The AKP’s Foreign Policy towards the Middle East:

Changes within continuity or rupture with past practices?

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| **Abstract:** Over the course of the past decade, Turkey has developed an active foreign policy towards the Middle East. By embarking on mediating missions in the Arab-Israeli conflict and by being vocal on sensitive issues such as the Iranian nuclear program, Turkey has emerged as an influential actor in the Middle East and as a major regional leader. The Eastern-orientation of Turkish foreign policy under the AKP has been subject to a heated debate: while several pundits have wondered whether Turkey is turning its back to the West and adopting a neo-Ottoman policy, others have praised Turkey’s activism in the East and its multi-dimensional foreign policy. Supporters and opponents of the AKP’s foreign policy have nevertheless converged in perceiving Turkey’s involvement in the Arab-Muslim world as a complete restructuring of the nature of Turkish foreign policy. This paper examines the claim that the AKP has operated a radical shift in the main principles and axes of Turkish foreign policy. By examining the current features of this policy, the paper argues that elements of both continuity and rupture exist in Turkey’s foreign orientations under the AKP. Rather than “shifting its axis,” the author argues that Turkey is practicing “split diplomacy”[[2]](#footnote-2) or dual-tracked foreign policy characteristic of rising powers. The paper also examines the achievements and shortcomings of the AKP’s Eastern-oriented policy, and looks at the challenges it must face in the post-“Arab spring” era.  **Key words**: Strategic depth, zero problems with the neighbors, neo-Ottomanism, split diplomacy, dual-tracked foreign policy, Arab spring. |

**Introduction**

“Believe me, Sarajevo won today as much as Istanbul, Beirut won as much as Izmir, Damascus won as much as Ankara, Ramallah, Nablus, Jenin, the West Bank, Jerusalem won as much as Diyarbakir.” With this statement made after the AKP’s victory in the parliamentary elections held on June 12, 2011, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan alluded to Turkey’s aspiration to assert itself as a regional power and to be the voice in the West for Arabs and Muslims in the Middle East.

Since its arrival to power in 2002, the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*) has sought to increase Turkey’s involvement in Middle Eastern affairs. In March 2003, in the context of the American-led invasion of Iraq, the AKP-majority Parliament voted against the deployment of American troops on Turkish soil; this episode offered the first illustration of the new government’s willingness to adopt a more independent, Eastern-oriented path of foreign policy that differs from previous governments’ alignment with Western powers. Yet, it is only during the mandate of the AKP, especially after the appointment of Pr Ahmet Davutoğlu as minister of foreign affairs in May 2009, that the AKP’s foreign policy became more assertive towards the Middle East, suggesting a drift away from the predominantly Western orientation which had been a hallmark of Turkish foreign policy throughout the post-World War II period (Öniş, 2011: 47-65).

This paper argues that while the AKP’s first term in office (2002-2007) has been characterized by relative continuity with traditional foreign policy style and behavior, the party’s second and third mandates (2007- 2011; 2011 -…) have been marked by a more independent and self-confident foreign policy, and a rupture with past practices. Yet, the paper notes that even though the AKP has been enthusiastically looking to the East, it has by no means operated a radical “shift of axis” and truly abandoned the West. Instead, the AKP is practicing some sort of “split-diplomacy” or “dual-tracked foreign policy” which is characteristic of rising powers. By simultaneously engaging on the Northern and Southern fronts, the East and the West, the AKP is multiplying Turkey’s foreign policy options and enhancing the country’s position as an emerging power and a leading regional and global actor.

The paper is organized as follows: first, it identifies the elements of continuity and rupture in Turkish Middle Eastern policy under the AKP and puts them into historical context. Then, it explores the major driving forces that have led to the observed changes and discontinuities in the country’s “new” foreign policy practice: ideological factors (namely, *Stratejik Derilink* and the “Davutoğlu Doctrine”) as well as economic, domestic, and international causes are given particular attention. Finally, the paper makes an assessment of the AKP’s foreign policy in the Middle East: it examines its achievements, shortcomings, and inconsistencies – especially as revealed during the “Arab Spring” – and considers the future challenges it must face.

**The AKP’s Foreign Policy towards the Middle East:**

**Between Continuity and Rupture**.

There is no doubt that activism in the Middle East and increased involvement in the affairs of the Arab-Muslim world have been invariable characteristics of the AKP’s foreign policy since its accession to power in 2002. Nevertheless, a deep understanding of changes and continuities in Turkish foreign policy requires an examination of the AKP’s rhetoric and practice, both before and after the parliamentary elections of 2007 which gave the party another mandate over Turkish politics. While the AKP government has been moderately active in its Eastern neighborhood during its first term in office (2002-2007), it pursued a far more assertive and self-confident policy in the Middle East after its victory in the 2007 elections.

When the AKP won the 2002 elections with some 34 percent of the votes and a large majority in Parliament, its leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was careful to articulate a foreign policy that would dispel the fears of the secular establishment at the domestic level, and would calm the worries of the international community (Barkey, 2010: 2). In his 2002 victory speech, Erdoğan embraced Turkey’s ambitions to join the European Union, and promised to speed up reforms in order to obtain the candidate status. In an attempt to assure the military and the Kemalist circles, he declared that the AKP is committed to making Turkey join “modern civilization”– the goal Atatürk had set for Turkey and which had always been interpreted as a reference to the West (Zarakol, 2011). The AKP’s foreign policy style and behavior during the 2002-2007 period therefore represented a continuation of traditional patterns of foreign policy towards the EU, as the AKP government adopted a European-oriented policy and embarked on a series of domestic reforms whose ultimate objective was to facilitate Turkey’s EU candidacy. The fact that the Turkish Parliament voted in March 2003 against the deployment of American troops on Turkish soil was not at that time a clear departure from the West: rather, Turkey’s position during this episode was driven by strategic interests. In fact, the AKP was worried that the U.S. invasion of Iraq would destabilize the region and consolidate a Kurdish emancipation process that would be detrimental to Turkey’s security (International Crisis Group, 2010: 3).

