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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the significant foreign policy changes with respect to Turkey's relations with the Middle East and North Africa region within four relatively distinct periods of the two-decade rule of the *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* - 2002-2010; 2011-2015; 2016-2020; 2020-2022. It analyzes Turkey's foreign policy changes based on the application of three intersecting levels of analysis: transformations in the regional and global international system, shifts in domestic politics and changes in individual leadership. The article contributes to the foreign policy literature by demonstrating that the continuity in power of a more centralized government does not guarantee continuity in foreign policy as conceptualized in the literature on foreign policy change.

Keywords: AKP foreign policy, Middle East and North Africa, Turkey, foreign policy, foreign policy change

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Introduction: A Model of Explaining Foreign Policy Change

The Justice and Development Party (*Adalet and Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP), has led Turkey since late 2002. Over the two decades that followed the AKP has made significant foreign policy changes. We argue that most changes go beyond mere foreign policy adjustments or tooling. Rather, they involve important transformations in goals and orientation.¹ The literature on foreign policy change (FPC) argues that wholesale change in a state's foreign policy is rare² and even rarer in states ruled by the same party.³ Hence, the frequency and the extent of the AKP's foreign policy changes is quite remarkable.

- 1 For graduated levels of foreign policy change see Charles Hermann, "Changing Course: When Governments Choose to Redirect Foreign Policy", *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No 1, 1990, p. 3–21.
- 2 Jerel A. Rosati et.al., *Foreign Policy Restructuring: How Governments Respond to Global Change*, Columbia, South Carolina, South Carolina University Press, 1994.
- 3 Thomas J. Volgy and John E. Schwarz, "Foreign Policy Restructuring and the Myriad Webs of Restraint", Rosati JA, Hagan JD and Sampson MW III (eds.), *Foreign Policy Restructuring: How Governments Respond to Global Change*, Colombia, SC, University of South Carolina Press, 1994, p. 32.

The study of FPC has proliferated since the end of the Cold War, yet without the emergence of a general theoretical framework.⁴ Nonetheless, there is a growing consensus in the field that the study of FPC requires attention to three levels of analysis: the international level, the domestic level and the level of individual decision makers. Hermann's pioneering studies on FPC essentially used this framework by mainly focusing on the domestic and individual levels but also referring to external environment as a stimulus for FPC.⁵ Gustavsson⁶ then designed a model for explaining FPC that focused on fundamental structural conditions, strategies of political leaders and the presence of a crisis. Problematically there are evident shifts in foreign policy occurring without a crisis. A recent study by Haar and Pierce utilized the Advocacy Coalition Framework to explain FPC.⁷ Their framework goes beyond a state's leadership and includes institutional actors such as bureaucracies at the domestic level. There is less discussion of the international level variables. Scholars mainly identify systemic conditions as well as specific policies of external powers as affecting FPC by leading states to reconceptualize security threats⁸ or systemically allowing more policy flexibility.⁹ In short, the international environment presents challenges and opportunities that may lead to FPC.

This article will apply the three levels of analysis to explain the changes in AKP foreign policy towards the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region in four periods from 2002 through 2022. In doing so, it identifies the plausible drivers of change in each phase.¹⁰ As to the international level we consider both systemic and actor-based transformations at the global and regional level. Inspired by Haar and Pierce's framework, the study identifies three variables at the domestic level to explain the AKP's foreign policy changes: institutions, domestic coalitions, and leadership and ideology.

This approach contributes to the FPC literature in two ways. First, it demonstrates the importance of global systemic changes and equally if not more important regional systemic changes in explaining FPC especially for a middle power such as Turkey.¹¹ Secondly, this model shows that there is no *a priori* hierarchy between the three levels of analysis. In other words, it does not give priority to the international systemic level as does Neoclassical Realism. Nor does it give priority to domestic level variables that determine policy outcomes as does traditional Foreign Policy Analysis. Rather this model stresses the importance of the mutual interaction

4 Tim Haesebrouck and Jereon Joly, "Foreign Policy Change: Foreign Policy Adjustments to Fundamental Reorientations", *Political Studies Review*, Vol. 19, No 3, 2021, p. 482-491.

5 Hermann, "Changing Course".

6 Jacob Gustavsson, "How Should We Study Foreign Policy Change?", *Cooperation and Conflict*, Vol. 34, No 1, 1999, p. 73-95.

7 Roberta N. Haar and Jonathan J. Pierce, "Foreign Policy Change from an Advocacy Coalition Perspective", *International Studies Review*, Vol. 23, No 4, 2021, p. 1771-1791.

8 Spyros Blavoukas and Dimitris Bourantonis, "Identifying Parameters of Foreign Policy Change: An Eclectic Approach", *Cooperation and Conflict*, Vol. 49 No 4, 2014, p. 483-500.

9 Volgy and Schwarz, "Foreign Policy Restructuring".

10 There are few studies on the first topic as regards to Turkey's foreign policy. See, for instance, Meliha B. Altunişik and Lenore G. Martin, "Making Sense of Turkish Foreign Policy in the Middle East under AKP", *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 12, No 4, 2011, p. 569-587.

11 Tarık Oğuzlu and Ahmet Kasım Han, "Making Sense of Turkey's Foreign Policy from the Perspective of Neorealism", *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol. 20, No 78, p. 59-77.

of the level of analysis variables in bringing about FPC. The interaction between the level of analysis involves a two-way effect, rather than a one-way causal effect. The action that initiates the FPC may occur at the leadership, state, regional or the global level. The important point is that none of these level of analysis variables by themselves necessarily results in foreign policy change. More importantly, their interaction affects the nature of the change.

