

Changes in Turkish Foreign Policy: A Shift or a Passing Interest?

Türk Dış Politikasında Değişimler: Bir Değişim mi, Geçici Bir İlgi mi?

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Abstract

Since 2003, following the election of the Justice and Development Party (JDP), Turkish Foreign Policy placed a clear emphasis on the Middle East, establishing and improving relations with the region. This, by some, was interpreted as a major shift away from the traditional Western oriented stance, while others argued that this was just an effort to develop a multi-dimensional foreign policy. The paper argues that the rising interest in the Middle East is not something we observe for the first time. There are two factors that determine Turkey's interest in the region: government's ideological position and the international context. Due to the developments in these two areas Turkey experienced periods of rising interest before. This being said, there are certain characteristics that distinguished JDP policies from previous experiences like an effort to act independently and a special emphasis on the Palestinian issue. The paper also argues that despite what we have been observing so far, Turkish foreign policy will continue to act alongside of the West in the region.

Key Words: Turkey, Foreign Policy, Middle East, Justice and Development Party, Arab Spring.

Özet

2003 yılında Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi'nin seçilmesinin ardından Türk Dış Politikası yeni ilişkiler kurarak ve mevcut ilişkileri geliştirerek Ortadoğu'ya açık bir vurgu yaptı. Bu bazılarınca geleneksel Batı'ya yakın konumun değişimi anlamına gelirken, diğerleri bunun çok boyutlu bir dış politika geliştirilmesi çabası olduğunu savundu. Bu çalışma Ortadoğu'ya karşı artan ilginin ilk kez karşılaştığımız bir durum olmadığını savunuyor. Türkiye'nin bölgeye ilgisini açıklayan iki faktör var: hükümetin ideolojik konumu ve uluslararası şartlar. Bu iki alandaki gelişmelere bağlı olarak Türkiye'nin daha önce de bölgeyle ilgilendiği dönemler oldu. Buna rağmen AKP politikalarını daha önceki deneyimlerden ayıran bağımsız hareket etme çabası ve Flistin konusuna verilen önem gibi özellikler var. Çalışma aynı zamanda bugüne kadar ne gözlemlemiş olursak olalım Türk dış politikasının bölgede Batı'nın yanında hareket etmeye devam edeceğini öne sürüyor.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Türkiye, Dış Politika, Ortadoğu, Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, Arap Baharı.

Introduction

Turkish Foreign Policy (TFP) is generally seen as stable and based on tradition. Since the inception of the Turkish Republic in 1923, foreign policy has been based close ties with the West. Despite certain shifts and adjustments as a result of changes in the international system TFP remained aligned with the West throughout this period. Studies focusing on TFP usually identify three main periods parallel to international developments: Pre- World War II, Cold War, and post-Cold War.

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The first period begins with 1923 and continues until the end of World War II. During this period we observe a major effort to be multi-dimensional. In addition to keeping good relations with Western countries Turkish policy makers also made an attempt to forge strong ties with independent third world countries, whose number was much more limited at the time. This dual policy required to adopt an anti-colonial stance, while at the same time remaining close to colonial powers. It was only possible because the international system was multi-polar in nature, allowing countries room to develop policies and pursue them somewhat freely. In such systems, as long as a country did not upset the balance the system is based on, it can freely pursue its own national interest to the extent to its own power. Regarding the Middle East the relations were mostly limited to a number of conflicts the young republic had with its neighbors who had not gained their complete independence yet from France and Great Britain. Another factor that limited Turkish ties with the region was the fact that the whole region was a part of the Ottoman Empire until few years earlier and that the memories of that period were still fresh in the minds of the new administrations, creating concerns about re-establishing ties with the young Republic.

The second period began with the end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War. Because its bipolar nature the international system allowed little room for movement for countries that felt threatened by one of the superpowers. Leading TFP to become increasingly unidimensional. In Turkey's case the source of the threat was the Soviet Union and Stalin's demands¹ during and after World War II playing an important role in Turkish decision to further strengthen its ties to the Western bloc. This alignment meant an increasing dependence on the West and mainly the United States. Turkey began to rely on Western support for economic and security needs. At the same time the "northern threat" became the focal point of Turkish foreign policy, causing a loss of interest in other regions like the Middle East unless a threat surfaced.

The end of the Cold War meant major changes for all actors in the international system and Turkey was no exception. Until then Turkey had adopted a foreign policy based on security needs and its ties with the West were predominantly based on common security threats. With their common enemy out of the way, it began experiencing an identity crisis and trying to find itself a new role in the changing environment. There were three candidate areas Turkey could base its cooperation with the West on. The preferred option by decision-makers was full membership to the European Community (EC). EC's rejection of the Turkish membership application in December 1989 showed Turks that the relationship with the West would continue to be based on common secu-

1 Among these demands were the rearrangement of the common border with some land transfer to the Soviet Union and a military base in Turkish straits.

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rity concerns. The two regions where such a cooperation could be beneficial for all parties were the Central Asia and the Middle East. The limited success against the Russian Federation in increasing its influence in the Central Asia led Turkey to turn to the Middle East. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 made this choice easier by turning the World's attention to the region.

While these periods are often studied as the three stages of TFP it is clear that these are not the only major shifts one can observe. This classification relies on systemic developments in order to explain changes in a single country's foreign policy decisions. Although it proved to be useful, it is incomplete because regardless of how reactive a foreign policy tradition is, it cannot be explained relying solely on external factors. Here I will attempt to add a second dimension that has been long neglected, government ideology. While international developments can explain why a country needs to make changes, it cannot completely explain why certain choices are made by decision-makers. In order to support my argument I will focus on Turkish Foreign Policy toward the Middle East. In the following sections I will first show that the increasing focus on the region is not a new trend in TFP, but a periodical tendency that accompanies center-right governments since the establishment of the republic. Later on I will focus on JDP's foreign policy, what distinguished it from its predecessors, and how it changed over time.