In parallel to the Europeanization ambition, the AKP government had an impetus to engage in the Middle East and the Arab world. As soon as the AKP accessed to government in 2002, Turkey sought to be a central player in its Eastern basin: the diplomatic rapprochement with Syria in 2005, the reception of the Hamas leader in Ankara in 2006, and the mediation efforts in the Syrian-Israeli indirect peace talks in 2007 are striking illustrations of this “new” policy. Yet, while it is undeniable that the AKP tried to boost Turkey’s stature and dynamism in the Middle East during its first mandate, it would be inaccurate to equate Turkey’s Eastern-oriented foreign policy exclusively with the AKP government (Öniş, 2011: 49). Indeed, Turkey’s activism in the Middle East can be traced back to the late 1980s and early 1990s: with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, former President Turgut Özal sought to create economic and diplomatic alliances with the Turkic countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus, and even called for the creation of a Turkic union. Similarly, between 1999 and 2002, the former minister of foreign affairs, İsmail Cem, favored a multi-dimensional foreign policy with a strong commitment to the West, yet with a particular attention to the Middle East (Cem, 2004). Hence, the first term of the AKP, which was characterized by a commitment to the West and more pronounced, yet limited, activism in the Middle East, was marked by continuity rather than rupture with previous patterns of foreign policy.

However, the AKP’s second term in office exhibits several elements of rupture and discontinuity with traditional foreign policy style and behavior. The 2007-2011 period was marked by Turkey’s relative detachment from the West (particularly the EU), its assertive foreign policy in the Middle East, and its emergence as an independent regional and international power. While the AKP’s rhetoric has continued to stress the importance of Turkey’s EU accession process,[[3]](#footnote-3) the government’s practice drifted away from traditional Western-oriented foreign policy conduct. Three major developments illustrate how the AKP has sought in the post-2007 era to act independently from Western powers and to depart from long-established foreign policy practices.

The evolution of Turkey’s relationship with Israel is the first signpost delineating the country’s new foreign policy path (Turan, 2011). The Turkish-Israeli clash at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2009 underlined the government’s new line of foreign policy: Prime Minister Erdoğan’s sharp critique of Israeli actions during the war in Gaza showed the AKP’s willingness to actively intervene in the Arab-Israeli conflict by siding with the Palestinians at the expense of the long-entrenched economic and security partnership with the Jewish state (Öniş, 2011: 52). The Davos episode therefore underscored the government’s new rhetoric and new style of mediation in regional conflicts: rather than maintaining the status of a neutral actor, the AKP leadership took a clearly pro-Palestinian stance, breaking with Turkey’s decades-long tradition of impartiality.

Turkey’s new stance towards Israel, first revealed by the Davos episode, was further confirmed by the “Mavi Marmara Flotilla crisis.” On May 31, 2010, Israel attacked the Turkish Mavi Marmara ship which was carrying humanitarian aid to Gaza; the attack left nine Turkish activists dead, and many others wounded. Describing the assault as “state terrorism,” Prime Minister Erdoğan ordered the recall of Turkey’s ambassador to Israel, thus jeopardizing the bilateral relations with the Jewish state. By championing the Palestinian cause and positioning himself as the new Gamal Abdel Nasser of the Arab street, the Turkish Prime Minister has operated the most striking rupture with the Kemalist tradition of non-interference in the affairs of the Middle East.

The betterment of bilateral relations with Arab states and the rapprochement with the “enemies” of the past is the second signpost of the AKP’s new foreign policy line in the post-2007 era. With both Syria and Iran, countries previously perceived as hostile to Turkey, the AKP sought to ease the tone in relations. While Syria and Turkey had come to the brink of war in 1998 due to Syria’s support of the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, the two countries started to develop a friendship in 2005 (Barkey, 2011). On a diplomatic level, Turkey mediated between Syria and Israel with the aim of achieving a peace agreement and a return of the occupied Golan Heights to Syria. On economic issues, cooperation between Ankara and Damascus also improved significantly, and in January 2007 a bilateral free trade agreement came into force. In 2008, Turkey invested some $6.3 million in 42 cooperative projects as part of the new Syrian-Turkish Interregional Cooperation Programme (Phillips, 2011). Similarly, Syria’s exports to Turkey rose from $187 million in 2006 to $662 million in 2010 (Phillips, 2011). This policy of rapprochement was also translated by the signing of an agreement in September 2009 that lifted visa requirements for tourist visits between the two states.