Furthermore, this framework argues for analytical eclecticism. It calls for bridging material and ideational factors in explaining FPC. In the AKP case, material factors such as the structure of the international/regional system as well as Turkey's military and economic capabilities play a role in its foreign policy changes. Just as importantly, identity politics and ideology have affected the perceptions of the AKP leadership of the developments in Turkey's external environment as well as how they approach the linkages between foreign and domestic politics. The interactions between the three levels of analysis as well as the interrelations of material and ideational factors will be explored in each of the four AKP periods of FPC in Turkey. In each period we identify continuities of policies adopted in the prior period as well as the wellsprings of changes that occur in the following period. The demarcations of the start and end times of each period should be viewed as heuristic rather than definitive.

Period I: Activism in the East and West (2002-2010)

The AKP was established in August 2001 by the younger generation of the Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi*), the party of Turkey's Islamist movement, the National Outlook (*Milli Görüş*). The AKP came to power in November 2002 in the first election in which it participated, branding itself as a "conservative democrat" party representing the center right. It also presented itself as an "outsider anti-system party." As such, the AKP government emphasized the "newness" of its policies, placing its foreign policies on par with its novel economic and social policies. For the AKP its foreign policy became more than Turkey's engagement with the outside, but also part of its domestic politics and its quest for restructuring Turkey's politics and identity.¹²

Despite the claim of newness, some of the AKP's foreign policies continued Turkey's traditional practices, such as engaging in the European Union (EU) process and emphasizing Turkey's relations with NATO allies. In this first period, the AKP government's main foreign policy goal was "Europeanisation."¹³ The previous coalition government had already introduced some political and legislative reforms necessary for EU membership. These included abolishing the death penalty, reducing police powers for detention, and implementing a new civil code particularly aimed at improving freedom of association and assembly. As a result, at the Helsinki Summit in 1999 the EU started the accession process with Turkey. The AKP government then quickly passed the necessary laws including limiting the strength of the military in the National Security Council and introducing political and social reforms such as increasing Kurdish language rights. Turkey's accession negotiations with the EU began in 2005.

12 Lisel Hintz, *Identity Politics Inside Out: National Identity Contestation and Foreign Policy in Turkey*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018.

13 Ziya Onis & Suhnaz Yılmaz, "Between Europeanization and Euro-Asianism: Foreign Policy Activism in Turkey during the AKP Era", *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 10, No 1, 2009, s. 7-24.

The AKP also sought to repair ties with the United States (US) that had been damaged by Turkey's refusal to support the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. The party chose to blame "the old Turkey", mainly the military for this demarche, even though some influential AKP members and parliamentarians had been responsible for the parliament's failure to approve the bill supporting the invasion. The AKP government succeeded in becoming an active participant in the Bush administration's post-9/11 policies by sending non-combat troops to Afghanistan and declaring support for the US policy of "forward strategy of freedom" in the Middle East that aimed at encouraging democratization as a path towards peace in the region.¹⁴ Distinguishing itself from the "old Turkey" allowed the AKP to proclaim an apparent "change" in its foreign policy and liberation from the "tutelage of the establishment."¹⁵ It, thereby, presented itself as "new" to internal and external audiences.

However, towards the end of this period in some areas AKP foreign policy did begin to diverge from previous Turkish foreign policy. Especially after 2007, that is starting from its second government, the AKP began to focus more on its relations with the MENA region and its attempts to harmonize its regional activism with its relations with the West ended. In the MENA region there were two major changes. The first was a general shift towards the region, and the second was a shift in Turkey's policy towards the newly-established Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). The former shift became evident with the AKP's adoption of a "new" policy of "zero problems with neighbors." In conformity with this policy, the AKP exerted great efforts to convert Turkey's relations with Syria from hostility over water, territorial disagreements and the harboring of the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) into one of increased trade, visa free travel, military cooperation, and friendship. As a result, Turkey's relations with Syria went beyond normalization and reached a level of "strategic partnership."¹⁶ This was underscored by Bashar al-Assad's first Syrian Presidential visit to Turkey in January 2004, followed up by the formation of a "High Level Strategic Cooperation Council."¹⁷ By 2009 there were meetings of their most important cabinet ministers. Turkish-Syrian trade increased from \$1 billion in 2007 to over \$4 billion in 2009.¹⁸ Syria also cooperated in returning PKK terrorists to Turkey,¹⁹ and amazingly the two leaders and their wives vacationed together. Assad referred to Turkey as Syria's best friend and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan called Syrians his brothers.²⁰

14 Fact sheet: President Bush Calls for a "Forward Strategy of Freedom" to Promote Democracy in the Middle East, The White House, November 2003 <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/11/20031106-11.html> (Accessed 1 September 2022).

15 Kılıç B. Kanat and Burhaneddin Duran, *AK party Years in Turkey: Domestic and Foreign Policy*, Ankara, SETAV Publishers, 2020.

16 "Turkey, Syria sign strategic partnership," *UPI*, 14 October 2009, <https://www.upi.com/Turkey-Syria-sign-strategic-partnership/1963125549037> (Accessed 1 November 2022).

17 Sebnem Arsu, "Turkey and Syria Signal Improved Relations", *New York Times*, 22 October 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/14/world/europe/14turkey.html> (Accessed 5 August 2022).

18 Robert Worth, "Relations With Turkey Kindle Hopes in Syria", *New York Times*, 15 December 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/15/world/middleeast/15syria.html> (Accessed 5 August 2022).

19 Ibid.

20 Chris Phillips, "Turkey, Syria's New Best Friend", *The Guardian*, 1 October 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2009/oct/01/turkey-syria-friendship> (Accessed 2 October 2009).

