

Ankara Torn Apart: Arab Spring Turns into Turkey's Autumn

Birol Baskan *

Abstract

The end of the threat posed by Kurdish separatism and the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq in the early 2000s created an international environment perfectly conducive for Turkey to play more active and dynamic role in the Middle East. The ruling party in Turkey, Justice and Development Party (JDP) ably benefitted from this international environment and expanded Turkey's influence in the region. Through a multi-level analysis of Turkish foreign policy under the JDP, this paper argues that the Arab revolutions/rebellions of 2011 have been undermining the very international environment the JDP found conducive for its foreign policy.

Keywords

Arab Spring, JDP, European Security, WEU

* Birol Baskan, PhD, is an assistant professor in Georgetown University School of Foreign Service, Doha, Qatar.

Introduction

The Arab revolutions/rebellions of 2011 seemed to be presenting a new opportunity for Turkey to expand its influence in the Middle East. Neither Zein al Abidin bin Ali of Tunisia nor Hosni Mubarak of Egypt had been welcoming Turkey as a rising star in the Middle East. More importantly, Turkey's Islamists had historically very cordial relations with the leaders of two powerful Islamist opposition groups, al Nahda in Tunisia and the Muslim Brothers in Egypt. Hence, the post-revolution regimes might open a new page in the history of the Middle East with Turkey as its leader. As the protests spread to other Arab countries, however, Turkey has found itself in a more complicated situation and as a result several inconsistencies marked Turkey's reactions to the Arab revolutions/rebellions.¹

Turkey was, for instance, too impatient with Hosni Mubarak. Erdogan voiced Turkey's strong support for the Egyptian people's demands on 1 February 2011, just one week after the massive protests broke out in Egypt.² On the other hand, Turkey has been quite patient with Bashar Asad, even after six months of protests and the regime's brutal crackdown, both Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his foreign affairs minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, still were working hard to persuade Bashar Asad to implement reforms so as to appease the protesters and avoid

¹ Two useful journalistic accounts of Turkey's reactions, See Steven A. Cook, 'Arab Spring, Turkish Fall,' *Foreign Policy*, May 5, 2011, available at <http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/05/05/arab_spring_turkish_fall?page=0,0> (accessed on Sept.3, 2011); Henri J. Barkey, 'Turkey and the Arab Spring,' Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 26, 2011, available at <<http://www.carnegieendowment.org/2011/04/26/turkey-and-arab-spring/2s3>> (accessed on Sept.3, 2011).

² The full text of Erdogan's speech can be found at <<http://www.setav.org/public/HaberDetay.aspx?Dil=tr&hid=63385&q=erdogan-to-mubarak-listen-to-the-egyptians>> (accessed on Aug.29, 2011).

international sanctions.³ Furthermore, even though Turkey repeatedly expressed its strong objection to any military intervention in Libya, but shortly thereafter, it participated in NATO forces.⁴ At the same time, Turkey has been quite understanding Saudi Arabia's intervention in Bahrain. Recently, as the crisis in Syria has escalated and proved to be beyond Turkey's power to solve it, Turkey began to play with the idea of collaborating more with the US and other European powers to bring the crisis to an end in Syria.

The Arab revolutions/rebellions have in fact added one more tension to Ankara's already strained relations. That is, Ankara is now torn apart not only between Iran and Israel or between Iran and Saudi Arabia, but also between the Arab masses and their authoritarian Arab leaders. Pulled off from so different directions, Turkey could not remain neutral among the sides. As it turns out, the Arab revolutions/rebellions have in fact been undermining the perfect international environment Erdogan and Davutoglu found when the Justice and Development Party (JDP) came to power.⁵ Added to this, over-ambitious, over-confident,

³ Ahmet Davutoglu's visit to Syria was the much-publicized one for Erdogan announced it on 6 August 2011 in the following words. "We arrived at the last moment of patience ... therefore I send Minister of Foreign Affairs to Suriye on Tuesday. They will hold necessary meetings with him [Esad]. In these meetings our messages to him will be strongly delivered." Erdogan's statement can be found at <<http://www.akparti.org.tr/site/haberler/suriye-meselesi-bizim-ic-meselemizdir/11521>> (accessed on Aug. 29, 2011). The visit proved to be of no use as Esad continued to suppress the protests on the very day Davutoglu was in Damascus. It turns out that Turkey has still patience with Esad.