Similarly, previous antagonistic relations with Iraq improved. From 2002 to 2007 the AKP’s policy towards Iraq was essentially focused on containing the presence of the Kurdish Workers’ Party (Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan – PKK) and preventing the establishment of an independent Kurdish state in Northern Iraq. Nevertheless, its policy after 2007 was one of engagement (Grigoriadis, 2010) with the Iraqi Kurdistan: Turkey accepted the legitimacy of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) as a federal entity within Iraq and deepened political and economic relations with the Baghdad government. On October 15, 2009, Ahmet Davutoğlu became the first Turkish official to visit Iraqi Kurdistan: after meeting Massoud Barzani, President of the KRG and Turkey’s previous enemy, Davutoğlu announced the opening of a new Turkish consulate in Erbil, a phenomenon no one had hitherto dared imagine (Grigoriadis, 2010). In his statement, Davutoğlu underlined Turkey’s new approach to Iraq and its Kurdish-controlled region by declaring: All of us will contribute to the even further development of Erbil. This will become a bridge between Iraq and Turkey. We are the gate of Iraq to the European Union. And Erbil is our gate opening to Basra. (Al Sharikh, 2011)

More recently, on March 30, 2011, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan became the first Turkish Prime Minister to visit the Kurdish region of Iraq. His host, President Massoud Barzani, praised Erdoğan’s decision to visit as “brave”, adding “We believe your visit will bring strong bridges between Turkey and our country and our region” (Al Sharikh, 2011). While this rapprochement between Turkey and Kurdish Iraq is still fragile due to the ongoing operations of the PKK from Northern Iraq, it is nevertheless rich in significance and marks an abandonment of previous attitudes of mistrust and hostility.

Hence, while conventional foreign policy-making was based on the belief that there is “no friend of a Turk other than a Turk,” the AKP leadership has actively engaged with neighboring states and has de-emphasized the “Islamic threat” propagated by Kemalist elites and the military. The AKP’s policy of rapprochement with previous “enemies” is therefore a clear departure from the “encirclement psychology” that had thus far dominated Turkey’s view of the Middle East (Özcan and Usul, 2010).

Turkey’s involvement in the dispute over the Iranian nuclear program provides the third indication of the AKP’s rupture with past foreign policy practices. Distancing himself from his traditional allies – the United States and the European Union - , Erdoğan made several statements on Western double-standards regarding nuclear proliferation in the Middle East (Grigoriadis, 2010: 7). The Turkish Prime Minister repeated the Iranian rhetoric that its nuclear program is peaceful and he vigorously asserted that the real problem lays in Israel’s suspected nuclear stockpile. In parallel, putting his proactive foreign policy vision into practice, Davutoğlu visited Tehran in February 2010 with the aim to find a compromise over uranium enrichment and to broker a genuine deal that would be acceptable by Iran, the United States, and the international community.[[4]](#footnote-4) When in June 2010 the United Nations Security Council approved a new sanction package against Iran, Turkey voted against the proposed UN resolution, thus positioning itself against the interests of the United States and the Western alliance. This episode clearly revealed the AKP’s willingness to act independently of the West and betrayed the government’s immense self-confidence in its regional policy.

Finally, the AKP’s third term in office, which has started on June 12, 2011 seems to confirm the government’s trend of increased activism in the Middle East. Erdoğan’s first speech after the election was remarkable for what it seemed to signal about the AKP’s foreign policy vision and plans for its third mandate. Delighted and self-assured by his overwhelming victory, Erdoğan greeted the “sister people of Baghdad, Cairo, Sarajevo, Baku, Nicosia, and others” and declared that “Sarajevo has won as much as Istanbul; Beirut as much as Izmir; West Bank and Gaza as much as Diyarbakır” and that “the Middle East, the Caucasus, and the Balkans have gained as much as Turkey” (Zarakol, 2011: 8). More noteworthy is the fact that while Erdoğan named these previous Ottoman territories, he did not mention, not even once, Europe and the West. This is certainly revealing of the foreign policy orientation the AKP intends to adopt in its new term.

**The driving forces behind the AKP’s foreign policy**

**towards the Middle East: a multi-causal explanation.**

Several factors converge to explain the AKP’s activism in the Middle East and the ruptures and changes it has operated in Turkish foreign policy during the post-2007 era. Ideology, domestic and interest-group politics, economic transformations, and changes in the international system are considered below.

*The ideological factor: “Strategic Depth” and the “Davutoğlu Doctrine”[[5]](#footnote-5)*

The developments of Turkish foreign policy must firstly be understood in the context of the “Davutoğlu Doctrine,” that poses an intellectual frame for the thinking, the elaboration, and the orientation of Turkey’s diplomacy. In 2001, Prof Ahmet Davutoğlu, current minister of foreign affairs and former professor of international relations at Boğaziçi University, published a book titled *Strategic Depth: Turkey’s international position* in which he articulates his strategic vision about Turkey. Having been chief foreign policy advisor to the Prime Minister from 2003 to 2009 and foreign minister since 2009, Ahmet Davutoğlu is undoubtedly one of the most influential actors in Turkey. He has, to a large extent, shaped Turkish foreign policy-making throughout the AKP administration: indeed, he has been identified as the “architect of Turkish foreign policy” (Walker, 2011) and the “Turkey’s Kissinger” (Atlantic Council, 2011).

In his seminal work, Davutoğlu’s main thesis is that a country’s value in the world system is based on its geo-strategic position and its historical legacy (Davutoğlu, 2011). For a country to be a “central power” and a leading player in international relations, it must harness history and geography to acquire “strategic depth.” In the author’s view, Turkey is uniquely endowed with geographical and historical assets that allow it to exercise a global strategic role. Sitting at the confluence of East and West, at the intersection of the Middle East, the Balkans, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Europe, Turkey must engage in a proactive foreign policy to gain geopolitical influence in these regions. Davutoğlu also emphasizes that Turkey must take advantage of its rich historical and cultural legacy as heir to the Ottoman Empire. Based on the cultural and religious links it has with the former Ottoman territories, Turkey must play a regional role by unifying and leading the Muslim world. In Davutoğlu’s own words:

Turkey enjoys multiple regional identities and thus has the capability as well as the responsibility to follow an integrated and multidimensional foreign policy. The unique combination of our history and geography brings with it a sense of responsibility. To contribute actively towards conflict resolution and international peace and security in all these areas is a call of duty arising from the depths of a multidimensional history of Turkey (Grigoriadis, 2010: 5).

