel length with considerable precision. Yavaşca also noted that Kaynak, beyond syllable counts, mapped the duration of instrumental passages and on-screen action, shaping both lyrics and notation accordingly (Yavaşca, cited in Özdemir, 2017, p. 387). İlhan Arakon's observations of Kaynak during a dubbing session support this account (Şen, 2003, p. 237).

Among the films for which Kaynak composed music, *Harunürreşid'in Gözdesi* stands out as a key example. He noted that the decision to commission Turkish music for the film was debated at length by the producers, and that the final solution was to screen two prints in two different cinemas: one with Turkish music and one in the original version. He added that the Turkish-music print grossed three times as much as the original did, which he interpreted as evidence of "the value the Turkish nation places on its own music" (Kaynak, 1944, pp. 6–17).

Yet the weakening of Arab film circulation after the late 1940s should not be understood only as a process of decline. As Cantek argued, the success of Egyptian melodramas and their Turkish musical adaptations did not simply disappear; rather, local productions entered the market by attaching themselves to this model and gradually came to occupy its place. In his formulation, local cinema products were integrated into the market through Egyptian films and eventually functioned as their heirs. He also stressed that this transformation should be understood together with protectionist intervention, the demands of Turkish filmmakers, and the expansion of domestic production rather than as the effect of a simple ban narrative (Cantek, 2025, pp. 174, 186–187, 198). From this perspective, 1952 marked less a point of disappearance than a point of reconfiguration, at which a transnational exhibition model began to lose force while some of its melodramatic and musical strategies were reworked within local production.

This reconfiguration can also be observed in domestic production in the early 1950s. As Tunç Yıldırım noted, at the request of producer Hürrem Erman, director Lütfi Akad made films such as *Tahir ile Zühre* and *Arzu ile Kamber*, which were shot in Baghdad and shaped by the aesthetics of Egyptian song melodramas. In this sense, these films reworked the musical and melodramatic model within Turkish production rather than extending the Arab-film cycle itself (Yıldırım, 2016, pp. 145–149).

Kaynak's name last appears in advertisements as the composer of the 1952 film *Kara Bahtım*. By this point, Arab films were losing visibility as domestic production gained greater force. Cantek explicitly linked this transition to the way Egyptian films stimulated local production and helped reshape the market within which Turkish cinema developed, while Muharrem Gürses later recalled that Arab films had encouraged filmmakers of the period to produce local films and that they set out to make films that would surpass them (Cantek, 2025, pp. 174, 186–188; Kirel, 1995, p. 62). Taken together, this indicates that Kaynak-centered musical localization belonged not only to a specific cycle of Arab film circulation, but also to a broader moment of transition in which exhibition practices, musical forms, and melodramatic models were being reworked within Turkish cinema.

Findings: Distribution Patterns, Economic Constraint, and Musical Concentration in the Auditory Localization of Arab Films

The graphs in this section track three things: the yearly distribution of first screenings in Türkiye, the composers and singers involved in musical localization, and the post-1948 decline in screenings. Taken together, they allow the article's central claim to be tested against the evidence. The dataset shows how auditory familiarity works in practice, how Turkish-language adaptations became routine, and how economic pressures affected film circulation.

The expression $N = 144$ in the graphs refers to a dataset of 144 Arab films first screened between 1937 and 1952. When compiling this list, only first screenings were coded; re-screenings were excluded. The names of composers and singers were counted separately based on each film's advertisement, and the totals were calculated accordingly. Although some advertisements did not list the composer or singer, the distributions were still calculated across the same set of 144 films ($N = 144$). The resulting frequencies therefore reflect how often specific names and labels appear in the advertisements, rather than any broader measure of popularity.