Similar shifts in the AKP's new MENA policies were evident in Saudi King Abdullah's first royal visit to Turkey in 40 years and referred to it as "a turning point in improving relations between Turkey and Saudi Arabia."²¹ Two years later Turkey signed a Memorandum of Understanding making it the first Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) strategic partner outside the Gulf.²² Turkey also took on a role as mediator for peace between Syria and Israel,²³ between Hamas and Fatah,²⁴ and between Iran and the international community.²⁵ In August 2010 Turkey announced the formation of a "Quadripartite High Level Cooperation Council" with Syria, Jordan and Lebanon. The Council which sought to "enhance cooperation on common concerns" as a long term strategic partnership" was to be open to other "brotherly countries."²⁶ Turkey also sought to add to its Free Trade Agreements with Syria and Jordan by finalizing another with Lebanon but without success. Turkey and Egypt also signed a more limited Free Trade Agreement that came into effect in March 2007.²⁷ The two states had long been discussing energy cooperation without agreement. The AKP continued these talks. As he had done with other Middle East countries Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu along with the foreign minister of Egypt pledged to set up a high level strategic council to increase political and trade cooperation.²⁸

Clearly, the change in Turkey's domestic leadership began to look East towards its Middle Eastern neighbors in addition to maintaining relationships with the West, as a source of influence and trade in ways that have not always been welcome by its Western allies. For example, Turkey helped Syria move out of isolation imposed by France and the US when they were pressuring Syria to withdraw troops from Lebanon after the death of former Prime Minister of Lebanon Rafic Hariri. Turkey also formed a trilateral relationship with Syria and Iran over concerns of the future of Iraq after the US invasion. This change from harmonizing its foreign policy in the MENA region with that of the US and the EU began to occur at the end first decade of the 2000s when the AKP government expanded its involvement in the region while at the same time increasing its autonomy. Underlying these shifts in Turkey's MENA policies and general changes in its tools of foreign policy were the soft power theories²⁹ of

21 Raid Qusti and M Ghazanfar Ali Khan, "King Abdullah To Make Historic Visit to Turkey," *Arab News*, 6 August 2006, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/282954> (Accessed 5 August 2022).

22 "Relations between Türkiye and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)," https://www.mfa.gov.tr/korfez-arap-ulkeleri-isbirligi-konseyi_en.en.mfa (Accessed 2 September 2022).

23 "Assad: Turkey is Needed for Peace in the Region," *Dünya*, 8 October 2010 <https://www.dunya.com/gundem/assad-quotturkey-is-needed-for-peace-in-the-regionquot-haberi-127782> (Accessed 30 July 2022).

24 "Turkey Says It Would Mediate between Hamas and Fatah," *Jerusalem Post*, 19 January 2009, <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/turkey-says-it-would-mediate-between-hamas-and-fatah> (Accessed 30 August 2022).

25 Rahman G. Bonab, "Turkey's Emerging Role as a Mediator on Iran's Nuclear Activities," *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 11, No 3 2009, p. 169-171

26 Joint Declaration on the Establishment of the High Level Cooperation Council among Turkey, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon 8-2-10. <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/joint-political-declaration-on-the-establishment-of-the-high-level-cooperation-council-among-turkey-syria-jordan-and-lebanon.en.mfa> (Accessed 2 September 2022).

27 "The Egypt-Turkey Free Trade Agreement," USAID, August 2007. https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/pnadx293.pdf (Accessed 2 September 2022).

28 "Turkey, Egypt to Sign Deal for Closer Ties," *Daily News Egypt*, 22 November 2010, <https://dailynewsegyp.com/2010/11/22/turkey-egypt-to-sign-deal-for-closer-ties/> (Accessed 30 July 2022).

29 Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Address by Turkish Foreign Minister of Republic of Turkey Ahmet Davutoğlu*, 18 December 2009, SETA Foundation, Washington DC.

former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, such as his theory of “rhythmic diplomacy”³⁰ as set forth in his publications and speeches, including in his book, *Stratejik Derinlik* (Strategic Depth).³¹

The other major change in Turkish foreign policy under the AKP involved Ankara’s improved relations with the KRG from 2008 onwards. The end of the Cold War had enabled the US to invade Iraq in 2003. For Turkey the invasion threatened to end Baghdad’s control over most of the Kurdish populated areas. It also permitted the emergence of *de facto* rule by the Kurdish political parties and potential havens for the PKK that Ankara viewed as an existential threat to Turkish security. After the US toppled the Saddam regime, the extensive role the Kurds played in establishing a new Iraq and the KRG foreshadowed for some the eventual birth of an independent Kurdish state. Therefore, with Turkey suffering an increased number of PKK terrorist attacks and with little success at convincing the US to control the PKK in Northern Iraq, the Erdoğan government reached out to the KRG directly to help end the attacks from across the border. Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu’s official visit to the KRG in October 2009 demonstrated that policy change and paved the way for the opening of Turkey’s consulate in Erbil in 2010.³² This was an important step to try solve the “The Kurdish problem.” Even the use of that phrase publicly by Prime Minister Erdoğan, in addressing the Kurds in 2005, was new for a Turkish leader.³³

How can we explain these changes in Turkey’s foreign policy towards the MENA region during this first period of AKP rule? Since these changes were introduced after a new party came to power, domestic level variables clearly played a role. One of these variables was the AKP’s worldview and ideology that had been critical of Turkey’s foreign policy since the inception of the Republic and characterized it as passive and defensive.³⁴ Specifically in the case of the MENA region, the AKP elites accused the Republic of “turning its back” on this region, where Turkey had “historical responsibility” and cultural proximity.³⁵

In addition to the ideology of the leadership and the party, institutional factors and domestic coalitions also played a role. The AKP had been framing itself as an outsider and in those early years tried to consolidate itself and “capture the state”. To consolidate its power the party implemented two main strategies. First, it aimed to undermine the power of the military which had been presenting itself as the “guardian of the Kemalist secular state”. The AKP eventually succeeded in doing so with the help of the US and the EU supporting it as furthering democratization and as part of the accession process. Secondly, the AKP formed alliances with other actors that were critical of and felt excluded from the Kemalist regime. Allying with the liberals, provided the AKP with intellectual capital in criticizing the regime. Allying with

30 Ahmet Davutoğlu, “Turkey’s Foreign Policy Vision: An Assessment of 2007”, *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 10, No 1, 2008, p. 82

31 Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik*, İstanbul, Küre Yayınları, 2001.