Furthermore, Davutoğlu identifies two major conditions for Turkey to fulfill its potential and become a global power. First, the country must solve its domestic problems, namely the Kurdish question and the polarization between Islamists and secularists (Grigoriadis, 2010: 5). Davutoğlu advocates a resolution of these two issues based on liberal principles: the Kurds would be given their rights within Turkey, and a liberal consensus would be achieved on the question of secularism between the Islamist and the liberal segments of society (Schleifer, 2010). On the international level, the author argues that Turkey must pursue a policy of “zero problem with the neighbors”: it must end its bilateral disputes and establish cordial relations with neighboring countries. He also suggests that Turkey counterbalances its dependence on the West by building pragmatic alliances with its Eastern basin and engaging in a policy of regional “dialogue and cooperation” rather than “coercion and confrontation” (Walker, 2011: 6-7).

It is noteworthy that the most assertive initiatives the AKP has taken with regard to the Middle East coincide with the appointment of Ahmet Davutoğlu as minister of foreign affairs on May 1, 2009. Indeed, the rapprochement with previous enemies such as Syria and the AKP’s mediating efforts over the Iranian nuclear program took place after 2009, and represent an implementation of the principles Davutoğlu has advocated for.

*Shifting balance of power at the domestic front: a domestic-politics*

*explanation of Turkey’s new foreign policy orientation*

The shifting domestic contours of policy-making can also provide an explanation for Turkey’s assertive and confident foreign policy in the post-2007 period. Traditionally, up to 2007, Turkish foreign policy-making had been entrusted to the military and to state bureaucracy who are seen as the guardians of Atatürk’s legacy. Nevertheless, since the parliamentary elections of June 2007 and the election of Abdullah Gül as President on August 27, 2007, decision-making has increasingly come under civilian control: the decisive victory of the AKP at the polls[[6]](#footnote-6) restricted the prerogatives of the military and provided the government with a legitimate mandate to exert influence and leadership.

In fact, in 2007, the military committed a strategic miscalculation at home that helped the AKP win the elections with a large margin, while alienating the military institution itself and greatly reducing its grip over political affairs (Barkey, 2011: 6). When the term of President Sezer came to an end, Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül declared his candidacy to replace him. The military however was anxious that someone who is very close to the AKP leadership and whose wife is veiled would assume this high national office. The institution therefore decided to block Gül’s candidacy: the Chief of Staff issued a memorandum in which he warned of terrible consequences were Gül to become President (Barkey, 2011: 6). The officers also organized demonstrations against the government and sought to rally AKP opponents. Yet, the party decided not to back down and pushed for early national elections. The results were disastrous for the military: the public clearly repudiated this institution by giving 47% of the votes to the AKP.

Elated by its electoral victory and the political power it has accumulated domestically, the AKP government got a sense of foreign policy ownership. As Henry Barkey (2011: 6) expresses it: “The new victory and the humiliation of the military and its allies at the polls freed the AKP government to begin to change policies it hitherto had not dared to.” Driven by its central Anatolian roots and its attachment to Islam, the party therefore sought to reach out to the Arab-Muslim world and engaged in a far more assertive and self-confident foreign policy than the one it had adopted in its first term in office.

It is noteworthy that the AKP’s pro-active foreign policy in the Middle East has proven to be a major asset in domestic politics. Indeed, the government’s engagement with the Arab-Muslim world and Erdoğan’s championing of the Palestinian cause have echoed the mood of a large majority of the Turkish population and appealed to nationalistic sentiments. As Ziya Öniş (2011: 57) perfectly puts it:

What we observe in the recent Turkish context is that domestic politics has become heavily intertwined with foreign policy, and foreign policy has emerged as a major instrument for gaining a competitive edge in domestic politics.

In sum, Turkey’s domestic political transformation - its democratization in particular - has played an important role in shaping Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East (Walker, 2011: 11). A democratically elected civilian government - like the one headed by the AKP - must act in accordance with the public opinion and popular sentiment. In Turkey, despite the traditional hostility of the secular Kemalist elites towards the Arab world, most Turks have generally been favorable to their country’s engagement in its Arab-Muslim neighborhood. Erdoğan’s harsh critique of the Gaza war and the Flotilla attack must thus be seen as both a reflection of the public outrage over civilian casualties and a willingness to cultivate public support among the conservative, pro-Muslim and pro-Arab segment of his constituency.