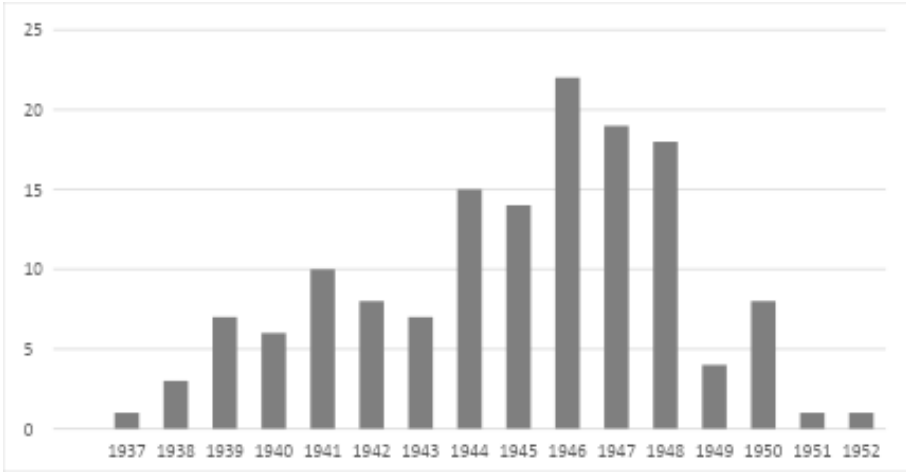


Figure 3. Annual Distribution of Arab Films First Released in Türkiye (1937–1952) (N = 144)

Figure 3, which shows the distribution of Arab films first screened between 1937 and 1952 by year, reveals the years in which screenings intensified and began to decline. The increase in the number of films screened in cinemas from 1938 onward appears to have been driven largely by *Aşkın Gözyaşları (Dumu' al-Hubb)*, 1936). The audience's interest in this film helped increase the number of Arab films in subsequent years.

The second conclusion that can be drawn from the graph is that, by 1942, Turkish-language adaptations of songs in films featuring Egypt's famous singers had become a regular feature of circulation. Of the 23 films screened between 1939 and early 1942, 15 were shown with Turkish-language music. This suggests that the shift in 1942 was likely driven by audience interest in Turkish-music versions and by exhibitors' preference for these versions over the original Arabic-song versions. From 1948 onward, the number of films declined significantly, but screenings continued until 1952. This indicates that the cycle did not end with an official ban, but tapered off as a distribution model that weakened over time.

A major factor in the slowdown and decline of Arab film circulation after 1948 was the change in tax regulation. The Municipal Revenue Law, which came into force on July 1, 1948, altered the entertainment tax in favor of Turkish films and increased the cost of exhibiting foreign films in cinemas (Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Resmî Gazete, 1948). Yet this change

should not be treated as an isolated cause. As recent work on the 1948 admission tax has shown, the law functioned not only as a fiscal adjustment but also within a broader framework of cultural protectionism, sectoral mobilization, and shifting national cinema priorities (Çam & Çam, 2026, pp. 97, 103–104). This broader orientation can also be seen in *Filmlerimiz*, the 1946 brochure of the Yerli Film Yapanlar Cemiyeti, which presented domestic film production as a national concern and supported fiscal measures in favor of local films (Yerli Film Yapanlar Cemiyeti, 1946).

In practice, this intervention directly affected cinema programming and, in turn, the patterns of circulation. From this date onward, cinemas increasingly preferred to show Turkish films rather than imported films, while audience demand for cinema itself did not decline, as data from the Istanbul Municipal Statistics Directorate also suggests (Berktaş, 2008, pp. 64–65). At the same time, however, the weakening of Arab film circulation cannot be reduced to tax regulation alone. The effects of the new tax framework became more pronounced within a broader shift that also included the renewed availability of European and American imports after the war and the growing visibility of domestic production (Çam & Çam, 2026, pp. 102–103, 106–107). In this sense, Arab films were not affected simply as foreign films; they were especially vulnerable because they circulated through a more specific exhibition model built around musical localization, recognizability structured around particular singers, and adjustable program duration.