⁴ See Saban Kardas, "Turkey's 'moral politics' in Libya: Seduction by analogy?", Today's Zaman, 20 March 2011, available at <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-238664-turkeys-moral-politics-in-libya-seduction-by-analogy-by-saban-kardas*--.html> (accessed on Aug. 29, 2011).

⁵ For a rather positive view on the JDP period, see Hakan Yavuz, *The Emergence of a New Turkey: Democracy and the AK Parti*, (University of Utah

and highly personalized management of Turkish foreign policy in two hands, and two hands only, those of Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Ahmet Davutoglu, is simply turning the Arab spring into Turkey's autumn.

To prove this argument, this paper provides a multi-level analysis of Turkish foreign policy under the JDP. The next section discusses the main findings of the existing literature on Turkish foreign policy under the JDP on which my analysis in part relies. Then, the discussion turns to this paper's analysis. The conclusion then completes the argument by discussing how the perfect environment the JDP found itself in to pursue its quite ambitious foreign policy has recently changed.

The Literature on Turkish Foreign Policy under the Justice and Development Party

The change in Turkish foreign policy under the JDP can be best grasped if we look at how Turkey's relations with Israel on the one hand and with Iran and the Arab World on the other have changed from the 1990s to the 2000s. Throughout the 1990s, Turkey decisively and systematically developed extensive relations with Israel, sharing intelligence with Israel, undertaking joint-military training and exercises, and granting huge military contracts to Israel.⁶ Turkey's relations with Israel became a great concern to

Press, 2006). For a rather critical view on the JDP period, See Bülent Duru and İlhan Uzgöl, *AKP Kitabı: Bir Dönüşümün Bilançosu*, (Istanbul: Phoenix Yayınevi, 2010).

⁶ For more on Turkey-Israel relations in the 1990s, see Ofra Bengio, *The Turkish-Israeli Relationship: Changing Ties of Middle Eastern Outsiders*, 2nd ed., (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). See also Cevik Bir and Martin Sherman, 'Formula for Stability: Turkey plus Israel,' *Middle East Quarterly*, vol.9, no.4, (Fall, 2002), pp.23-32. What makes this article particularly

Iran and its Arab neighbors: Not only the Arab league, but also the Organization of Islamic Conference strongly condemned Turkey for developing close ties with Israel. The Arab league also strongly criticized Turkey on its military incursions into Iraq. In the 1990s, Turkey accused Iran and Syria of supporting PKK terrorism, coming to the brink of war with Syria and exchanging verbal assaults and even expelling each other's ambassadors.⁷

With the coming to power of the JDP in 2002, this picture has radically changed as Turkey has developed closer relations with Iran and the Arab world. For example, the Gulf Cooperation Council declared Turkey a strategic partner in September 2008.⁸ Turkey and Syria signed a free trade agreement in 2006, cancelled visa requirements from each other in 2009 and to the ire of Israel undertook joint military maneuvers in the same year.⁹ As the US, Israel, the EU and the Arab countries became increasingly critical of Iran's nuclear program, Turkey has been very soft with Iran, opposing, for example, US-led attempts to impose more economic sanctions on Iran.¹⁰ In the meantime, Turkey became more vocal in its criticism of Israel on Palestine, relations coming to their

insightful is that one of the authors, Cevik Bir, was the deputy chief of Staff of the Turkish Armed Forces at the time of critical agreements between Turkey and Israel were made, and is seen as the Turkish architect behind the extensive relations.

⁷ For more on Turkey-Iran relations, see Robert Olson, *Turkey-Iran Relations, 1979-2004: Revolution, Ideology, War, Coups and Geopolitics*, (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 2004).

⁸ Mariam Al Hakeem, 'GCC names Turkey first strategic partner outside the Gulf,' *Gulfnews.com*, Sept. 3, 2008, <<http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/uae/general/gcc-names-turkey-first-strategic-partner-outside-the-gulf-1.129631>> (accessed on October 2, 2010).

⁹ Turkey also cancelled visa requirements with Yemen, Jordan and Lebanon.