32 Özlem K. Pusane, “Türkiye’nin Kuzey Irak Politikasında Değişim: Turgut Özal ve Tayyip Erdoğan Dönemleri Karşılaştırmalı Analizi”, *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol. 14, No 56, 2017, p. 39-53.

33 Sabine Tavernise, “As Kurds’ Status Improves, Support for Militants Erodes in Turkey”, *New York Times*, 2 November 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/02/world/europe/02turkey.html> (Accessed 2 November 2007).

34 Meliha Altunışık, “Worldviews and Turkish Foreign Policy in the Middle East”, *New Perspectives in Turkey*, Vol. 40, 2009, pp. 169-172.

35 Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik*.

the Gülen movement provided administrative cadres, and allying with Kurdish nationalists provided more grassroots support. From 2007 to 2011, the AKP aimed to solve the Kurdish problem in Turkey by increasing its relations with the Iraqi Kurds.³⁶ Thus, desecuritization of Turkey's MENA policy and especially the policy towards the KRG was crucial for the AKP to achieve its domestic objectives. Desecuritization of Turkey's MENA policy and especially its policy towards the KRG not only helped to weaken civil and military bureaucratic resistance to the AKP but also to consolidate AKP's coalitions at home and abroad. In addition, it provided economic opportunities for the AKP which focused on achieving economic success as one of the most important pillars of its power. The turn to the MENA had provided opportunities for Anatolian businesses to prosper and became one of the backbones of the AKP government. Improving ties with the KRG, served that purpose as well as the promise of increasing Turkey's access to badly needed energy resources due to its increasing economic growth.³⁷ In short, the AKP utilized foreign policy in developing its domestic policy for its political survival and electoral successes.

In addition to the central importance of the domestic level variables, the international and regional level variables also provided the AKP with opportunities to implement foreign policy changes. At the international level, the West in the post-9/11 period favored Turkey as a possible model for democracy in Muslim countries. At the regional level, the changes in the post-2003 Middle East also created opportunities for Turkey. Concerned by the Shiites gaining power in Baghdad and the "rise of Iran" in Iraq and generally in regional politics, led Saudi Arabia and its allies in the Arab world to engage Turkey as a counter-balance to Iran. Similarly, the start of the accession process with the EU encouraged countries in the region to develop their relations with Turkey as a potential bridge to the West. At the same time Ankara, aimed to harmonize its foreign policy with that of the EU which led the government to prioritize soft power tools, economic interdependence and conflict resolution roles in the MENA region.

Period II: Becoming a Central State (2010–2015)

The second period of FPC towards the MENA region occurs in the 2010s. Turkey began to be more involved in the region and less concerned to prove its importance to its Western partners, as signified in Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's definition of Turkey as a "central state" (*merkez ülke*).³⁸ This change was also reflected in arguments in the literature over the degree to which Turkey's foreign policy was shifting from an emphasis on Europeanization to "soft Euro-Asianism."³⁹ In the late 2000s, the AKP's perception of Turkey as a "central state" led to an increasing divergence of its MENA policy from that of its Western allies with respect to Israel, engagement with Iran as well as deepening relations with the Assad regime in Syria and the Bashir

36 Altunışık and Martin, "Making Sense of Turkish Foreign Policy".

37 Gönül Tol, "Untangling the Turkey-KRG Energy Partnership: Looking Beyond Economic Drivers", *Global Turkey in Europe*, Stiftung Mercator, IAI, Istanbul Policy Center, March 2014, p. 2. <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/untangling-turkey-krge-energy-partnership> (Accessed 5 September 2022).

38 Davutoğlu was cognizant of Turkey's geographical location and history, when he used the term "Central State." His vision was Turkey acting in the Balkans, Middle East, the Caucasus and Central Asia and become a global actor. Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik*. This paper is concentrating on Turkey in the MENA.

39 Onis and Yılmaz, "Between".

regime in the Sudan. Thus, along with Brazil, Turkey worked against passage of UNSC 1929 that tightened sanctions on Iran due to its nuclear program. Then upon the resolution's passage, the AKP government argued that Ankara could only agree to abide by the UN sanctions and not the additional sanctions imposed by the EU and US, citing Ankara's interest to increase trade with its neighbors.⁴⁰ In 2009 then Prime Minister Erdoğan welcomed Sudan's leader Omar al-Bashir for a meeting of the Organization of Islamic Countries in Istanbul, defying an arrest warrant on al-Bashir by the International Criminal Court. Erdoğan explained that he did not see genocide on his visit to Darfur going on to say, "It is not possible for Muslims to commit genocide."⁴¹

The AKP's policy towards Israel also underwent a radical change from the prior period. Upon coming to power the AKP continued the positive relationship that Turkey and Israel had built beginning in the early 1990s based on mutual security concerns and economic interests⁴² and the changing regional and international system. Their relationship was increasingly tested by Israeli incursions in the Occupied Territories. Israel's 2008 attack on Gaza a few days following indirect talks in Istanbul on Israel-Syria peace angered Prime Minister Erdoğan and prompted his outburst at the World Economic Forum in Davos. Erdoğan verbally attacked Israel's President Shimon Peres saying, "When it comes to killing, you know very well how to kill."⁴³ Erdoğan returned home to a hero's welcome lauding him as "Conqueror of Davos!" and boosting his popularity in Turkey up by 19%, from 55% to 74%⁴⁴ Erdoğan's outburst engendered a similar reaction in the Arab world. According to the Annual Arab Opinion Poll following Davos he became the most popular world leader with a score boosted from 0 in 2008 to 4 in 2009 and after Davos he jumped to 20.⁴⁵

Relations with Israel worsened in 2010 when Turkey's Islamic oriented charity *İnsani Yardım Vakfı* (Humanitarian Aid Organization, İHH) organized a flotilla to bring humanitarian aid to the Palestinians of Gaza who had been under an Israeli blockade. The AKP government refused to stop the flotilla. When Israel tried to stop the lead boat, the *Mavi Marmara*, fighting ensued, killing nine of the activists onboard. Anti-Israel rhetoric increased and Ankara withdrew the Turkish Ambassador to Israel. This episode brings to the fore the disagreement over Hamas, deemed by Israel, the US and EU a terrorist group and by Turkey an Islamist group linked to the Muslim Brothers that Erdoğan sees as a positive influence in the region and similar to his AKP.⁴⁶

40 "Turkey to Follow UN Sanctions on Iran, Not Tougher EU or US Bans", *Hürriyet Daily News*, 27 July 2010, www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=turkey-to-follow-un-sanctions-on-iran-but-not-eu-or-us-sanctions-2010-07-27 (Accessed 27 July 2010).