Furthermore, the circulation of Arab films in Turkish cinemas overlapped with the Second World War. Due to the war, film production in Europe declined and customs operations became more restricted. Consequently, during these years, Türkiye faced difficulties importing both European films and American films distributed through Europe. According to Nijat Özön, the importation of American films via Egypt helped open a route through which Arab films also entered Türkiye (Özön, 1962, p. 117). In this respect, the wartime circulation of Arab films was shaped not only by audience interest, but also by the temporary weakening of competing import channels. In the post-war years, imports resumed, and Türkiye's broader pattern of film imports began to return to its earlier form. This shift also contributed, together with tax regulation and the growing visibility of domestic production, to the decline in the number of Arab films shown in cinemas.

In the periodical press data, only 14 of the 144 films in the dataset

were advertised with labels such as “Arabic songs.” The advertisements for all of these films featured famous Egyptian singers such as Muhammed Abdülvehab, Ümmü Gülsüm, Leyla Murad (Leila Mourad), Fatma Rüşdi (Fatma Rushdi), and Azize Emir (Aziza Amir). Audience familiarity with these singers, shaped through radio broadcasting, made it possible for the films they starred in to circulate without Turkish lyrics or other forms of Turkish localization. This was not an option extended to all singers appearing in Arab films, but a limited exception associated with a relatively small group of recognizable names.

In 1942, the songs and musical numbers in films featuring these singers were also adapted into Turkish. Yet titles such as *Elmacı Güzelili* (*Tan*, March 8, 1942), with Azize Emir, and *Yetimenin Aşkı* (*Cumhuriyet*, April 7, 1948), with Abdülvehab and Leyla Murad, were still screened with Arabic songs. This suggests that localization was not a fixed formula, but a practice that shifted according to context, the recognizability of particular singers, and exhibition conditions.

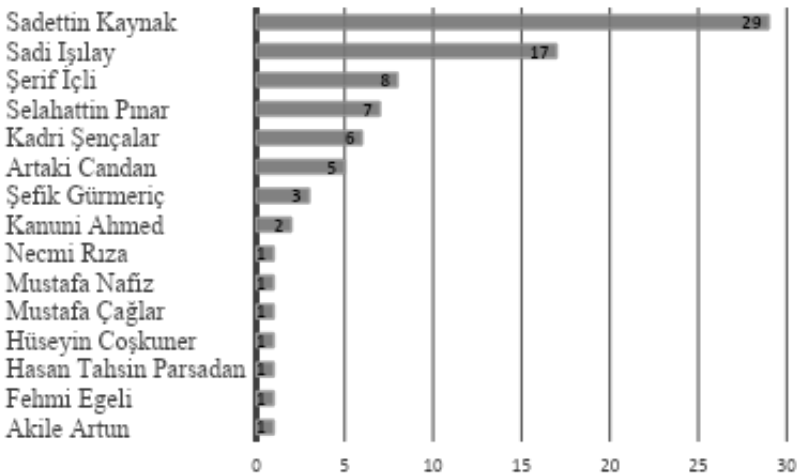


Figure 4. Distribution of Composers Involved in the Musical Localization of Arab Films (1938–1952) ($N = 144$ Films)

Figure 4 shows that localization practices did not unfold at random, but followed a fairly stable pattern centered on prominent Turkish

composers of the period. Sadettin Kaynak, often treated as the key figure in musical localization, appears as the most frequent contributor, with 29 films in the list. This concentration is not limited to Kaynak: Sadi Işıl (17 films), Şerif İçli (eight films), and Selahattin Pınar (seven films) suggest that localization clustered around a small set of well-known names in Turkish music. Moreover, these composers' names recur in advertisements until the late 1940s, after which they give way to less familiar figures as this cycle loses momentum.