Turkish Foreign Policy and the Middle East

Generally, it is argued that Turkish foreign policy has two main characteristics. It is based on the security concerns of the period and it is reactive. These, to an extent can be said for any country. As I will show later on Turkey's main motivation is not always security, but can also be economic depending on the period. The security appears to be more emphasized because while Turkey attempts to remain close to the West the role it is often given is a strategic ally against common enemies. This is more visible when one focuses on the level of military relations relative to economic and cultural ties between Turkey and the West.

In the following sections I will evaluate foreign policy choices adopted by various center-right governments starting with the beginning of the multi-party period. There have been six different political parties in power since 1950 that can be described as center-right or conservative.² During all these periods there have been a rising interest in the Middle East to a varying degree. Here I will focus on four of these political parties. There are two reasons for this choice. First, these three parties remained in power longer than a single term, allowing them to make changes in TFP and us to observe the results of these

² Democrat Party (1950-1960), Justice Party (1965-1971, 1977, 1978, 1980), Motherland Party (1983-1991), True Path Party, Welfare Party, and Justice and Development Party (2002-Present).

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changes. Second, and more importantly, the remaining two cases were coalition governments severely constraining their ability to develop a foreign policy based on their own preferences.

1. Democrat Party (1950-1960)

Democrat Party came to power in 1950 elections by a large majority.³ Ideologically placing itself at center-right DP adopted a populist stance, claiming to represent the masses. Domestically, DP claimed that Republican People's Party (RPP) governments were not responsive to the public's religious sensibilities and emphasized religion and conservative values, often mentioning the Islamic identity of the country. Internationally, post-World War II international system was shaping up and the Soviet Union was increasing its pressure on Turkey. In addition to demanding changes in Montreux Treaty, regulating the status of Turkish straits, they were also asking for certain modifications on Turkey's northeastern border. Unable to resist Soviet demands alone Turkish governments were seeking ways to strengthen their ties with the West, and more specifically the US, even before DP came to power.

During its time in the opposition, DP had criticized RPP's foreign policy on two accounts.⁴ The first was governments' failure to secure a Western commitment to guarantee Turkey's security, claiming that they would solve this problem by joining the newly established Western alliance, NATO. At the time, Turkey had already agreements in place with the US that included the country in Marshall Plan and secured economic and military aid⁵ and NATO membership came in 1952, two years after DP came to power. The second issue was policies toward the Middle East. DP had long claimed that Turkey needed to become a major power in the region and that cooperation with the Middle Eastern countries needed to be improved in order to increase the security of the Eastern Mediterranean region. This was partly because they believed Turkey, with its Ottoman heritage, had the right to become a leading actor in the region, and partly because as the only Middle Eastern member of the NATO Turkey was to limit the spread of Soviet influence in Eastern Mediterranean. In order to achieve this, the first step was argued to be to activate the Sadabad

3 "According to the results of the election held on 14 May 1950, DP obtained 4,242,833 votes (53.35%) out of total votes 7,953,055 and gained 408 seats in the parliament. On the other hand, RPP obtained 3,165,095 votes and gained 69 seats only; the Nation Party (NP) got 240,209 votes (3.02%) and gained 1 seat in the parliament. In addition to these, 9 independent MPs became able to enter parliament." The Journal of Turkish Weekly "The Menderes Period (1950-1960)" (www.turkishweekly.net).

4 Behçet Kemal Yeşilbursa, "Demokrat Parti Dönemi Türkiye'nin Ortadoğu Politikası (1950-1960)," *History Studies, Middle East Special Issue* 2010, p. 68.

5 American military aid had began with the agreement two countries signed on July 12, 1947 and later it was included in Truman Doctrine on July 4, 1948. The economic aid came through the Marshall Plan between 1949 and 1951 and was later included in the Common Defense Program.

Pact between Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan which would later be followed by other agreements and alliances.⁶

Turkey's NATO membership and its efforts to pursue an active policy in the Middle East were met with renewed Soviet pressure in 1951 when the Soviet Union announced that developments showed that the Western imperialism intended to use Turkey against the USSR,⁷ further increasing Turkish dependence on the US and creating a need to prove its worth as an ally. In the Middle East, these policies were often counterproductive, requiring DP to oppose Arab countries, seriously hindering its efforts to increase its influence. Some of these policies were:

- Following the creation of Israel, Turkey was not only the first Muslim nation to recognize Israel, it also signed the "Trilateral Intelligence Agreement" with Israel and Iran in 1950.⁸
- When Iranian oil was nationalized Turkey initially seemed to unofficially support the decision, but decided to support Britain if the issue ever came in front of the UN.⁹
- During the Suez Crisis of 1956 Turkey saw British and French actions as a violation of international law, but still kept Egypt responsible for the crisis.¹⁰
- When Soviets approached Syria in 1957 Turkey tried to stop Soviet influence in Syria from rising and was prepared to use force for it.
- When the US decided to intervene in Lebanon. Turkey supported the move by allowing the US to use the Incirlik air base in Turkey.
- During the Algerian independence struggle from France. Turkey openly sided with France.

In addition, the Arab Nationalist movement was gaining speed in the region and it was not only anti-Western, but also anti-Ottoman. Turkey was perceived as the successor of the Ottoman Empire, as well as a representative of the colonizing Western powers attempting to gain influence in the region.