41 "Erdoğan: 'A Muslim Can Never Commit Genocide'", *Hürriyet Daily News*, 9 November 2009, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=a-muslim-can-never-commit-genocide-erdogan-defends-bashir-2009-11-08> (Accessed 9 November 2009).

42 Ofra Bengio, *The Turkish-Israeli Relationship*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

43 Pelin Turgut, "Behind the Turkish Prime Minister's Outburst at Davos", *Time*, 20 January 2009, <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1875981,00.html> (Accessed 3 June 2022).

44 Emre Erdoğan, "Dış Politikada Siyasallaşma: Türk Kamuoyunun "Davos Krizi" ve Etkileri Hakkındaki Değerlendirmeleri", *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol. 10, No 37, 2013, p. 46.

45 "2010 Annual Arab Public Opinion Survey", University of Maryland with Zogby International, 5 August 2010 https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/0805_arabic_opinion_poll_telhami.pdf (Accessed 3 June 2022).

46 Sabine Tavernise, "Raid Jeopardizes Turkey Relations", *New York Times*, 31 May 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/01/world/middleeast/01turkey.html> (Accessed 3 August 2022).

Turkey's FPC became more pronounced in 2010-11 as a result of the Arab uprisings. The AKP perceived the changes brought about by the Arab uprisings as a “window of opportunity”⁴⁷ to embark on a policy of asserting itself as a leading regional power. Ankara discarded its previous roles of talking to almost every actor and honest broker in regional disputes, in favor of active involvement in the transformations in the Arab world. This became particularly evident with Turkey’s support for the Muslim Brothers in Egypt, Tunisia, and Syria where Turkey also supported some other Islamists groups.⁴⁸ Ankara was an early supporter of the pro-democracy forces in Cairo’s Tahrir Square who were calling for the overthrow of the Mubarak regime and a strong supporter of the new regime headed by the Muslim Brother’s Mohamed Morsi. Ankara therefore condemned Abdel Fattah el-Sisi’s military takeover of the Egyptian government after Morsi took office.⁴⁹ Furthermore, Prime Minister Erdoğan began using the four finger Rabaa (Rabia in Turkish) salute in support of ousted President Morsi, whose supporters were fiercely attacked in the Rabaa al-Adawiya mosque in Cairo.⁵⁰ Erdoğan also attacked the Sisi government at the United Nations as well as other UN members not objecting to the takeover.⁵¹

In Syria, Turkey’s FPC was even more pronounced. As noted above, Erdoğan and Davutoğlu had striven to build a strong relationship with the Assad regime. Once Assad refused to adjust his response to the Syrian uprising as Ankara had proposed, Turkey not only broke with the Syrian regime it adopted a staunch regime change policy and allowed the armed opposition safe haven on the Turkey-Syrian border.⁵² Ankara also allowed foreign fighters who wanted to join the Syrian opposition forces, to cross the border and armed some opposition groups.⁵³ Erdoğan no doubt believed that Assad would fall as had Mubarak providing an opening for more Turkish influence in Syria where Ankara supported the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood as part of the Syrian opposition.⁵⁴ As Mehmet Ali Birand stated in a 2011 article, Syrian state television was accusing Turkey of arming the Syrian Muslim Brothers. He went on to point out that for the Syrian regime the Muslim Brothers were seen as much of a threat to the state as Turkey sees the PKK threat.⁵⁵

47 Fredrik Doeser and Joakim Eidenfalk, “The Importance of Windows of Opportunity for Foreign Policy Change”, *International Area Studies Review*, Vol. 16, No 4, 2013, p. 390-406.

48 Beatrix Futák-Campbell and Hylke de Sauvage Nolting, “Turkey as Normative Power: Connections with the Muslim Brotherhood during the Arab Spring”, *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol. 19, No. 74, 2022, p. 3-19.

49 Daniel Dombey, “Erdoğan Attacks West’s Reaction to Morsi’s Overthrow”, *Financial Times*, 5 July 2013 <https://www.ft.com/content/b8396b56-e582-11e2-ad1a-00144feabdc0> (Accessed 6 July 2013).

50 “Four-finger Salutes as Turks Back Egypt Protesters”, *Reuters*, 19 August 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-turkey/four-finger-salutes-as-turks-back-egypt-protesters-idUSBRE97I0PI20130819> (Accessed 9 September 2022).

51 Micheal Gregory, “Egypt Blasts Turkish Leader Erdogan after U.N. Speech”, *Reuters*, 25 September 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-turkey/egypt-blasts-turkish-leader-erdogan-after-u-n-speech-idUSKCN0HK0TH20140925> (Accessed 9 September 2022).

52 Özlem Tür, “Turkey’s Role in the Middle East and Gulf Security”, *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, Vol. 13, No 4, 2019, p. 592-603.

53 Faysal Itani and Aaron Stein, “Turkey’s Syria Predicament”, *Atlantic Council*, May 2016, https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep03457#metadata_info_tab_contents (Accessed 10 October 2022).