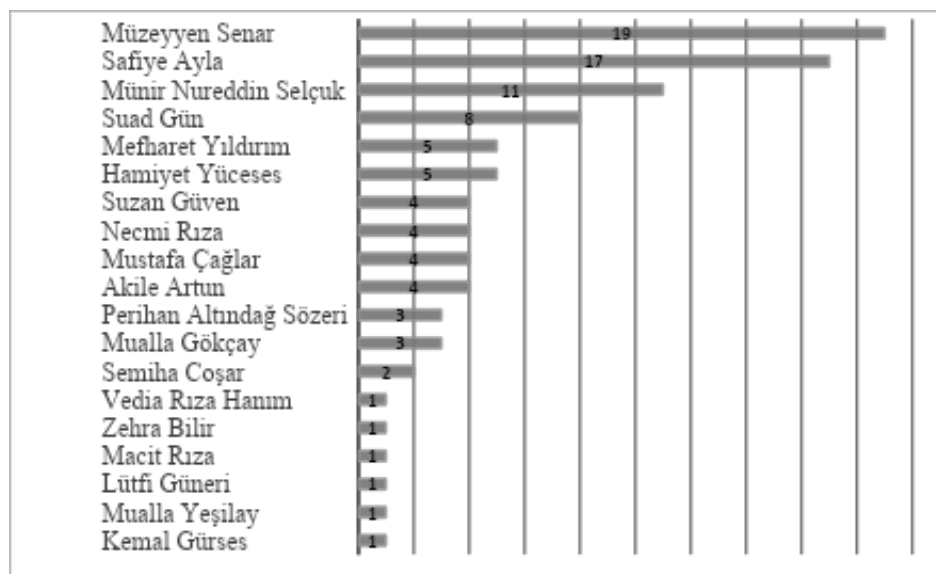


Figure 5. Distribution of Performers Featured in Arab Films by Number of Titles (1937–1952) ($N = 144$ Films)

Figure 5 shows a similar clustering among singers. The repeated presence of performers such as Müzeyyen Senar (19 films), Safiye Ayla (17 films), and Münir Nurettin Selçuk (11 films), whom Kaynak often worked with, suggests that localization was not a cheap stopgap, but a sustained practice involving leading vocalists of the era.

The fact that lyricists besides Vecdi Bingöl were not mentioned in advertisements indicates that the promotional approach in periodicals of the time prioritized composers and performers. Although the lyrics he wrote and his collaboration with Kaynak were confirmed by Kaynak, Bingöl's name appears in only two advertisements (*Emir'in Gözdesi*, *Son Posta*, April 18, 1946; and *Acı Günlerim*, *Cumhuriyet*, March 1, 1947). Notably, Şerif İçli appears as the composer of the music for these two films for which Bingöl wrote the lyrics. Although Kaynak and Bingöl worked together during the

height of Arab film distribution, their names do not appear together in any advertisement.

The data also show that musical localization clustered within a fairly specific industry setup. The fact that most films cluster around Kaynak, his regular collaborators, and İpek Film at the height of circulation suggests that dubbing, music production, and the exhibition circuit were organized through the same commercial infrastructure. This, in turn, suggests that localization functioned as a settled sector practice rather than a series of individual initiatives.

Consequently, the similarity of cinema circuits, the recurrence of composer and singer clusters, and the continuity of localization over time suggest that the findings are not coincidental, but reflect a consistent exhibition pattern. However, this pattern shifted at times in response to the period's economic conditions.

When the findings are considered together, it becomes apparent that Arab films' withdrawal from circulation was not the result of a single, abrupt ban, but of several factors working together: the 1948 tax regulations, the growing dominance of Turkish films on cinema programs, and the resumption of film imports from Europe after the Second World War. Furthermore, the findings suggest that the logic of this circulation took shape through the interplay of auditory familiarity, auditory regime, and circulation regime.

Discussion

The advertisement data obtained from the periodical survey show that localization was not a uniform intervention imposed in the same way on every film. The coexistence of Turkish music and Arabic songs during this period is the clearest indication of this. Rather than reflecting a simple opposition between prohibition and liberalization, these parallel practices point to a differentiated exhibition strategy shaped by the management of sound in circulation.