This rejection of Turkish involvement in regional issues best can be seen in the efforts to create a defensive alliance in the region that would limit the spread of Soviet influence and contribute to the containment of the Soviet Union. In addition to Turkey's Ottoman past and pro-Western stance the

6 Yeşilbursa, ibid, p. 70.

7 Yeşilbursa, ibid, p. 73.

8 Cihat Göktepe, "The Menderes Period (1950-1960)," *The Journal of Turkish Weekly*, www.turkishweekly.net.

9 Yeşilbursa, ibid, p. 74.

10 Hüseyin Bağcı, Hüseyin and Mehmet Şahin, "Doğu-Batı Arasında Demokrat Parti Dış Politikası," *Demokrasi Platformu* 5 (17), 2009, p. 198.

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reluctance of Arab countries to join such an organization can be attributed to their preference to establish bilateral ties instead of large-scale alliances that would limit their policy options. Iranian nationalization of oil and the military coup in Egypt during the early 1950s intensified Turkish efforts, but by 1954 the failure to include Arab countries rendered Turkey's alliance with Pakistan meaningless in terms of containment. Eventually Turkey managed to sign a cooperation agreement with Iraq in 1954. Within a year Great Britain, Pakistan, and Iran joined the Baghdad Pact, a short-lived alliance that did very little other than attracting the anger of other countries in the region.¹¹

A very good example of the DP's approach to the region and the general Middle Eastern dynamics during the 1950s is the Turkish-Syrian crisis of 1957. The declaration of the Eisenhower Doctrine early in 1957 had opened the way for the US to support other countries economically and militarily against a communist threat. The announcement also coincided with political turmoil in Syria. When the Syrian government, formed by the Baath Party, leftist-liberal National Party, and some independents and supported externally by the Syrian Communist Party,¹² began adopting a foreign policy along the lines of the Non-aligned Movement and against the US it became a good candidate to test the Eisenhower Doctrine. First American attempts were toward overthrowing the government by supporting pro-Western groups in the country, but their failure opened the way for a purge of the Western-leaning political and military elites and increasing the regime's left leanings as well as its relations with the Soviet Union and Egypt.¹³ As an alternative policy the US tried to solve the problem through a regional solution with only indirect American involvement. This meant that Syria's neighbors Turkey, Iraq, and Jordan increase tensions and try to force the government out and establish a Western-friendly regime in its place. Soon it became clear that Iraq and Jordan gave in to Syrian and Egyptian pressure announcing that they not only would not move against another Arab regime, but they would come to Syria's aid if a threat surfaced. This development left Turkey and the US alone against Syria and Soviet Union. Turkey refused to back down against Soviet pressure and soon border tensions escalated to clashes and following a failed Saudi mediation attempt, the issue

11 Following the coup in Iraq, the country withdrew from the alliance in 1959. This moved the headquarters to Ankara and changed the name of the organization to Central Treaty Organization (CENTO). Even though the US joined as an observer and that the organization survived until the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the goal of adding Jordan and Lebanon as members failed. CENTO fell far short of expectations.

12 Francis Fukuyama, *Soviet Threats to Intervene in the Middle East 1956-1973, A Series in International Security and Arms Control*, Rand Corporation 1980, p. 11.

13 Salim Yaqub, *Contesting Arabism: The Eisenhower Doctrine and the Arab Middle East, 1956-1959, The MacMillan Center Council on Middle East Studies Working Papers*, 2009 <http://opus.macmillan.yale.edu/workpaper/pdfs/MESV3-9.pdf>, _____ 06. 27. 2011. Retrieved 13 September 2011.

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went to the UN with Syria's request without any success.¹⁴ The establishment of the United Arab Republic by Egypt and Syria on February 1, 1958 and Turkish recognition of the new country on March 11, 1958 was what finally brought the crisis to an end.¹⁵

From Turkish point of view, the crisis was an opportunity to prove itself as a useful NATO ally and an important actor in the region. This may be the reason why even after the Arab participants of the original plan pulled back Turkey was still eager to force the issue. From the point of view of the Americans the results were mixed. While the American support given to Turkey during the crisis could be interpreted as a success of the Eisenhower Doctrine and NATO,¹⁶ it is also possible to argue that the failure to keep Soviets out of Syria was a failure of the Doctrine and NATO.

Overall, Democrat Party's efforts to forge close ties with the US seemed to result in Turkish economic and political dependence. This dependence could also be seen in foreign policy, especially when it came to the Middle East. The perception that Turkey was forming its policy according to American preferences badly hurt by its chances of becoming a relevant actor in the region, alienated many countries in the region that was swept by an anti-Western and anti-Imperialist wave. By the end of the 1950s Turkey's ties with the Middle East were worse than what they had been prior to Democrat Party governments.

2. Justice Party (1965-1971, 1977, 1978, 1980)

The foreign policy trend DP established during the 1950s continued even after the military coup in 1960 had brought it down. The military's declaration that they would remain loyal to their responsibilities in NATO and CENTO immediately after the coup made it clear that they would honor DP's commitments regarding Turkish Foreign Policy.

The next rise of interest in the region came around the mid-1960s. Once again center-right Justice Party (JP-AP), claiming to be the continuation of DP, was in power with similar views and systemic constraints that required Turkey to find an alternative focus for its foreign policy. The main development in foreign policy was the Cyprus crisis which led to the cooling of Turkey's relations with the West, including the US. Finding itself almost isolated in the international arena, Turkey felt the need to diversify its foreign policy and seek support from elsewhere. Once again, the logical direction was the Middle East. In order to improve the relations with the region, where Arab Nationalism was

14 Gönübol, Mehmet et al. 1974. *Olaylarla Türk Dış Politikası (1919-1973)*, Ankara: Ankara Üniversitesi Siyasal Bilgiler Fakültesi Yayınları.