54 Bayram Balci, “Turkey’s Relations with the Syrian Opposition”, *Carnegie Endowment*, 13 April 2012, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2012/04/13/turkey-s-relations-with-syrian-opposition-pub-47841> (Accessed 5 May 2012).

55 Mehmet Ali Birand, “Turkey Plans Buffer Zone on Syrian Land”, *Hürriyet Daily News*, 15 June 2011, www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=turkey-plans-buffer-zone-on-syrian-soil-2011-06-15, (Accessed 17 June 2011).

The causes of the FPC in AKP's relations in the MENA during this period can be located at the intersection of variables at three different analytical levels: the ideological influence of Erdoğan and Davutoğlu at the individual level; the "windows of opportunity"⁵⁶ presented to Ankara from Arab uprisings at the regional systemic level; and the AKP's changing alliances at the domestic level after it had largely concluded its domestic consolidation. In particular its alliance with the Gülen movement enabled it to control the most important institutions of the state. Davutoğlu who had been influential in AKP foreign policy as an advisor to Prime Minister Erdoğan, became Turkish Foreign Minister in May 2009. He called the Arab uprisings of 2010-11 the end of the imperially designed Sykes-Picot order and an opportunity to restore the Ottoman Peace, with the Republic, as the heir of the Ottoman Empire, playing the leading role in this process.⁵⁷ At the same time, Turkey's relations with the EU began to stall, ironically soon after the start of the accession negotiations.

Period III: Strategic Autonomy (2016-2020)

A third period of AKP's FPC towards the MENA became quite visible starting in 2016. During this period, relations with almost all of the MENA countries, except Qatar, deteriorated and increasingly Turkey began to use military tools in its foreign policy. Turkey's major concerns focused on the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed People's Protection Unit (YPG) who are affiliated with the PKK and who occupied sections of northern Syria that they called Rojova. Ankara was determined to prevent the joining of these sections to create a second autonomous Kurdish region on its border that could offer the PKK a haven and aid. A Syrian Kurdish region aligned with the PKK posed a greater security threat to Turkey than does the KRG whose leadership cooperates with Ankara on economic and political issues as noted earlier. Therefore, the Turkish military began "Operation Euphrates Shield," to prevent the linking of the eastern and western sections held by the PYD.

This Turkish military intervention in Syria had both domestic and international implications. The domestic impact stems from the failed Turkish coup of July 15, 2016. By successfully carrying out a military intervention in Syria just weeks following the attempted coup, the AKP was reassuring its constituents of the continuing strength of the Turkish army. It also helped to build a nationalist rhetoric for the AKP and its ally the Nationalist Movement Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP) to use in its campaign to win the referendum converting Turkey's constitution from a parliamentary system to a strong presidential system, a major goal of then Prime Minister Erdoğan.⁵⁸ On the international level Turkey's perspective on the dangers of the Syrian civil war differed greatly from that of the US as well as a number of states in the region such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), who were most concerned about the build up of the Islamic State forces and other Islamist groups.

56 Doeser and Eidenfalk, "The Importance of Windows of Opportunity for Foreign Policy Change".

57 C. Akça Ataç, "A Comparative Civilizational Reading for the Middle East and Turkey's New Role in It", *Global Change, Peace & Security*, Vol. 28, No 1, 2016, p. 99-115.

58 Francesco Siccardi, "How Syria Changed Turkey's Foreign Policy", *Carnegie Europe*, 14 September 2021, p. 7. <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2021/09/14/how-syria-changed-turkey-s-foreign-policy-pub-85301> (Accessed 21 September 2021).

YPG forces were the US “boots on the ground” fighting the Islamic State and controlling imprisoned Islamic State fighters. Russia and Iran, who supported the Assad regime, were also concerned about the Islamic State. However, Russia which now controlled Syrian airspace, allowed Turkey’s military intervention in order to continue to develop its relations with Turkey. For the AKP government, the US decision to arm and train the PYD/YPG to fight the Islamic State was enormously problematic as it is seen as strengthening Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria and endangering the security and territorial integrity of the Republic.⁵⁹

Facing the reality of Russia’s direct military intervention in Syria in the summer of 2015 and unable to persuade Washington to cut its support to the PYD/YPG, the AKP government increasingly cooperated with the Russian axis in Syria. Ankara’s rapprochement with Moscow allowed it to launch a second military operation against the PYD/YPG in northern Syria in 2018 and a third military operation in 2019 with Washington’s consent. Similarly, Turkey and Russia agreed to create a de-escalation zone in Idlib with 12 observer points controlled by Turkey. Turkey also joined with Russia and Iran in forming the Astana process, a rival to the Western-led Geneva process seeking to end the Syrian civil war. Under the Astana process Ankara’s aim was to manage its relations with Syria and work to find a political solution to the conflict, seemingly making Turkey an even stronger actor in the Syrian conflict.

In addition to the Syrian intervention, this period of FPC witnessed Turkey’s more active interaction generally in the MENA region. Ankara took a much more oppositional role with Egypt and Israel. It also initiated a more active involvement in the Persian Gulf and a more assertive foreign policy in Libya. In the Gulf Ankara came to the aid of Doha by extending its small military base in Qatar and helping to resist the embargo imposed on Qatar by Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The AKP government also began to get involved diplomatically and militarily in Libya following the assault by Khalifa Haftar’s Libyan National Army (LNA) on the UN-supported Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli in 2019. With the help of the UAE the LNA appeared on the verge of taking Tripoli. However, Ankara prevented it by intervening militarily with Turkish paid mercenaries recruited from Syria as well as Turkish troops.⁶⁰ In return for the intervention, the GNA announced a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Turkey for an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) that extended across the Mediterranean and included access to oil and gas resources under the continental shelf. After Haftar’s forces were expelled from Tripoli and suffered reversals in the conflict, Turkey extended its military deployment into 2020, explaining that it was not only protecting Turkey’s security but that of the entire region from the rebels in Libya. The explanation specifically referred to Turkey’s interests in the “Mediterranean basin and North Africa.”⁶¹

Turkey’s foreign policy alignments and troop deployments in Libya, Qatar, and Syria were linked to the AKP’s ideological affinity with the Muslim Brothers and similar groups in

59 Didem Buhari Gulmez, “The Resilience of the US-Turkey Alliance: Divergent Threat Perceptions and Worldviews”, *Contemporary Politics*, Vol. 26, No 4, 2020.