*Economic dynamism and the “rise of the trading state”* (Kirisci, 2009)*:*

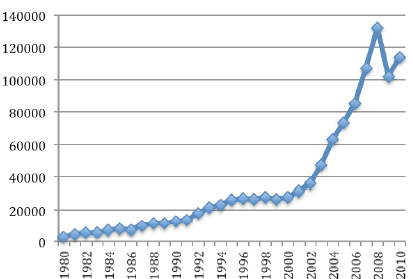
*a political economy explanation*

Turkey’s opening to the Middle East is also driven by economic motives, namely by the desire to reach new markets. Since the 1980s, the Turkish economy has been undergoing important structural changes that have transformed it from an inward-looking to an export-oriented one. The graph below reveals the significant increase in Turkish exports from 1980 to 2010:

The global crisis of 2008-2009 represented a turning point for Turkey’s foreign policy and economic diplomacy insofar as it accelerated the country’s search for new markets. Indeed, at a time when the EU – Turkey’s major trade and investment partner – was experiencing major difficulties, the AKP government sought to diversify Turkey’s economic relations by expanding trade agreements with Middle Eastern countries (Öniş, 2011: 56). Turkey’s activism in the East during the post-2007 period therefore reflects the ‘rise of the trading state.’ The figure below illustrates Turkey’s shifting trade patterns in the aftermath of the global financial crisis. Although the EU remains Turkey’s main trading partner, its share in Turkish exports declined from 54% in 2003 to 42% in 2010. In parallel, the Middle East’s share increased from 9% in 2003 to 13% in 2010.

Furthermore, the AKP’s assertive foreign policy in the Middle East can be explained in light of interest-group politics and the socio-economic make-up of Turkey. Central to the AKP’s initiatives towards the Arab world have been the interests of a new class of entrepreneurs: the “Anatolian Tigers.” This new business elite, who has been accumulating capital since the economic reforms of the 1980s, is export driven, but also hails from a conservative and pious background. It constitutes the backbone of the AKP’s constituency.

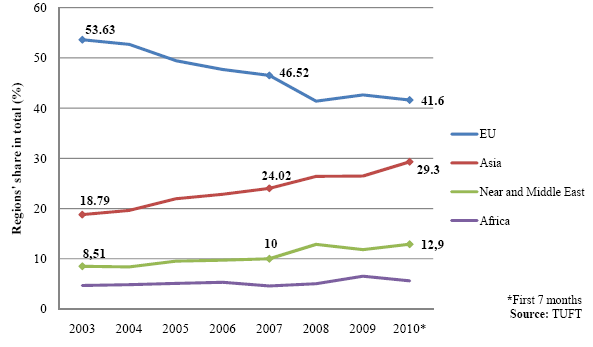
Turkish exports between 1980 and 2010



Source: Barkey, 2011:5

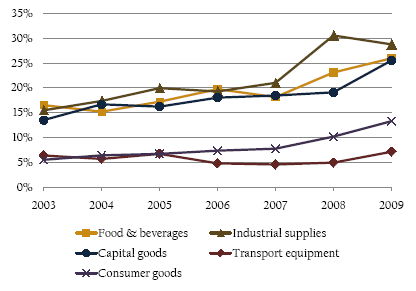
Thanks to geographical proximity and cultural factors (devotion to Islam), the Anatolian businessmen have advocated for Turkish expansion into emerging Middle Eastern/Muslim markets, rather than an exclusive focus on the saturated European markets. In order to promote their agenda and to have a say in Turkish policy-making, the Tigers have structured themselves into economic interest groups, such as MÜSIAD. Established in 1990, this business association has become quite active in recent years: thanks to its 30 nation-wide branches, 92 connection points in 43 countries, and 4700 members all around Anatolia, it wields considerable economic and political power and pushes policy-makers to reformulate their policies vis-à-vis the Eastern neighbors (Kutlay, 2011). With the collaboration of other business associations such as TUSKON, MÜSIAD has actively participated in trade negotiations with Arab counterparts: it has sponsored several business forums designed to bring together Turkish and Arab business leaders, the most recent one having been held in December 2010 in Istanbul, with substantial participation from Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan (People Daily, 2011).

Turkey’s shifting trading partners (2003 -2010)



Source: Öniş, 2011 : 56

Arab World’s share of Turkey’s Goods Exports



Source: Habibi and Walker, 2011: 4

The figure below reveals the influence of the Anatolian Tigers on Turkish economic and foreign diplomacy. In fact, the main export commodities of these businesses are food products and industrial supplies, which have grown more dependent on Arab markets than have other commodities. The Arab share of food exports rose from 15% to 26% between 2003 and 2009, while the share of chemicals exports rose from 13% to 20% in the same period.

In sum, with the victory of the AKP in the 2002 elections, a new set of interest groups – that had previously had no say in Turkish foreign policy-making - were empowered. The economic interests of those Anatolian businesses have played an important role in the AKP government’s efforts to promote greater trade and economic cooperation with the Middle East in the context of Turkey’s new foreign policy agenda.

*Turkey’s ‘historical depth’: a constructivist and identity-based approach to the AKP’s activism in the Middle East*

In April 2010, at the opening ceremony of the TRT TV channel in Arabic, Erdo-ğan gave a speech in which he addressed the people of the Middle East, saying:

We share the same past. You should know that we have a common future as well. (…) We are members of a common history, and a common culture. Our minds and hearts have grown and developed from joint sources. (Bianet, 2010)

This statement, that stresses the common heritage shared by Turkey and its Arab neighbors, unveils the role of historical memory, Muslim values and identity in shaping Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East. In fact, the assertive role of Ankara in the region may well be driven – or at least facilitated – by the AKP’s “Muslim identity” and its tendency to see Muslim nations in a positive light. The ruling party has indeed turned Turkish foreign policy on its head by realizing Turkey’s Muslim identity and drawing strength from the country’s history and legacy as heir to the Ottoman Empire rather than perceiving that as a handicap. It is noteworthy that under the AKP rule, a Turk became Secretary General of the Organization of the Islamic Cooperation (OIC) for the first time in the institution’s history.