This differentiation operated most clearly around certain star singers. Films starring famous Egyptian performers such as Muhammed Abdülvehab, Ümmü Gülsüm, and Leyla Murad could circulate with their original Arabic songs, whereas films featuring less recognizable singers were more often localized into Turkish. The boundary of this flexibility was therefore set not by a fixed rule, but by a historically formed auditory

familiarity shaped through radio and reinforced in cinema culture. In this respect, localization was not inevitable. It remained a context-specific choice structured around recognizability, expected audience response, and the practical conditions of exhibition.

The findings also suggest that musical localization should be understood not simply as a matter of translation, but as part of an exhibition economy. The continuity of the practice around Sadettin Kaynak and other prominent composers and singers of the period indicates that localization had become a settled operational model rather than an occasional intervention. Kaynak's working method, based on cuts, rescoring, duration management, and syllabic calculation, shows that songs were reshaped in ways that made programs easier to schedule and screenings more viable for cinema owners. In this sense, musical localization worked at once as a narrative adjustment and as a practical solution to the timing and cost pressures of exhibition.

Seen from this angle, the decline of Arab films after 1948 cannot be reduced to a ban or single legal intervention. Cantek likewise questions explanations that derive Turkish musical adaptation directly from prohibition alone, arguing instead that Turkish musical versions became consolidated because they proved commercially effective within the exhibition economy of the period (Cantek, 2025, p. 190). The present dataset pushes this argument further by showing that the practical force of prohibition was uneven. Some films, such as *Yetimenin Aşkı*, continued to circulate with Arabic songs even after 1948. Moreover, earlier examples such as Harunürreşid'in Gözdesi show that, in exceptional cases, the same title could circulate in different sonic versions across different cinemas. What weakened after 1948 was not simply the presence of Arab films as imported films, but the sustainability of a more specific circulation regime. Tax regulation was a major factor in this process, but it operated together with the renewed availability of European and American imports after the war and the growing visibility of domestic production.

Arab films were especially exposed within this changing environment because their circulation depended on more than import channels or general demand for foreign productions. It also relied on the continued viability of a localized auditory format that made long musical films manageable within Turkish exhibition conditions. Once the broader programming environment shifted, this model became more fragile. The decline of Arab films in Turkish cinemas should therefore be understood

less as the abrupt end of a prohibited cycle than as the weakening of a historically specific articulation between auditory familiarity, localization, and exhibition economy.

From this perspective, Rancière's notion of the "distribution of the sensible" helps illuminate how this auditory order remained selective rather than uniform. The circulation of both Turkish renditions and original Arabic songs suggests that the boundaries of audibility were historically organized, but not absolutely fixed (Rancière, 2008, pp. 147–148). Likewise, Attali's approach is useful not because it replaces the historical explanation, but because it clarifies how music functioned here as an organizing practice. In the localization model associated with Kaynak, music did not operate merely as an aesthetic supplement. It worked as a practical mechanism through which circulation was adjusted to the temporal and economic demands of exhibition. In that sense, the management of meters, seconds, and syllabic duration offers a concrete instance of what Attali calls the "organization of noise" (Attali, 2009, pp. 4–5, 15).

At the same time, the argument developed here should be read within the limits of the study's scope. The corpus is built primarily from Istanbul-based periodicals and therefore reconstructs the circulation and localization of Arab films through the exhibition practices most visible in Istanbul. It does not claim to map the full geography of circulation across Türkiye. Nor does it attempt to cover all other sound-localization practices applied to foreign films in the same period. The localization of Indian, American, or Italian films, and the wider history of dubbed comic and musical imports, remain important comparative lines of inquiry that lie beyond the present study.

Conclusion

This article proposes a different way of understanding the circulation of Arab films in Türkiye between 1937 and 1952 than the familiar prohibition-centered narrative. It does not deny the importance of prohibition, censorship, or the fiscal changes introduced after 1948. However, it argues that these factors alone cannot adequately explain either the rise or the decline of Arab films in Turkish cinemas.