60 Isabel Debre, “Pentagon Report: Turkey Sent Up to 3,800 Fighters to Libya”, 17 August 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/c339f71bf029f36b1091ee31c9f0171a> (Accessed 20 September 2021).

61 “Turkish Parliament extends troop deployment to Libya”, 23 December 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/12/turkey-troops-libya-deployment-extend-gna-lna-truce-erdogan.html> (Accessed 20 September 2022).

each of those countries. Ankara also benefited from the economic bolstering Turkey received from both Qatar and Libya. Qatar has improved Turkey's economy with foreign direct investments and currency swaps. The Libyan MoU offered Turkey the possibility to develop Mediterranean energy resources albeit in competition with Greece and the other members of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (Egypt, Israel, Cyprus, Italy, Jordan and Palestine) from which Turkey was excluded. Turkey's policies during this period also continued to alienate Egypt, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia who viewed Turkey's support of the Muslim Brothers as possible challenges to their own regimes.

Turkey's FPC at this time can be partially explained by changes in the international and regional system that led to reconceptualization of security threats and challenges as well as the emergence of new opportunities. The increasing multipolarity and decline of the West in the region were hallmarks of an emerging international system. This transformation of the international system has increased the room for maneuver and enhanced foreign policy flexibility for middle powers like Turkey. Thus, the perception of a transforming international system has increased Ankara's tendency for assertiveness.

Yet, the main impetus for the FPC can be found in domestic politics where both AKP's political alliances and foreign policy decision making went through major transformations. After the failed coup attempt in July 2016, Erdoğan established an alliance with nationalists including the MHP. This new National Alliance (*Cumhur İttifakı*) led to a general shift to nationalist positions in foreign policy and re-securitization of the Kurdish issue by prioritizing military means to deal with the PKK in Turkey and in the region. With the introduction of a Turkish-style presidential system and after the coup attempt it became easier to implement this nationalist foreign policy without much parliamentary and bureaucratic scrutiny. This appears to support the argument in the literature that foreign policy change is easier in centrist systems.⁶²

Period IV: Reset in Turkey-MENA Relations (2021 -2022)

Beginning in 2021 another significant shift in Turkey's foreign policy began unfolding in the MENA region. This was characterized by Ankara's efforts to normalize relations with the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Israel following its conflictual relations with all these states in the previous period. First, Turkey sought to normalize its relations with the UAE, which the AKP government and President Erdoğan had accused of financing the failed coup attempt. This began with a visit to Turkey by Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed in November 2021 during which the UAE announced a \$10 billion fund to support investments in Turkey.⁶³ On a return visit by President Erdoğan in February 2022 the two countries signed thirteen more agreements for defense, trade, and technology.⁶⁴

62 Haesebrouck and Joly, "Foreign Policy Change", p. 487.

63 Orhan Coskun, "Turkey, UAE sign investment accords worth billions of dollars", *Reuters*, 24 November 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-hopes-uae-investment-deals-during-ankara-talks-2021-11-24/> (Accessed 24 September 2022).

64 Amani Hamad, "UAE, Turkey Sign 13 Agreements during Erdogan's Meeting with Mohammed bin Zayed", *AlArabiya news*, 2022, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/gulf/2022/02/14/UAE-Turkey-sign-13-agreements-during-Erdogans-meeting-with-Mohammed-bin-Zayed> (Accessed 20 September 2022).

Soon after normalization of relations with the UAE, the AKP government signaled its interest in resetting its relations with Saudi Arabia that had hit bottom after Erdoğan openly accused Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman of ordering the 2018 murder of Jamal Kashoggi, a Saudi dissident, at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. The prospect for normalization brightened when the AKP Justice Minister agreed to stop the trial of 26 Saudi nationals for the killing and to hand over the case to Saudi Arabia on the grounds that the trial was impeded by Riyadh's refusal to extradite them.⁶⁵ There followed an exchange of visits between Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Salman and President Erdoğan, preceded by the lifting of an undeclared Saudi embargo on some Turkish imports.⁶⁶ Riyadh later deposited \$5 billion in Turkey's Central Bank.⁶⁷

Equally unexpected was the *volte face* in Turkey's relations with Israel. The normalization started in 2022 with Israeli President Herzog's visit to Turkey and culminated in the mutual appointment of ambassadors after a four year hiatus. An important motive for the normalization of Ankara's relations with Israel seems to have been its interest in obtaining the support of the pro-Israel lobby in the US. Thus, in September 2022 during his trip to New York for the annual meeting of the UN General Assembly President Erdoğan met with the President of the World Jewish Congress and separately with representatives from several Jewish organizations. A pro-government Turkish newspaper reported that Erdoğan mentioned his plans to visit Israel at these meetings.⁶⁸ Normalization of relations with Israel also had a domestic benefit for the AKP in terms of increasing economic relations, tourism and most significantly the possibility of transporting Israeli natural gas through Turkey.

The most dramatic of all the normalization efforts was the AKP's announcement of its interest in improving relations with Assad's regime, followed by talks at the intelligence level with Syria. Defense ministers of the two countries met in Moscow in December 2022, the first ministerial meeting in 11 years.⁶⁹ Ankara announced that such meetings will continue in 2023. This FPC clearly has domestic level variables. It addresses two contentious issues of interest to most of the Turkish population irrespective of their party allegiance. One is the large numbers of Syrian refugees in Turkey that has prompted stinging criticism by Turkey's opposition parties and has stimulated growing anti-refugee sentiment within the voting public. The FPC helps the AKP send a strong message at home that they are working to resolve this refugee issue. The second issue involves the concern over the possible formation of an "independent Kurdish entity" in northern Syria. To respond to this issue, Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu announced at the sidelines of his brief meeting with his Syrian counterpart that "there must be a

65 Andrew Wilks, "Turkish prosecutor calls for transfer of Khashoggi trial to Riyadh" 31 March 2022 <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/03/turkish-prosecutor-calls-transfer-khashoggi-trial-riyadh> (Accessed 1 April 2022).