¹⁰ See UN Security Council Press Release SC/9948, available at <<http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2010/sc9948.doc.htm>> (accessed on Sept.1, 2011).

lowest ebb after Israel's deadly military operation on the Turkish flotilla, Mavi Marmara, which was headed to Gaza.¹¹ Finally, after the UN report on the flotilla incidence was leaked to the media, Turkey downgraded its diplomatic relations to the second secretary level¹² and suspended all military agreements worth of billions of dollars with Israel.¹³

Why did this radical change in Turkey's relations with Israel on the one hand and Iran and the Arab World on the other occur? Does the Islamist/conservative background of JDP account for this change in Turkey's relations?¹⁴

A uni-dimensional ideological analysis suffers from at least three weakness. First, this analysis assumes that foreign policy makers are totally guided by their ideological affinities, thus pre-disposes not only Islamists, but also secularists to certain types of foreign policy decisions. Such an assumption is hard to keep in the face of past vicissitudes in Turkey's relations with Israel, Iran and the Arab World. Rather Turkey's security concerns, diplomatic and

¹¹ On the changing relations between Turkey and Israel, see Hasan Kosebalaban, 'The Crisis in Turkish-Israeli Relations: What is Its Strategic Significance,' *Middle East Policy*, vol.17, no. 3, (Fall, 2010), pp.36-50.

¹² Diplomatic relations between Turkey and Israel were upgraded to the ambassadorial level in 1991.

¹³ 'İsrail'e 5 Yaptırım,' [5 Measures against Israel], Anatolian News Agency, Sept. 2, 2011, available at <<http://www.aa.com.tr/tr/manset/91199-israile-5-maddelik-yaptirim>> (accessed on Sept 2, 2011).

¹⁴ See, for example, Soner Cagaptay, 'Islamists in Charge,' the Wall Street Journal Europe Edition, 18 August 2006; Soner Cagaptay, 'Turkey's Clash of Civilizations,' the Wall Street Journal Europe Edition, 8 June 2010, available at <<http://www.cagaptay.com/7583/turkey-clash-of-civilizations>> (accessed on Nov.19, 2011); Daniel Pipes, "Islamist Turkey Overreaches," *National Review*, 8 June 2010, available at <<http://www.danielpipes.org/8467/islamist-turkey-overreaches>> (accessed on Nov.19, 2011).

economic needs have played much influential role in determining Turkey's relations.¹⁵ Moreover, in the transition from the 1990s to the 2000s, there are critical continuities in Turkish foreign policy, such as commitment to Western orientation and EU membership, neutrality in regional conflicts. An ideological analysis will not be of great help in accounting for these continuities.¹⁶

Second, the ideological analysis presumes that there really exists an axis in the Middle East between Israel on the one hand and the Arab World and Iran on the other. Hence, we have the picture of Turkey moving away from the Israeli side of the axis toward the side of the Arab world and Iran. This picture is too simplistic to capture the complexity of alliances and counter-alliances in the Middle East. It is true that in response to Turkey's developing relations with Israel, the Organization of Islamic Conference managed to raise a united criticism of Turkey in its Eighth Summit held in Tehran, Iran, in December 1997. However, this unity was rather an exception, not the rule: Iran and the Arab World have never constituted a monolithic body. In fact, in the 2000s, not Israel, but Iran seems to be a great challenge especially for some Arab countries, such as, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Bahrain, and UAE, because of its nuclear program. Despite the rhetoric of Arab unity, even the Arab World does not constitute a monolithic

¹⁵ On how Turkey's security concerns played critical roles in driving Turkey's relations with Israel, see Suha Bolukbasi, 'Behind the Turkish-Israeli Alliance: a Turkish View,' *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol.29, no. 1, (Autumn, 1999), pp.21-35; Bengio, *The Turkish-Israeli Relationship*; with Iran, see Olson, *Turkey-Iran Relations, 1979-2004*.

¹⁶ For an analysis of the continuities and ruptures in Turkish foreign policy from the 1990s to the 2000s, see Ziya Onis, 'Multiple Faces of the "New" Turkish Foreign Policy: Underlying Dynamics and a Critique' *Insight Turkey*, vol.13, no:1, (Winter, 2011), pp.47-63.

body,¹⁷ neither do the GCC countries, each following different foreign policies across different foreign policy issues.