Reciprocally, thanks to the AKP’s conservative religious identity, Arab Sunni nations have generally tended to perceive Turkey’s new “soft power” in their region in a positive light (Altuni*ş*ik, 2010). A striking example is Erdoğan’s visit of Sunni villages in North Lebanon on November 25, 2010. He was greeted with posters and banners saying: “Warm welcome to the Sublime Porte.”[[7]](#footnote-7) This indicates that Sunni populations may assimilate Turkey’s role in their countries with some sort of “Islamic solidarity” like the one that used to exist during the Ottoman Empire era.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The AKP’s insistence on Turkey’s Muslim identity and common heritage with the Arab world has created a debate over “Neo-Ottomanism” (Yavuz, 2008: 10). A number of commentators and scholars believe that Turkey’s increased involvement in Middle Eastern affairs reflects the AKP’s abandonment of Kemalism and its embrace of “neo-Ottomanism.” This term is however quite ambiguous. For as Özcan and Musul (2010: 116) put it:

It is still not clear what we understand exactly by “neo-Ottomanism.” Is it an alternative foreign policy model for Turkey? Does it hide secret “imperialist” ambitions on the part of Turkey? Or is it just a romantic and hollow rhetoric echoed by certain Turks?

“Neo-Ottomanism” cannot be regarded as an alternative model of foreign policy or as an expression of Turkey’s ambition of re-establishing some sort of “empire” in the Arab world. Rather, it may be regarded as Turkey’s willingness to exert “soft power” and influence on regions formerly under Ottoman rule. In this sense, “neo-Ottomanism” would be a foreign policy model in which Turkey uses the “Ottoman identity” and the Ottoman heritage to build connections with the Middle East and to “create an atmosphere of belonging to the same civilization” (Özcan and Musul, 2010: 117).

*Turkey’s rising diplomacy and shifting global role: a symptom of power diffusion in the international system?*

Turkey’s emerging role in the Middle East after 2007 is also a reflection of changes in the world system and international politics: as power is becoming de-centralized and more diffuse, and as the American leadership is increasingly challenged and contested, rising powers have emerged on the global scene to fill the void left by previous established blocs.

Indeed, the decline of the U.S.- Israeli- Saudi vertex – ongoing since the invasion of Iraq – has created a power and leadership vacuum in the Middle East. Although Iran has been seeking this moment to assert itself on the Arab scene, its socio-political makeup may prove to be an obstacle to the realization of its regional aspirations: as the only majority Shiite, Persian state in a region dominated by Sunnis and Arabs, Iran stands as the odd man in the Middle East, despite its alliance with the Lebanese Hezbollah, the Assad regime in Syria, and Hamas in Palestine. Turkey’s rising regional role is therefore filling the leadership gap in a region that has strong connections with Turkey, through the memory of the Ottoman Empire. For Arab nationalists who fear Iranian hegemony, Turkey is seen as a benign power acting as a counter-weight to Iran, and establishing a balance of power in the region. For those frustrated by the US inability to end the siege of Gaza or to stop settlement activity, Turkey’s efforts and pro-Palestinian stance are perceived as a healing balm even if they are not expected to solve the conflict.

Hence, in the last decade, international changes in the balance of power have propelled Turkey to the forefront and made it a major geopolitical player in the Middle East, a role that the AKP leadership was ready to embrace enthusiastically.

**An assessment of the AKP’s foreign policy in the Middle East: achievements, shortcomings, and future challenges**

**in the post-“Arab Spring” period.**

Many aspects of the AKP’s assertive foreign policy in the Middle East – especially after 2007 - have represented a positive development for Turkey. In a changing global environment, it is rational for a country to pursue a multi-dimensional pro-active foreign policy (Öniş, 2011: 58). Instead of focusing exclusively on one partner – the West, Turkey has sought under the AKP’s mandates to diversify its relationships and become an influential player on both regional and global levels. The AKP’s style of foreign policy activism has brought the country several short-term gains: an improvement of its economic relations and opening of new markets, popularity and prestige in its Eastern neighborhood, and a reputation for being a “benign regional power.”

Nevertheless, the Arab Spring has revealed the limits of the AKP’s foreign policy towards the Middle East. In the past decade, Turkey’s Middle East policy was “based on an approach that privileged relations with existing power structures; the Arab rebellions have however upended Ankara’s calculations” (Barkey, 201: 12). In fact, the revolts starting with Tunisia in early 2011 undermined the regimes with which the AKP had established excellent economic relations: this is the case for Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria.

The upheavals of the Arab Spring have therefore proved to be problematic for the AKP leadership and created a dilemma between ethics and *realpolitik*: Turkey had to choose between either positioning itself as a champion of democratic change in the region while jeopardizing its economic relations, or acting pragmatically and realistically in accordance with its interests while appearing as a “status quo” power vested in the authoritarian regimes of the Middle East.

The AKP seemed to have chosen a mix of realism and idealism in its policy response to the Arab Spring. It has adopted a case-by-case approach and weighted the costs and benefits of its stance in each country, while at the same time paying careful attention to embrace an ethical position. Though Turkey and Tunisia have traditionally developed warm relations, the events in Tunis unfolded quite quickly, preventing the ruling party from crafting an adequate response. Egypt was a different case: Erdoğan and Mubarak had never been close friends, and the Egyptian regime had looked apprehensively at Turkey’s ambitions in a region that was traditionally in Egypt’s sphere of influence. Moreover, Egypt absorbed only 2% of Turkish exports in the last years (Habibi and Walker, 2011: 3). Based on these facts, Erdoğan was quick to call on Mubarak to step down as Turkey had little to lose from a regime change in Egypt.