15 Bağcı and Şahin, ibid, p. 199.

16 Hüseyin Bağcı, *Türk Dış Politikasında 1950'li Yıllar*, Ankara: ODTÜ Yayıncılık, 2007.

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still quite strong, Turkey reversed its policy on Arab-Israel conflict and supported Arabs during the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. However, as a result of Turkey's continuing ties with the West, Soviet supported Arab countries were reluctant to respond these efforts.

Developments during the early 1970s provided additional motivation for Turkey to improve its relations with the region. First, a second crisis in Cyprus and the subsequent Turkish intervention was followed by an American arms embargo that affected Turkey deeply. Second, and more importantly, the oil crisis of 1973 required nations dependent on foreign oil to improve their relations with oil producing countries. Starting with the mid-1970s Turkey began to participate in the Organization of the Islamic Cooperation (OIC) more actively and at a higher level. These efforts were somewhat more successful than the previous ones and began to bear fruit in the 1980s. The limited success of these policies were due to a changing approach to the region. Turkey tried not to get involved in regional conflicts, only adopting a mediating role when asked by the participants. This meant Turkey made itself available if the countries in the region were willing to use it as a mediator. Even though there were not many requests for Turkish involvement, this succeeded in distancing Turkey from many conflicts that plagued the region. Turkish foreign policy makers also made an effort to avoid any policies that could threaten the security of Arab states. This did not mean Turkey used soft power, it simply meant that Turkey tried not to get involved in issues that could be misinterpreted. And finally, instead of trying to build large-scale, structured organizations Turkey opted for bilateral relations that emphasized economic ties instead of security issues. This last point was crucial because in an environment where alliances were constantly shifting it was much more realistic to deal with individual countries than attempting to bring them all together.

While the interest in the region was similar, JP's Middle East policy was more subdued than its predecessor. This was likely to be the result of the dependency caused by Turkey's isolation in the international arena. Unlike the DP who tried to force its will on the region, JP was trying to find support in order to balance its losses. This required a milder approach resulting in only modest success.

3. Motherland Party (1983-1991)

Motherland Party (MP-ANAP), led by Turgut Özal, came to power in 1983, following the military coup of 1980. Even though Özal saw integration with the West as a prime foreign policy goal and applied for full membership to European Community in 1987, many of his policies focused on the Middle East. Internationally Özal was concerned about the role Turkey would play following the end of the Cold War. His solution, once again, was to broaden the horizons

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of TFP.¹⁷ Regarding the Middle East, Özal “claimed that the Turkish Islamic outlook could provide peace between Muslims and others, since religion and progress could go hand in hand”.¹⁸ Policy toward the region was motivated by two factors. The first was predominantly economic. Özal initiated an economic liberalization campaign that included privatization and opening up Turkish economy to foreign investment. Following the oil crisis of the 1970s many Middle Eastern countries had accumulated capital that was extremely attractive to countries like Turkey seeking foreign investment sources. As a result, Turkish exports to the region rose from 54 million dollars to 3 billion dollars between 1970 and 1985.¹⁹ This major increase translated to an increase in the share of Middle Eastern countries in Turkey’s manufactured goods exports from 15.1% in 1979 to 41.9% in 1985.²⁰

A second source of motivation was security based. With the end of the 1980s, the Cold War was winding down and the bipolar system was gradually replaced with uncertainty. Iran-Iraq war had ended in a tie and Iraq had invaded Kuwait on August 2, 1990. By this time Özal was elected President, a largely symbolic position, but MP was still in power and he held strong influence over foreign policy decisions. Özal believed that the developments in the region gave Turkey an opportunity to prove once again that it could be an important asset for Western security. He also argued that Turkey could use this conflict to its advantage to gain influence in the region.

In the months following Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait Turkish foreign policy once again became active in the region and went through three distinct stages. The first stage began with Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait (August 2, 1990) and ended when the American-led coalition attacked Iraq (February 16, 1991). This was the period of multilateral diplomacy that went parallel to the efforts to create an alliance that would end Iraqi invasion by force in case diplomacy failed. The reactions to Iraqi invasion from the Arab League, the US and Great Britain came the day after Iraq entered Kuwait, followed by the European Economic Community.²¹ Keeping a close contact with its Western allies and countries in the region Turkish policy focused on following UN decisions without committing to a policy position. This lack of commitment was the result of an internal disagreement. While Özal was in favor of a pro-American policy and full

17 Özal’s attempts to broaden TFP perspectives were not limited to the Middle East. He set up the Black Sea Economic Cooperation project that included Armenia, Azerbaijan, Greece, and Albania in addition to all Black Sea countries; also attempting to establish links to Turkic republics in Central Asia.