Finally, the picture of the 2000s is in fact more complicated than painted above. Turkey has developed extensive relations not only with Iran and the Arab world, but also with the Balkan, East European, including Russia, Central Asian, Caucasian, South and Far East Asian, and finally Latin American countries. Given the historical hostility and competition between Iran and the Arab World, an emphasis on the Islamist background of the JDP leadership does not add much to our understanding of why Turkey has developed relations with both sides. Moreover, rhetorical change towards Israel left aside, it seems, there is not much radical change in Turkey's relations with Israel either. Under the JDP, Turkish-Israeli relations in fact continued to flourish. Between 2003 and 2010, Turkey's exports to Israel increased from \$1.06 billion to \$2.08 billion, in other words, exports almost doubled. In the same period, Turkey's imports from Israel increased from \$459 million to \$1,35 billion, in other words, imports tripled. The impact of the infamous flotilla crisis is yet to be seen on the future of Turkey-Israel relations.¹⁸

An ideological and/or one-dimensional axis analysis of Turkish foreign policy, therefore, cannot capture the diversity and depth of Turkey's developing relations with Israel, Iran and the Arab World. If not the JDP's ideological orientation, then what accounts for Turkey's changing relations?

¹⁷ Ofra Bengio and Gencer Ozcan, 'Old Grievances, New Fears: Arab Perceptions of Turkey and its Alignment with Israel,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol.36, no:2, (April, 2001), pp.50-92.

¹⁸ If not stated otherwise, all statistics are taken from the Turkish Statistical Institute at <<http://www.tuik.gov.tr>>.

There is a sizable literature on Turkish foreign policy under the JDP. This literature observes that Turkish foreign policy has become pro-active not in the JDP period, but in the post-Cold War period. Yet, the literature points out, this activism took different forms in the 1990s and the 2000s. In the former Turkey was aptly described as either post-cold warrior,¹⁹ or coercive regional power²⁰ or regional bully²¹, in the latter, however, it became “benign” or “soft” power,²² heavily involving itself in the resolution of regional conflicts.

In accounting for the aforementioned transformation in Turkish foreign policy, the literature proposes different explanations.²³ The change in Turkish foreign policy under the JDP is attributed to the EU process,²⁴ to changing perceptions of

¹⁹ Kemal Kirisci, ‘Turkey’s Foreign Policy in Turbulent Times,’ Institute for Security Studies, Chaillot Paper 92, September 2006, available at <<http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/cp092.pdf>> (accessed on Nov.19, 2011).

²⁰ Ziya Onis, ‘Turkey and the Middle East after September 11: the Importance of the EU Dimension,’ *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, vol.2, no:4, (Winter, 2003), pp.84-95.

²¹ Seiju Desai, ‘Turkey and the European Union: a Security Perspective: Risk or Opportunity,’ *Defense Studies*, vol.5, no:3,(Sept., 2005), pp.366-393.

²² Kirisci, ‘The Transformation of Turkish Foreign Policy: the rise of the trading rise,’ *New Perspectives on Turkey*, no.40, (Spring, 2009), pp.29-47.

²³ For a survey of the literature, see Kirisci, ‘The Transformation of Turkish Foreign Policy’ and Onis, ‘Multiple Faces of the “New” Turkish Foreign Policy.’

²⁴ Mustafa Aydin and Sinem Altinmese, “Europeanization through EU Conditionality: Understanding the New Era in Turkish Foreign Policy,” *Journal of Southeastern European and Black Sea Studies*, vol.9, no:3, (Dec., 2007), pp.263-274; Onis, ‘Turkey and the Middle East after September 11’; Mesut Ozcan, *Harmonizing Foreign Policy: Turkey, the EU and the Middle East*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008).

national security,²⁵ to such domestic political developments as the coming to power of the JDP and its leadership,²⁶ the changing attitude of the military²⁷ and increasing dynamism of Turkish domestic economy and its need for international markets.²⁸

This literature has a direct relevance for this paper as such a transformation of Turkish foreign policy had a critical impact on Turkey's relations with Israel, Iran and the Arab World. For example, changing security perceptions definitely worked to improve Turkey's relations with Syria and Iran.²⁹ However, the direction of causal linkage may not be so straightforward to establish when it comes to other factors. For example, improvement in economic relations may be conditional upon

²⁵ Umit Cizre, 'Demythologizing the National Security Concept: the Case of Turkey,' *Middle East Journal*, vol.57, no:2, (Spring, 2003), pp.213-229; Pinar Bilgin, 'Turkey's Changing Security Discourse: the Challenges of Globalization,' *European Journal of Political Research*, vol.44, no:1, 2005, pp.175-201.