Libya was a much more complicated case that posed a real challenge for the AKP policy: in Libya, Turkey had invested some $23 billion in the construction sector, and had to evacuate some 15 000 of its nationals living and working there (Barkey, 2011: 10). Moreover, in December 2010, Erdoğan had received the Qaddafi International Prize award. Hence, whereas the Turkish Prime Minister was quick to turn against Mubarak, in Libya he hesitated: he initially opposed the NATO military intervention against Qaddafi’s regime. It is only after Turkey found itself isolated vis-à-vis the international community and shamed by anti-Turkish demonstrations in Benghazi that the AKP leadership decided to take action against Qaddafi. Changing his previous policy position, Erdoğan called on Qaddafi to step down and accepted Turkey’s participation in NATO operations.

As for the rebellion in Syria, it presented the biggest challenge to Davutoğlu’s policy of “zero problems with the neighbors.” Diplomatically, Erdoğan had built close relations with President Bashar al-Assad. Economically, the Syrian and Turkish economies are very well integrated (Jabbour, 2011). As Syrian unrest threatened the bilateral security and economic relations, Erdoğan sought in private to convince President al-Assad to introduce effective and meaningful reforms, and sent his foreign minister Davutoğlu to Damascus to negotiate with the regime (Barkey, 2011: 11). Here again, the Turkish Prime Minister first adopted a realist and pragmatic stance as he tried to find a compromise with the Syrian regime. It is only when 12 000 Syrian refugees converged on the Turkish border seeking shelter, that Erdoğan spoke up publicly against al-Assad’s regime. However, despite Turkey’s “zero problems” with Syria and despite the good relations between Damascus and Ankara, Erdoğan’s pleas and calls have fallen on deaf ears as al-Assad continues to rebuff any compromise. As the situation deteriorated in Syria and as the pragmatic attitude seemed useless, the AKP leadership adopted a more idealistic and ethical approach: on November 22, 2011, Erdoğan called on al-Assad to step down, thus putting an end to Turkey’s once-close ties to the Assad regime for the benefit of championing democracy. All in all however, the Syrian Spring has demonstrated the shortcomings of the AKP’s Middle Eastern policy and the limits of Turkish influence on the regimes of the region.

In the post-Arab Spring Middle East, Ankara must face several challenges. First, though the AKP’s assertive and self-confident foreign policy in the region has brought Turkey many gains, the ruling party must be cautious not to over-rely on the Middle East as an exclusive partner. For, as new institutions and regimes come into existence in the region, markets are likely to contract, jeopardizing Turkey’s economic interests. Second, the AKP must be ready to suffer from the consequences of its collaboration with previous authoritarian regimes: it is likely indeed that new elites in power be mistrustful of Turkey’s real ambitions and agenda in the region. Third, though Turkey can certainly be a “role model” for Arab states, the AKP leadership must be careful not to sermonize populations on how to develop and on which path to adopt in their transition to democracy. Prime Minister Erdoğan has thus far been cautious not to impose the so-called “Turkish model” on Arab populations. In the future, the AKP government should stick to Erdoğan’s careful position as over-assertiveness in exporting the Turkish model might reduce the Arab street’s appetite for such a model and create a negative reaction against a patronizing Turkey.[[9]](#footnote-9)

**Conclusion**

This paper has sought to evaluate the claim that Turkey’s Middle Eastern policy under the AKP represents a rupture with conventional foreign policy behavior and illustrates a “shift of axis.” The author has argued that the ruling party’s first term in office (2002-2007) was characterized by minor changes within continuity: whilst the AKP leadership undeniably paid special attention to the Middle East, it was also very cautious to formulate a policy that pleases the Kemalist and liberal circles in Turkey. The AKP government therefore adopted a European-oriented policy and embarked on a series of domestic reforms whose ultimate objective was to facilitate Turkey’s EU candidacy. On the Middle Eastern front, the AKP initiatives in its first term seemed to represent a continuation of Turgut Özal’s opening to the Eastern neighborhood.

Nevertheless, the rupture or discontinuity occurred during the AKP’s second and third mandates (2007-2011; 2011-…). The political power accumulated by the party domestically after the 2007 elections has allowed it to exert a far more assertive, independent and self-confident foreign policy. Davutoğlu’s doctrine of “strategic depth” and “zero-problems with the neighbors” were put into practice; former “enemies” were transformed into new “friends”; the long-entrenched partnership with Israel was replaced by Erdoğan’s championing of the Palestinian cause; and Turkey’s historical and cultural legacy was no longer considered as a handicap but rather seen as an asset and a source of strength in international relations.

The assertive policy towards the Middle East after 2007 was driven by a multitude of domestic, regional, and international factors. They can be summarized as follows: Turkey’s interest in securing new investments and markets for its growing economy ; democratization and shifting contours of foreign policy-making; changes in Turkey’s socio-economic makeup and the rise of the Anatolian Tigers; the AKP’s Muslim identity and sympathy towards its neighborhood; power diffusion in the international system and leadership vacuum in the Middle East.