18 Sedat Laçiner, “Özalizm”, *The Journal of Turkish Weekly*, 1993 www.turkishweekly.net. Retrieved 27 August 2011.

19 Laçiner, *ibid.*

20 Laçiner, *ibid.*

21 William Hale, “Turkey, the Middle East and the Gulf Crisis,” *International Affairs*, 68(4), 1992, p. 683-684.

cooperation against Iraq, domestic opposition, some members of the cabinet and the military establishment were more cautious about a policy that would place Turkey in direct conflict with Iraq.²² Despite these disagreements Turkey closed the oil pipeline immediately following the UN decision and applied a strict embargo while talking to all sides. During the second stage of the conflict, the war, Turkey did not directly get involved, but allowed the US to use Turkish bases. The cooperation during this war was considered by the US officials as the “golden age” of Turkish-American cooperation, while it was seen by many Turkish officials as the starting point of the problems between the two countries.²³

During the early stages Turkish policies were based on bilateral relations with various actors, non-commitment to a policy position and strict adherence to UN decisions. This was parallel to what we had observed during JP governments. Later on, Turkey became more directly involved and placed itself firmly with the US and the coalition formed by it. Özal’s policy choices were based on the assumption that the cooperation would lead to a strategic partnership between Turkey and the US and that American support would help Turkey’s EU membership. Neither of these assumptions were realized. This shift did not affect Turkey’s relations with the countries in the region like it had during DP’s rule mainly because the Arab World was extremely divided on the issue as well. However, Turkey suffered a major financial loss due to the economic embargo applied to Iraq and experienced an increase in PKK activity in Northern Iraq that was left almost completely outside Iraqi control.

4. Justice and Development Party (2002-Present)

Soon after JDP’s ascent to power in 2002 the new government’s policy choices created a rift regarding the direction of its foreign policy. On the one side, government officials claimed that up to that point TFP had been uni-dimensional, solely focusing on its relations with the West, and due to changes in the international system this was no longer sustainable and Turkey, like many other countries needed to adopt a multi-dimensional foreign policy that would allow a certain degree of flexibility and require an increasing interest in other regions including the Middle East, Africa and certain parts of Asia. The increasing involvement in the Middle East was further justified by geographical proximity and the fact that any of the issues Turkey struggled with stemmed from there. Domestic opposition and some foreign analysts, on the other hand pointed to the decline of Turkey’s relations with the West and claimed that this was not an expansion of foreign policy areas, but a shift of axis from West to

22 Throughout the conflict Özal’s direct involvement in foreign policy making, a role traditionally reserved to the prime minister, led to conflicts that caused the Chief of Staff Necip Toruntay and Foreign Minister Ali Bozer to resign.

23 F. Stephen Larrabee, “Küresel Jeopolitik Değişim Çağında Amerika-Türkiye İlişkileri,” *Turquie Diplomatique*, April, 2010, p. 35.

East. This shift was perceived as a result of JDP's Islamist origins. The government was accused of turning its back to the West. Whether this is an expansion of foreign policy areas or an ideological shift of axis one needs to keep in mind that this is not the first time Turkey turned to the region and that it should not be evaluated in isolation from previous instances.

During the first years of the JDP period foreign policy goals were poorly defined without a clear perspective with the exception of a commitment to European Union membership.²⁴ This became clear to everyone during the preparation period of the invasion of Iraq when the government, despite the large majority it enjoyed in the parliament, failed to pass the motion, that would allow the US to open the northern front and transfer troops and supplies through Turkey, on March 1, 2003. Hale claims that following the failure of the motion "broader foreign policy strategies emerged." This new approach was credited to Ahmet Davutoğlu, foreign policy advisor to the Prime Minister Erdoğan until 2009 when he became Foreign Minister. He summarized his view with two points.²⁵ First the traditional Turkish claim that the country was a bridge between East and West was replaced by a new role as a problem solving central country. Second, and more importantly, the focus on security that determined TFP for so long would be replaced by cooperation and the use of soft power. This emphasis on soft power was summarized by the policy of "zero problems with neighbors," meaning that the existing conflicts with neighbors would be solved to open the way for cooperative relations.

Davutoğlu claims that Turkish presence in Iraq, Iran, Caucasus, Afghanistan, and the Middle East is perfectly compatible with its alliance with the West.²⁶ However what received the most attention was that the tone of TFP on certain issues were shifting from the traditional line which closely followed Western policies in the region. According to Davutoğlu, TFP is guided by three methodological and five operational principles.²⁷ The methodological principles are:

- TFP was crisis-based during the Cold War only reacting to crises the country faced. The new foreign policy will be active and guided by a vision in which the Middle East occupies the center stage.
- Globally, TFP will be consistent. Policies in each region will not contradict each other.
- Even though because of the instability of its region Turkey continues to need a powerful military, this military strength does not pose a threat to

24 Ziya Öniş, "Multiple Faces of the 'New' Turkish Foreign Policy: Underlying Dynamics and a Critique," *Insight Turkey* 13(1), 2011.

25 Hale, *a.g.e.*, S. 4-5.

26 Ahmet Davutoğlu, "Soğuk Savaş Sonrası Türkiye: Türkiye'nin Dış Politikası," *Turquie Diplomatique*, June 2010, p. 34.

27 Davutoğlu, *ibid.*

other countries. Turkish policies are based on increasing the country's influence through the use of soft power.

- Operationally, these principles define the characteristics of the TFP:
- There needs a balance between security and democracy. Even though countries need to feel secure they should not seek it at the expense of democracy.
- Turkey needs to maximize its cooperation with its neighbors.
- Foreign policy needs to be proactive and not wait for crises to surface. To achieve this Turkey needs to adopt a "preventive peace diplomacy."
- Turkey is committed to a multi-dimensional foreign policy that is based on cooperation, not competition, with other global actors.
- Turkish involvement in global affairs needs to increase. This is called a "rhythmic diplomacy."

This process began with improving relations with Arab countries which resulted in the election of a Turk, Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, as the president of the Organization of the Islamic Cooperation in 2004. Starting with its immediate neighbors JDP attempted to improve its economic relations not only as a source of economic wellbeing, but also as a way of creating interdependencies that could later be used to solve political problems. JDP also volunteered as a mediator to a large number of conflicts, an attempt to show the international community and its constituency that it could succeed where all others had failed, namely bringing peace to the region.