²⁶ Hasret D. Bilgin, 'Foreign Policy Orientation of Turkey's Pro-Islamist Parties: a Comparative Study of the AKP and Refah,' *Turkish Studies*, vol.9, no:3, 2008, pp.407-421; Meliha Altunisik, 'Worldviews and Turkish Foreign Policy in the Middle East,' *New Perspectives on Turkey*, 40, 2009, pp.171-194.

²⁷ Ersen Aydinli, Nihat A. Ozcan and Dogan Akyaz, 'The Turkish Military's March towards Europe,' *Foreign Affairs*, vol.85, no:1, 2006, pp.77-90.

²⁸ Kirisci, 'The Transformation of Turkish Foreign Policy'; Mustafa Kutlay, 'Economy as the 'Practical Hand' of 'New Turkish Foreign Policy': A Political Economy Explanation,' *Insight Turkey*, vol.13, no:1, (Winter, 2011), pp.67-88; Winter 2011 Special Issue of Insight Turkey.

²⁹ Meliha Altinisik and Ozlem Tur, 'From Distant Neighbors to Partners? Changing Syrian-Turkish Relations,' *Security Dialogue*, vol.37, no:2, 2006, pp.229-248; Bulent Aras and Rabia K. Polat, 'From Conflict to Cooperation: Desecuritization of Turkey's Relations with Iran and Syria,' *Security Dialogue*, vol.29, no:2, 2008, pp.495-535.

improvement in political relations.³⁰ This argument is especially valid in the case of Middle Eastern authoritarian regimes, where entry into domestic markets may need political intervention on the side of exporters.

In accounting for the transformation of Turkish foreign policy this literature thus brings to the table major transformations Turkey has undergone in the last decades and persuasively relates them to Turkish foreign policy.³¹ This paper builds upon the findings of this literature and constructs a narrative in which the literature's findings are presented as not competing factors, but complementing ones. In this vein, the paper employs a multi-level analysis of Turkish foreign policy, integrating individual, state and international factors into one meaningful whole. Overall, the narrative differentiates how factors at different levels of analysis interact and impact Turkey's relations.

A Multi-Level Analysis of Turkish Foreign Policy

The historical driver of Turkish foreign policy has been, pure and simple, security against external and unity against internal threats. This is understandable for early Republican Turkish statesmen deeply internalized the bitter lessons they all learned from their previous experience under the late Ottoman Empire. Most of them having a Unionist background, they were the first-

³⁰ Mustafa Aydin and Damla Aras, 'Political Conditionality of Economic Relations between Paternalist States: Turkey's Interaction with Iran, Iraq and Syria,' *Arab Studies Quarterly*, vol.27, no:1&2, (Winter/Spring, 2005), pp.21-43.

³¹ This literature sounds in general positive about the activism of the JDP in foreign policy. There are also critics of the JDP in foreign policy. See Ilhan Uzgel, "Dış Politikada AKP: Stratejik Konumdan Stratejik Modele," *Miilekije*, vol. 30, no.252, (June, 2007), pp.69-84.

hand observers of the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire. Since then Turkey has been obsessively concerned with protecting its political independence and territorial integrity. Any threat, real or perceived, to these sacred values has almost solely driven Turkish foreign policy, accounting for, for example, Turkey's isolationism in the period between two world wars and its entry into NATO during the Cold war. Likewise, the ups and downs, turns and twists in Turkey's multilateral and bilateral relations with Israel, Iran and the Arab World throughout the 20th century constitute no exception to this rule.

Turkey's membership in Baghdad pact in 1955 and Turkey's partnership in Israel's peripheral alliance in 1956 were responses to the security threat posed by the expansion of Soviet influence in the Middle East and the rising tide of Arab nationalism led by Egypt. As the threat of Arab nationalism waned, Turkey's relations with Israel slowly, but consistently cooled down. The low point in Turkey-Israel relations came in early 1980: the military, which took over the government in a coup d'état in September 1980, decided to downgrade Turkey's diplomatic relations with Israel to second secretary level.

Likewise, a number of Turkish and non-Turkish foreign policy analysts quite convincingly argued that a rapprochement with Israel in the 1990s helped Turkey address its growing security concerns.³² Briefly put, after the First Gulf War, Turkey began to face a more aggressive, more dangerous, and much stronger PKK, Kurdish separatist organization, terrorizing the whole South-East part of Turkey.³³ To tackle with the problem, Turkey

³² See Bengio, *The Turkish-Israeli Relationship*, in particular.