However, notwithstanding some departures from past foreign policy practices, the AKP leadership has been careful not to veer too far off from Turkey’s Western orientation. Indeed, Turkey is still committed to Western institutions it belongs to, such as NATO. In this regard, the country’s decision to participate in the Libyan no-fly zone with the NATO forces is emblematic. Despite its initial hesitation to NATO intervention, Turkey has since played an active role in it: the Izmir airbase was transformed into a command and communication centre for air operations in Libya, and four Turkish frigates and a submarine were sent there to enforce the arms embargo against Qaddafi (Atlantic Council, 2011). Moreover, Turkey continues to host US weapons at the Incirlik Air Base and it has recently accepted to participate in a NATO Missile Defense architecture (Atlantic Council, 2011).

Hence, talking of an “axis shift” to describe Turkey’s “new” foreign policy under the AKP in the post-2007 era is excessive and misleading. Instead, the paper has argued that Turkey is practicing “split diplomacy” (Badie, 2011) or a dual-tracked foreign policy, characteristic of rising powers. By simultaneously engaging on the Western and Eastern fronts, in the North and in the South, Turkey is multiplying its options and engaging in a multidimensional pro-active foreign policy.

Whilst the AKP’s foreign policy in the Middle East has undoubtedly brought Turkey several economic and security gains, it has nevertheless faced setbacks during the Arab Spring. The principle of “zero problems with the neighbors” is seriously challenged by the Syrian (and Libyan) rebellion, and Turkey’s economic relations are jeopardized. The AKP must therefore be quick and flexible enough in readapting its foreign policy to the changing Middle Eastern environment. The coming years will show how Turkey, as a rising regional and global power, will help shape the future of its Eastern neighborhood in the post-Arab Spring era.

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| **AKP’nin Ortadoğu Dış Politikası: Süreklilikte Değişim mi Kopuş mu?**  **Özet:** Türkiye, geçtiğimiz on yıl boyunca, Ortadoğu’ya yönelik aktif bir dış politika geliştirmiştir. Türkiye, Arap-İsrail çatışmasında arabuluculuk misyonu girişimi ve İran’ın nükleer programı gibi hassas konularda devreye girerek, önemli bir bölgesel lider ve Ortadoğu’da etkili bir aktör olarak ortaya çıkmıştır. AKP iktidarı ile birlikte, Türk dış politikasının doğuya yönelimi, tartışmaları da beraberinde getirmiştir: Bazı uzmanlar Türkiye’nin Batı’ya sırtını dönerek yeni Osmanlıcılık politikasını benimseyip benimsemediğini sorgularken, bazıları ise Türkiye’nin Ortadoğu’daki çok yönlü dış politikası ve aktivizmini övmüşlerdir. Ancak, AKP dış politikasının destekçileri ya da muhalifleri, Türkiye’nin dış politikasının doğasının bir gereği olarak tam bir yeniden yapılanma ile Arap- Müslüman dünyasına Türkiye’nin dâhil olduğu görüşünde yine de birleşmişlerdir. Bu makale, Türk Dış Politikasının temel prensipleri ve ekseninin radikal bir biçimde AKP tarafından değiştirildiği iddiasını ele almaktadır. Bu politikanın mevcut özelliklerini inceleyerek, bu çalışma AKP iktidarında Türk dış politikasının yönelimlerinde hem kopuş hem de süreklilik unsurlarının birlikte var olduğunu iddia etmektedir. Yazar “eksen kayması” yerine Türkiye’nin “bölünmüş diplomasi” ya da yükselen güçlerin çift yönlü dış politika karakteristiğini uyguladığını iddia etmektedir. Bu makale ayrıca, AKP’nin Doğu yönelimli dış politikasının başarı ve eksikliklerini incelemekte ve aynı zamanda “Arap Baharı” sonrası dönemde yüzleşmek zorunda olduğu meydan okumalara bakmaktadır.  **Anahtar Kelimler:** Stratejik Derinlik, komşularla sıfır problem, yeni-Osmanlıcılık, bölünmüş diplomasi, çift yönlü dış politika, Arap Baharı |

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2. This idea is inspired by the work and analysis of Bertrand Badie in his recent book *La Diplomatie de connivence: Les dérives oligarchiques du système international*, Paris: La Découverte, May 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In fact, the EU was again the only foreign entity Erdoğan mentioned in his victory speech in 2007, with two explicit mentions of Turkey’s EU accession process. See Zarakol (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. On May 2010, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, Brazilian Foreign Minister Celso Amorim, and Iranian Foreign Minister Manuchehr Motaki signed an agreement referred to as the Tehran Research reactor (TRR) by which Iran accepted low-enriched nuclear fuel swap: Iran committed to send 1,200 kg of 3.5% enriched uranium to Turkey in exchange for 20% enriched uranium from Western countries. However, the US and the EU did not agree to the deal and the UN Security Council subsequently approved the fourth sanction package on Iran. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Walker (2007: 32-47). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The AKP increased its share of the vote from 34 percent in 2002 to almost 47 percent in 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The author’s personal observation during a visit to Tripoli, North Lebanon. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Nevertheless, it should be noted that while Sunni populations in the Middle East have a tendency to perceive Turkey’s regional involvement in a positive light, Christian populations have several apprehensions and suspicions about the “real agenda” of the AKP and a possible “Turkish hegemony” in the region . Also, some Arab nationalists are concerned that Turkey may be “implementing the American project in the Middle East.” Read Altuni*ş*ik, 2010, art.cit. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood for instance was especially angry when Erdoğan urged a secular separation of religion and state. Cf “Is Turkey building a new Ottoman Empire?”, *The Star*, November 13, 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)