Such a policy required Turkey not to get directly involved in conflicts around and adopt the position of a balancer at equal distance from all other actors. That was the point where policy-makers experienced difficulties because JDP had made clear that it was more committed to the Palestinian cause than any other Turkish government. Relations with Hamas and attempts to get involved as a mediator were all interpreted as evidence of Turkish determination to play a major role in solving Israeli-Palestinian conflict, preferably in favor of the Palestinians. However, while attempting to bring peace to the region, JDP managed to worsen Turkey's relations with Israel through a series of crises and destroy any possibility of being an impartial mediator that could be accepted by both sides. The first major sign came in January 2009, when Prime Minister Erdoğan very strongly criticized Israeli policy during the war in Gaza Strip and "stormed out of a meeting at the World Economic Forum".²⁸ This was followed by the Flotilla Crisis in May 2009, when Israeli soldiers stormed a Turkish humanitarian aid ship on route to Gaza in international waters and

28 Öniş, *ibid*, p. 51-2.

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killed nine activists, eight of which were Turkish citizens. Even though Turkish Government denied all ties with the flotilla's organizers it was argued that the ships had sailed only after JDP overruled the port authorities who claimed Mavi Marmara was not sea-worthy.²⁹ Israel's insistence on not formally apologizing and not taking responsibility gradually began to worsen not only political but also economic ties between two countries who until very recently were cooperating in many areas. Despite pressure from the US, neither side cave in so far and new Israeli foreign policy since the crisis appears to aim creating ties with Turkey's neighbors and containing its former ally.

A second area where Turkey's path diverged from the Western policy was the Iran's nuclear program and the crisis that accompanied it. Backing the Iranian thesis that its nuclear program was peaceful, Turkey was unusually active during the crisis trying to find a middle ground between Iran and the rest of the world in order to avoid another potential violent conflict on its borders. Turkey and Brazil cooperated to reach an agreement with Iran that would also be acceptable to the UN and reduce the need for further sanctions. The agreement was signed on May 17, 2010, but quickly dismissed by a large portion of the international community. Soon after, Brazil pulled its support as a result of international pressures and Turkey was left alone. New sanctions were approved at the UN with a vote of 12 to 2, where Turkey and Brazil voted against the sanctions and Lebanon abstained.³⁰ Since then even though Turkey was the host of one of the meetings over the Iranian nuclear program, it failed to play the role it hoped it would and frequently came into conflict with Iran especially over the missile defense system being built in Turkey and the Syrian crisis.

Although it is not a major international issue, Turkey also initially improved its relations with Syria playing the role of the mediator not only between Israel and Syria in their long-lasting conflict, but also between Syria and the US, as well as Syria and Saudi Arabia. This was actually an opportunity for the US to communicate with the country indirectly and encourage reforms that would pull Syria closer to some form of representative political system. Unfortunately this policy proved to be ineffective once the "Arab Spring" reached Syria. Over a very short period of time we witnessed Turkish-Syrian relations become extremely tense with talks of an international intervention in order to solve the conflict in Syria.

Following all these developments Turkish foreign policy is at a very different place than it was at the beginning of the decade. Attempting to solve all its problems with its neighbors, Turkey ended up creating more problems

29 Stratejik Arařtırmalar Enstitüsü, "Araplar ve Yeni Osmanlı: Türkiye'nin Nüfuzunu Artırma Girişimi," *Turquie Diplomatique*, November, 2010, 33.

30 Stratejik Arařtırmalar Enstitüsü, *ibid.*, p. 33.

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and a more dependent foreign policy than before. Initially, Turkish interest in the region was not only tolerated, but also encouraged for two reasons. First, being the most democratic Muslim country, it was hoped that Turkey would represent a model to predominantly autocratic Middle Eastern regimes. A second reason was Arab countries' failure to cooperate and present a united front against any issues they dealt with. Their failure created concerns that this vacuum could be filled by rising Iranian influence in the region. Even though Turkey was perceived in the region as an outsider for a very long time and was dealt with caution because of its dominant Ottoman past, JDP policies were successful in creating an excitement among the Arab public. In many cases, this did very little to improve relations with the regimes of those countries because the authoritarian regimes perceived this excitement as a challenge to their legitimacy.

The new foreign policy also had an impact domestically. JDP quickly saw that their active foreign policy helped the party to maintain its popularity domestically. The support of Arab street and Turkish involvement in many issues it had intentionally avoided in the past created the perception that Turkey was becoming a major actor in the region and that Turkey's international prestige was on the rise. While this seemed to be the case for a while we have witnessed protest against Turkish policy in the region in some of the countries like Egypt, Syria, and Iraq.

It would be a mistake to present this change in foreign policy as a decision based purely on the government's ideologic view and its preferences. Just like in the previous examples there were a number of international factors in play. The most cited cause of this shift is the disappointment in the failure of EU accession negotiations and the blockage of key chapters due to the Cyprus issue. In order to compensate for the economic loss caused by the failure to move forward in accession negotiations one alternative was taking steps toward the creation of a free trade zone between Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey starting in 2011.³¹ Even though the initial steps, such as the removal of visa requirements between these countries, seemed to be progressing according to the plans, the instability in the Arab World made this extremely hard proceed further. Especially the spread of popular discontent in many of these countries pushed the talk about a common economic area to the background.

According to Öniş³² another factor was the economic and financial crisis of 2008-2009 that predominantly affected the developed economies, increasing the attraction of the East and the South. Turkish products began to seek new markets to fill the loss they experienced in Europe. Barkey,³³ on the other

31 Stratejik Araştırmalar Enstitüsü, *ibid*, p. 33.

32 Öniş, *ibid*, p. 54.