³³ There is an extensive literature on Turkey's Kurdish Problem. For a concise summary, Dogu Ergil, 'The Kurdish Question in Turkey,' *Journal of Democracy*, vol.11, no:3, (July, 2000), pp.122-135. See also Nimet Beriker-Atiyas, 'The Kurdish Conflict in Turkey: Issues, Parties and

desperately tried to persuade Iran and Syria in particular to stop their support to PKK and help Turkey to eradicate the problem. In this vein, in fact, Turkey and Iran signed several security agreements, But in vein, both Iran and Syria ignored Turkish pleas and instead attempted to use the PKK as a wild card against Turkey. Moreover, both the US and the EU imposed a semi-official embargo on Turkey, refusing to sell Turkey high-tech weapons systems to fight the PKK. Germany even requested Turkey not to use the German-made Leopard tanks against the PKK.³⁴ Conditions could not have been more conducive for a rapprochement with Israel. The Turkish military has long been impressed by the Israeli military's technological edge. Israel was willing to sell Turkey weapons Turkey desperately needed, without any condition being imposed. Turkey would also benefit from Israel's strong ties in the US, especially in mobilizing the Jewish lobby against the Armenian lobby.

First and foremost, in putting Turkish foreign policy on a different track, the JDP benefited from the very positive changes that took place in the security environment Turkey had been surrounded in. First, the rise of the taliban in Afghanistan, then the American invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq forced Iran to turn its full attention to its own existential problem and created a strong incentive to develop more cordial relations with Turkey. Second,

Prospects,' *Security Dialogues*, vol.28, no:4, (December, 1997), pp.439-452; Michael M. Gunter, 'The Kurdish Problem in Turkey,' *Middle East Journal*, vol.42:3, (Summer, 1988), pp.389-406; Michael M. Gunter, 'The Continuing Kurdish Problem in Turkey after Ocalan's Capture,' *Third World Quarterly*, vol.21, no:5, 2000, pp.849-869. For the Kurdish problem's impact on Turkish foreign policy, see Robert W. Olson, *The Kurdish Question and Turkish-Iranian Relations: From World War I to 1998*, (Costa Meza: Mazda Publishers, 1998).

³⁴ Germany lifted this condition only in 2009. Barkin Şık, 'Leopard'lara PKK'yi vurma izni,' [Permission to the Leopards to strike the PKK], *Akşam Newspaper*, 5 May 2009.

after avoiding a war with Turkey in 1999, Syria set out to develop much more cordial relations with Turkey and became more cooperative in helping Turkey fight the PKK. Like Iran, Syria was also isolated in international community thanks to the efforts of the US and Israel, giving further incentive to Syria to approach Turkey.

Not only Iran and Syria, but also the other Arab states, the Gulf states in particular, were receptive to Turkey's re-entry into the international politics of the Middle East. Especially after the US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, the Gulf Arab states began to face two pressing issues: first, the US became increasingly unreliable in the provision of security in the Gulf for the US performance in both Afghanistan and Iraq have raised questions about the US' future commitments. Second, and more important, the invasion of Iraq decapitated the only Arab power in the region, which could militarily balance Iran. What is called the rise of the Shi'a crescent in the Middle East was an existential threat to the security of the Gulf states, which also had their own Shi'a populations. Hence, declared strategic partner of the GCC in September 2008, Turkey could well help the Gulf states balance Iran.³⁵

As Iran and Syria cut their logistical support to the PKK, by the early the 2000s, the Turkish military managed to minimize the PKK threat to Turkey. The capture of the PKK leader, Abdullah Ocalan, in Kenya with the help of the US further boosted the Turkish military and demoralized the PKK. The JDP thus inherited a security problem much diminished in seriousness. Much more serious problem was the condition of Turkish economy. The 1990s were the lost decade for Turkey: economy

³⁵ See Birol Baskan, "Turkey-GCC Relations: Is there a Future?" *Insight Turkey*, vol.13, no:1, (Winter, 2011), pp.159-173. This was of course not Turkey's plan. Iran is equally important for Turkey.

shrank by 6.1 per cent in 1994 and 1999 and by 9.5 per cent in 2001, inflation rates fluctuated around 80 percent, recording high with 106 percent in 1994, public debt reached at unmanageable levels.³⁶ Weak coalition governments and petty fights among major politicians could not alleviate, but simply aggravated the economic deterioration in Turkey. As politics became a problem itself, not a solution, the military found ample opportunities to intervene in politics and set the course of politics, including foreign policy. The coming of the JDP to power effectively ended this period of political instability. The JDP then set out to take the matters into its hands and turned its attention to the economic crisis Turkey had been deeply in.