The findings suggest that Arab films circulated in Türkiye through a specific auditory and exhibition regime shaped by historically formed auditory familiarity, musical localization, and cinema economy. This regime did not operate through a stable or uniform model. It depended on

selective forms of recognizability, differentiated localization practices, and exhibition routines organized around timing, scheduling, and program management. For this reason, the weakening of Arab film circulation after 1948 should be understood not simply as the result of a ban, but as the gradual loss of viability of a more specific localized musical exhibition model.

In this respect, 1952 should be understood less as an absolute endpoint than as a threshold. What came to weaken was not only the circulation of Arab films as imported films, but a particular model through which they had been rendered workable within Turkish exhibition conditions. The article therefore redefines the chronology of the period on the basis of the dataset, proposing 1937–1952 as a more precise range than the conventional 1938–1948 or 1938–1950 frame.

Although the Istanbul-based dataset limits direct generalization to the whole country, Istanbul's central role in importation, dubbing, and exhibition makes it a strong core case for understanding broader circulation patterns. Future researchers can extend this contribution by tracing these dynamics beyond Istanbul and by examining more closely how some of the musical and exhibition logics associated with Arab films may also have been rearticulated in other foreign-film localization practices and, potentially, within domestic production.

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ORCID

Alican Yıldırım  <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-9573-8611>

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Appendix A. Representative Sample of Arab Films Identified Through Periodical Advertisements (1937–1952)

Due to space limitations, this appendix presents a representative sample rather than the full list of 144 films in the dataset. The sample is designed to reflect variation across years, exhibition venues, advertisement labels, and singer-centered circulation patterns.

Turkish release title	First screening date	Cinema(s)	Advertisement label	Main singer/star	Composer / singer in Turkish version (if stated)
<i>Bağdad Bülbülü</i>	February 20, 1937	Sümer	Arabic songs	–	–
<i>Arzu ile Kanber</i>	February 10, 1938	Türk	Turkish songs	–	Sadettin Kaynak
<i>Aşkın Gözyaşları</i>	November 23, 1938	Taksim	Arabic songs	Muhammed Abdülvehab	–
<i>Yaşasın Aşk</i>	March 15, 1939	Sümer	Arabic songs	Abdülvehab, Leyla Murad	–
		Taksim			
<i>Ümid Şarkısı</i>	September 22, 1939	Taksim	Arabic songs	Ümmü Gülsüm	–
<i>Leyla ile Mecnun</i>	October 23, 1940	İpek	Turkish songs	–	Sadettin Kaynak; Münir Nureddin, Müzeyyen Senar
<i>Binbirinci Gece</i>	March 27, 1941	İpek	Turkish songs	–	Sadettin Kaynak; Münir Nureddin, Müzeyyen Senar
<i>Harunürreşid'in Gözdesi</i>	January 3, 1942	Saray	Arabic songs	Ümmü Gülsüm	–
		İpek	Turkish songs	–	Sadettin Kaynak; Müzeyyen Senar
<i>Elmacı Güzeli</i>	March 8, 1942	Taksim	Arabic songs	Azize Emir	–
<i>Kahire Sokaklarında</i>	December 18, 1942	Taksim	Turkish songs	–	Sadi Işlay; Müzeyyen Senar
<i>Gizli Aşk</i>	February 20, 1943	İpek	Turkish songs	Yusuf Vehbi, Leyla Murad	Sadettin Kaynak; Müzeyyen Senar
<i>Beyaz Melek</i>	November 5, 1947	Milli	Turkish songs	–	Sadettin Kaynak
		Alemdar			
		Şık			
<i>Yetimenin Aşkı</i>	April 7, 1948	Azak	Arabic songs	Abdülvehab, Leyla Murad	–
		Hilal			
<i>Nil Bakiresi</i>	May 8, 1952	Taksim	Unspecified	Yusuf Vehbi, Leyla Murad	–

Note. Titles are given as they appear in periodical advertisements. Advertisement labels reproduce the wording of the source material in simplified English form.