33 Henri J. Barkey, "Turkish Foreign Policy and the Middle East", *CERI Strategy Papers*, No. 10, 2011.

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hand, claims that the economic factor leading this new activism was not the global economic and financial crisis, but domestic economic development. According to him Turkish economy transformed “from an inward looking to a robust export-driven one that is engaged in a continuous search for new markets”.³⁴ Regardless of the motivation behind it, Turkish exports to the Middle East enjoyed an increase similar to the one during the 1980s.

In the light of these changes some argued that Turkey was no longer a US ally in the Middle East, but a competitor who determined its position and policies based on its own priorities.³⁵ If we focus on the Palestinian issue and the Iranian nuclear crisis, one may be able to make such a claim. However, developments since the beginning of the Arab Spring show us that despite those two exceptions TFP continues to be in line with Western preferences. The difference appears to be the active nature of the policy and the emphasis on soft power.

Arab Spring and Turkish Foreign Policy

What is generally called the “Arab Spring” represents an important turning point for almost all actors that are involved in the region. Out of 22 members of the Arab League members have experienced some form of protest over the past year.³⁶ This wave of dissent was something Middle Eastern region had not experienced in the past and resulted in regime change in a number of countries and does not appear to have ended yet. Arab Spring represents a challenge for Turkish Foreign Policy. Claiming to be one of the major actors in the region, how Turkey handles the developments and approaches new regimes and opposition groups will not only determine the influence it will have in the region, it will also determine its relations with the West whose interest may clash with the will of the protesters.

When the process of regime change began in the Middle East with the revolt in Tunisia Turkey, like the rest of the world was caught by surprise and struggled to form a policy. As a result, while many Western embassies were attempting to establish ties with the protesters, Turkey was predominantly focused on evacuating its citizens, which was presented by the government as a major diplomatic success.³⁷ Only after the regime fell and the transition began Turkey was able to establish ties with opposition groups and was mentioned as a model.

34 Barkey, *ibid.*, p. 1.

35 Steven A. Cook, “Dostumsu Düşman’ın Türkçesi Nedir? ABD’nin Orta Doğu’daki Yeni Rakibi Türkiye,” *Turquie Diplomatique*, June, 2010.

36 Algeria, Bahrein, Djibuti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen.

37 Yusuf Al-Sharif, “Dış Politika ve Seçimler: Türkiye’nin Beklenen Rolü,” *Turquie Diplomatique*, March, 2011.

In Egypt, things were different in many aspects. First of all Egypt was one of the countries claiming leadership role in the region. It was also a close ally of the US and one of the few countries that signed a peace agreement with Israel. Mubarak regime saw JDP as a threat trying to “muscle into regional politics specifically in areas long considered to be part of the traditional Egyptian sphere of influence”.³⁸ Erdoğan was one of the first leaders to call Mubarak to leave office only on the eighth day of the protests, encouraging the opposition in Tahrir square. The call for Mubarak’s resignation came two days after Erdoğan had a phone conversation with Obama, during which the American President asked that Middle Eastern leaders to build up pressure on Mubarak to step down.³⁹ Of course it is hard to determine for sure whether Erdoğan was following this advice or not, but it seems fair to claim that Turkish policy was parallel to American preferences. This was further emphasized when Erdoğan visited Egypt in September 2011 and emphasized the importance of a secular state structure despite reactions from the Muslim Brotherhood, who until that point were his most enthusiastic supporters in Egypt.

In Libya, Turkish foreign policy was anything but clear. Initially Erdoğan resisted the calls for UN sanctions and NATO’s military operations against the country.⁴⁰ Erdoğan claimed at this stage that any talk of an intervention was motivated by the country’s oil sources.⁴¹ Later on this policy was reversed and Turkey began to openly support NATO operations and rebel groups in Libya. In addition, Turkey even called for Qaddafi’s resignation and recalled its ambassador to Libya.⁴² Barkey⁴³ claims that this shift was the result of the isolation Turkey found itself in after pretty much all major countries positioned themselves against Qaddafi and the anti-Turkish protests in the rebel capital, Benghazi. The causes of this change of position may be more economically based than what Barkey claims. Turkish companies from various sectors, construction being the main one, were active in Libya with a large number of Turkish workers living in the country. During the early stages Erdoğan had two phone conversations with Qaddafi about the future of Turkish companies and citizens working in Libya and Turkey announced that there was no need to evacuate its citizens.⁴⁴ Throughout the evacuation process Turkey could not openly oppose the Qaddafi and remained supportive of his regime and arguing that Libyan sovereignty should be respected by all. However, when the evacuation was complete and its NATO allies showed the resolve to replace Qaddafi regime, TFP fell in line with its Western allies.

38 Barkey, *ibid*, p. 10.

39 Al-Sharif, *ibid*, p. 42.

40 Svante E. Cornell “What drives Turkish Foreign Policy” <http://www.meforum.org/3129/turkish-foreign-policy>, Retrieved on 12 February 2012.

41 <http://hurarsiv.hurriyet.com.tr/goster/ShowNew.aspx?id=17149981>, Retrieved 12 February 2012.

42 <http://hurarsiv.hurriyet.com.tr/goster/ShowNew.aspx?id=17305175>, Retrieved 12 February 2012.

43 Barkey, *ibid*, p. 10.

44 Al-Sharif, *ibid*, p. 42.

It appears that the Libyan crisis represents the turning point in JDP's efforts to create an independent foreign policy in the Middle East that would lift Turkey to a regional, if not global, major power. It showed that when the conflict was small with only regional consequences Turkey would be allowed to play a significant role, but when there were larger issues at stake it would have to follow its Western allies' policy line.