The economic recovery was a wildcard the JDP leadership desperately need.³⁷ To see this, one has to go a little back in the history. As mentioned above, when the JDP came to power, PKK terrorism was not at the top of the list of security threats to Turkey in the eyes of the military. For the military Islamism in Turkey, hence including the JDP, posed a threat as serious as PKK terrorism. The coming of the Welfare Party to power in Turkey in 1996 simply aggravated the military's concerns. In what is called a post-modern coup d'etat, in February 1997, the military forced the Welfare Party government to implement strong measures against religious groups in Turkey. Unsatisfied with the WP's performance, the military eventually forced Necmettin Erbakan, the leader of the WP, step down. In the ensuing years the constitutional court not only closed down the Welfare Party and its successor, Virtue Party, but also banned Erbakan from politics.³⁸

³⁶ See Caglar Keyder, 'The Turkish Bell Jar,' *New Left Review*, vol.28, (July-August, 2004), pp.65-84.

³⁷ Also see Ilhan Uzgel, "Dış Politikada AKP: Stratejik Konumdan Stratejik Modele," *Mülkiye*, vol. 30, no.252, (June, 2007), pp.69-84.

³⁸ For more on this period, See Ümit Cizre and Menderes Çınar, 'Turkey 2002: Kemalism, Islamism, and Politics in the Light of the February 28

Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the future leader of the JDP, but by then the mayor of Grand Municipality of Istanbul from the WP, was among the victims. He was accused of stirring up hatred and enmity among the people due to a speech he delivered in a south-eastern town, Siirt, in Turkey on December 6, 1997 and sentenced to ten-month jail by the State Security Court of Diyarbakir. He not only lost his liberty, but also his office and political rights. An influential liberal Turkish newspaper, *Radikal*, even declared the end of his political career, its headline running as “he will not be able to become even a village headman.”³⁹ When Erdogan’s newly established party, the JDP, won the 2002 national elections, he was not even a member of the parliament. In order for him to enter the parliament and assume the position of the prime minister, the constitution had to be amended.

From the very beginning, Erdogan and his party have put under the close watchful eyes of the military, the judiciary and the universities, who would not refrain themselves from expressing their discontent with Erdogan and his party in every possible way. In other words, Erdogan was cornered by the secular establishment in Turkey from his first day in office and has been kept at that corner since then, constantly been checked whether he has any hidden agenda, like turning Turkey into Iran or Saudi Arabia.⁴⁰

It is now even more puzzling why Erdogan, in such a precarious position, has taken the risk of alienating Turkey’s

Process,’ *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol.102, no:2/3, (Spring/Summer, 2003), pp.309-332.

³⁹ “Muhtar Bile Olamayacak,” *Radikal Newspaper*, 24 September 1998. Village headman is elected in Turkey.

⁴⁰ It seems to me this axis-shift debate is another discursive strategy to corner Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

historical allies, the US, the EU, and Israel by flirting with Russia, Iran or Hamas. Would not it be safer just to steer Turkish foreign policy on its historical course? Such a conservative policy would not help Erdogan for the secular establishment did not approve him and want to get rid of him.⁴¹ To consolidate his position and basically to survive in Turkish domestic politics, Erdogan pursued a multi-pronged strategy. His ambitious push for political reform in Turkey to accord Turkish democracy to European standards was one of his strategies, serving to single out the authoritarian nature of the Turkish secular establishment and undermine their power through EU membership process.

More activist foreign policy has been another strategy serving multiple ends for Erdogan. Via an active foreign policy, Erdogan fed into the masses' and an important segment of state bureaucrats' nationalistic/imperialistic feelings. In due course the high international profile of Erdogan and that of Turkey became difficult to dissociate. This further strengthened Erdogan's popularity at home, empowering his hands vis-a-vis secular establishment in Turkey, who appear in this Erdogan-painted picture as insignificant players with small parochial interests.