66 "Saudi Arabia to Rev up Imports from Turkey as Ties Heal", *Daily Sabah*, 27 April 2022, <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/economy/saudi-arabia-to-rev-up-imports-from-turkey-as-ties-heal-sources> (Accessed 28 April 2022).

67 "Saudi Arabia deposits \$5 bln in Turkey's central bank - statement", Reuters, 6 March 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-deposits-5-bln-turkeys-central-bank-statement-2023-03-06/> (Accessed 6 March 2023).

68 "Erdoğan Tells Jewish Leaders He Plans to Visit Israel", *Daily Sabah*, 20 September 2022, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/erdogan-tells-jewish-leaders-he-plans-to-visit-israel> (Accessed 25 September 2022).

69 "Turkish and Syrian security and defence officials meet for first time in a decade", *The Guardian*, 29 December 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/dec/29/turkish-and-syrian-defence-and-security-officials-meet-for-first-time-in-decade> (Accessed 30 December 2022).

strong administration in Syria to prevent any division of the country.”⁷⁰ The AKP has also been trying to normalize its relations with Egypt. Although the normalization has not happened as quickly as with the other MENA states, AKP’s curtailment of Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood broadcast activities in Turkey in line with Egyptian demands and increasing convergence of interests in Libya have led to a progress recently.

It may be argued that these normalization efforts in the MENA region do not indicate a wholesale change in the AKP’s foreign policy. The nationalist discourses and the frequent use of military tools continue. Turkey is still very much involved in Libya both politically and militarily and that policy links with Turkey’s objectives in the eastern Mediterranean on Cyprus, energy resources, and maritime borders. In addition, Turkey is training Libyan pilots and selling the Libyan National Government planes. Turkey’s military involvement in Syria also continues. Yet, the recent wave of normalizations still requires explanation.

An important impetus for AKP’s recent FPC towards the region seems to originate from the domestic level, mainly the objective of political survival for the AKP. As in the early days of the AKP it appears trade and financial considerations are important motivators for Turkey’s renewed outreach to rebuild its relations in the MENA. With Erdoğan facing elections in 2023 and inflation in Turkey in 2022 averaging over 73%⁷¹ the President needed to increase investments in Turkey to try to bolster the economy and to lure hot money in order to get back the support of the former AKP supporters who had left the party. He therefore embarked on something of a charm offensive in the region trying to establish good relations with countries that he had disparaged and undermined for about ten years in order to build an atmosphere that would encourage trade and investment as he prepared to face the voters.

These domestic political considerations have also interacted with changes in the regional systemic level to allow for FPCs. Overall, the US retrenchment in the region has caused all regional countries to adjust their policies, creating new concerns over depending on US policy for their security after Washington’s withdrawal from Afghanistan and the US emphasis on challenges from Russia and China in its foreign policy rather than from the Middle East. Furthermore, the Biden administration has also been a major contributor to this regional normalization. In 2021 President Biden clearly stated that he will “work with our regional partners to deter Iranian aggression” and went on to state that in the Middle East “military force is not the answer.”⁷² That gave a number of countries which depended on the US for their security reason to look for allies that would strengthen their security. Turkey has a strong military and a growing defense industry—the UAE and Saudi Arabia have a strong economy. Therefore, improving relations made good sense to all.

70 “FM Çavuşoğlu has Brief Discussion with Syrian Counterpart for 1st Time”, *Daily Sabah*, 6 October 2022, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/fm-cavusoglu-has-brief-discussion-with-syrian-counterpart-for-1st-time> (Accessed 7 October 2022).

71 The IMF <https://www.imf.org/en/Countries/TUR> (Accessed 4 December 2022).

72 “Interim National Security Strategic Guidance”, March 2021, p. 11, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf> (Accessed 20 September 2022).

Conclusions

Turkish foreign policy towards the MENA region has gone through significant changes in the last 20 years. This paper identified four periods of change that occurred in the context of shifting domestic, regional and international level transformations. Rather than prioritizing one level, the paper demonstrates that the changes result from the interaction of domestic, regional, and international level variables. In the first period, 2002-2010, the AKP, which had just come to power as an outsider, adopted a discourse and practice of deepening engagement with the region as part of its domestic political agenda and that was supported by an international and regional context (post 9/11 and post-Iraq War of 2003) which was highly conducive to the AKP's increasing activity in the MENA region. Similarly, in the second period, 2011-2015 the AKP's consolidation of its domestic power coincided with the Arab Uprisings, a major regional transformation, and supported a significant shift in foreign policy. The third period, 2016-2020 saw the emergence of the National Alliance and the highly personalized presidential rule after the failed coup attempt. This interacted with a shifting regional politics in the wake of perceptions and the reality of US retrenchment from the region as well as the emergence of a multipolar international system. Finally, for the period starting in 2021, the FPC occurred mainly due to the political survival instincts of the AKP and President Erdoğan, as well as Turkey's increasing isolation in the MENA. These policy changes were made possible by the shifting regional context that made other actors also ready to mend fences with Turkey.

Thus, Turkey's foreign policy towards the MENA region in the last 20 years represents a significant demonstration for the FPC literature that the continuity in an even more centralized government does not guarantee continuity in foreign policy. This is not only because the international and regional structures change, but also because the domestic actors themselves also change. During these years the AKP has transformed in terms of its political alliances, leadership, and domestic political objectives although its worldview has remained the same.

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