The pro-Western character of the TFP became especially clear during the Syrian crisis. The significance of these development lies in the course of Turkish-Syrian relations. During Hafez Essad's reign and prior to JDP coming to power due to this country's support for Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), Kurdish terrorist organization in Turkey, Turkish policy toward Syria was cold and hostile at times. JDP, in line with its "zero problems with the neighbors" policy, normalized the relationship and strengthened the ties lifting the visa requirements, increasing economic ties, even having common cabinet meetings. Once the crowds took to the streets with demands of political reform many were not surprised.

Initially, like the rest of the world, Turkey encouraged Assad to adopt certain reforms in order to prevent the opposition movement from gaining momentum.⁴⁵ This was because an unstable Syria would not only mean instability in the region, but it would also complicate Turkey's struggle against its own Kurdish separatists. Despite these efforts Syria adopted a hardline against the protests and soon it became clear the support for Assad and the Ba'ath regime was not sustainable. In a last ditch effort Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoğlu visited Damascus and received guarantees that the crackdown would end and the regime would adopt reforms in line with the opposition demands. Following a brief period during which Syrian military pulled their tanks out of cities things quickly returned to violent destroying all hopes Turkey and the West had about working with Assad and calls for him to step down intensified. Unlike the previous ones during this crisis TFP seemed to be perfectly in sync with Western preferences. It can even be argued that Turkey was the actor that pushed the Western policy instead of the countries that did not want to be directly involved.

Over the course of the recent developments Turkey hosted opposition groups from almost all countries that experienced unrest. Out of these groups what received the most attention were the Muslim Brotherhood representatives from Tunisia and Egypt and opposition groups from Syria, which also included the representatives of Muslim Brotherhood. Unlike the previous contacts with Hamas before them, these were not official visits and appeared to be supported by the West in the hopes that they signaled an increasing interest in the Turkish Model, which would serve as a guide to these Islamist movements

45 Barkey, *ibid*, p. 11.

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who appeared likely to succeed falling regimes. Al-Sharif⁴⁶ argues that for two reasons it is unlikely that JDP can serve as an example for these movements. First, the circumstances that prepared the environment for these groups' accession to power are different. JDP had to go through a period of reform that changed the movement from more conservative Welfare Party line to one that is willing to cooperate with the West. this transformation took a relatively long period of time. Muslim Brotherhoods found the opportunity suddenly in front of them and in most cases they did not even actively participate in the protests that brought down existing regimes. Second, and more importantly, unlike other Middle Eastern countries, Turkey has a democratic tradition that established the rules of the political game and were respected by the majority of the participants. In Egypt, for example, the absence of such an environment is likely to play a role in the legitimacy of the upcoming regime. This means Turkish influence over these movements will remain limited at best, unable to steer future rulers of these countries to moderate politics. Erdoğan's visit to Egypt was a sign of this.

Conclusion

The examples above show that for Turkey, the Middle East has always been an alternative area of foreign policy and governments turned to the region when their ideology dictated and they faced problems in the main front of Turkish Foreign Policy, the West. In most cases these shifts have been temporary and were not particularly successful. I have argued that for the most part JDP's foreign policy was similar to previous examples. There are, however, two areas where we can point to differences. The first is the policy area. There appears to be one issue, namely, the Palestinian conflict, on which Turkey does not appear to shy away from diverging from the Western line. There is an active effort to keep the issue on the international agenda and make a difference in improving the circumstances of Palestinians.

The second difference is the method of involvement. Past involvements in the region were either through the use of hard power (DP) or the improvement of economic relations (MP). While traditional TFP has been to adopt a neutral stance and avoid involvement in all regional conflicts, now Turkey volunteers to mediate all conflicts in the region. These mediation efforts are only a small portion of the use of soft power which also includes economic ties, educational cooperation, and cooperation between non-governmental organizations.

These two differences unfortunately lead to a foreign policy that is not internally consistent. On the one hand, it is clear that Turkey is trying to become the peace-maker in the region, a role recognized and accepted by coun-

46 Al-Sharif, *ibid*, p. 42.

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tries in the region in certain occasions, like the peace process between Syria and Israel,⁴⁷ Iranian nuclear dispute, Israeli-Hamas relations, and Syrian-Iraqi relations (Tocci and Walker 2010). The role clearly depends on establishing good relationships with conflicting parties. This, in turn, requires a certain level of objectivity. Considering that the majority of conflicts in the region involve Israel directly or indirectly, it becomes extremely hard to fulfill this role as a country who is in a conflict with Israel. A second difficulty is the economic and diplomatic resources needed for these mediation efforts. Turkey is lacking resources in both areas, limiting its success to small and purely regional conflicts that are on a single issue.

Over the past eight years the experience showed us that Turkey could play the role it aspires to at a limited scale and that if the stakes in the conflict rises to global scales the involvement of non-Middle Eastern actors severely limits Turkey's ability to maneuver. The cases of Iran and Libya show us that in such cases Turkey is often left with no option but to follow Western policies and is unable to act independently. Even though this is an internally inconsistent policy that will be extremely hard to sustain in the future, it is more similar to the approach adopted by past governments than the policy-makers would care to admit.

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47 Turkish relations had begun to improve at a faster pace following Asad's 2004 visit. Israel, on the other hand, realized Hezbollah's strength in Lebanon during the war of 2006 and felt the need to improve its relations with Syria. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert asked Erdoğan to mediate and there was significant progress until the whole process failed when Israel started the operation "cast iron" in 2008 (Tocci and Walker 2010: 14).

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