High international profile, garnered through an active foreign policy, helps Erdogan play another critical role, a role, which cannot be appreciated if we do not take into account the dynamism of Turkish economy. The story of Turkish economic development is a familiar one, it is not really unique or exceptional. Similar examples, in fact more successful ones, can be observed in Far East Asia and Latin America.

⁴¹ Later it turned out that some high-ranking generals indeed prepared several plans to topple down the Erdogan government. See Ersel Aydinli, 'Ergenekon, New Pacts, and the Decline of the Turkish "Inner State,"' *Turkish Studies*, vol.12, no:2, 2011, pp. 227-239.

Turkey entered the 20th century as a peripheral economy, exporting raw materials and agricultural products and importing manufactured items. The key objective of the new Republic was to change this imbalance, which had been viewed as the main reason behind the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Creating a domestic industrial base thus became the main pillar of Turkish economic policy. In this vein the state either went alone, establishing big state-owned enterprises or supported private entrepreneurs through credits and highly protective measures. By 1980, Turkey made a considerable progress in changing its domestic economic structure: the share of the labor force employed in agricultural sector decreased from 85 per cent in 1923 to 51 per cent in 1980. In a similar way, the share of agricultural products in Turkey's exports decreased from 86 per cent in the period of 1923-1930 to 57 per cent in 1980. Despite these changes, Turkish economic policy was not export-oriented: in 1980, Turkey's total exports counted just \$2.9 billion dollar, constituting mere 4.2 per cent of Turkey's Gross Domestic Product.

Under the stress of two oil shocks in the 1970s, Turkey's state-led industrialization ended in severe economic crisis coupled with a deep political turmoil. Only the direct intervention of the Turkish military in 1980 prevented the collapse of the country into a civil war. Under a heavy-handed rule, the Turkish military steered the Turkish economy away from import-substitution industrialization toward an export-oriented economy. By 2000, Turkey's exports increased to \$27 billion, constituting now 13.8 per cent of Turkey's Gross Domestic Product.

The transformation of the Turkish economy was not merely quantitative. It was qualitative as well. The share of agricultural products in total exports decreased to a mere 7.1 per cent by 2000 while that of industry increased to 91.2 per cent. More significantly, in due course, a new entrepreneur class came

into being, challenging the economic dominance of major business conglomerates in Turkey. While the latter were the products of state-led industrialization in Turkey and thus owed their riches to the dear support they obtained from the state, this new class, who centered in major Anatolian towns, such as, Gaziantep, Denizli, Kayseri, Malatya, Konya owed little to the state. It was in fact quite the opposite. In its battle with religious groups, the Turkish military also waged a psychological warfare against this new bourgeoisie class, who had been identified by the military as supportive of religious groups in Turkey.

It was thus normal for this new class to throw their support behind the JDP against the Turkish secular establishmet: thus, with the JDP's support, they could hope to equalize the playing field for themselves in their competition with the major business conglomerates In Turkey. Moreover, mostly Anatolian in origin, this class lacked international expertise and was further haunted by the language barrier to seek new markets abroad. Hence, they needed a strong political support on their side to open up new markets to grow further. Furthermore, without an active political support, they could hardly compete with much stronger international companies.

Erdogan's high international profile played into their hands. What Erdogan himself called, 'merchant politics' referred exactly to Erdogan's key role in opening up new markets all around the world for this new Anatolian-based bourgeoisie class. Thus it would become ordinary for the JDP leadership to travel with hundreds of businessmen around the world to establish commerical links and obtain contracts for them. Erdogan and his team helped Turkey's exports increase from \$36 billion in 2002 to \$132 billion in 2008 and decreased to \$113 billion in 2010.

It will be telling to look at the nature of exporters in Turkey to see how vital a political interference is going to be to their success. According to statistics provided by Turkey's Assembly of Exporters. In 2008, 46,022 companies distributed across 23 sectors engaged in export in Turkey. Only 14 of these companies exported goods worth of more than \$1 billion, the largest exporter being a state-created company, TUPRAS, exporting more than \$4 billion; 12 companies exported goods of worth between \$500million and \$1billion, and 112 companies between \$100million and \$500 million. The top 1000 largest exporters made 67.5 per cent of the total export in 2008.⁴² More importantly, perhaps, the majority of exporters in Turkey could not establish themselves as regular exporters: only 14,000 companies in Turkey engaged in export in three consecutive years, the others have gone in and out the international markets.⁴³ It is apparent that in order to continue its export oriented growth, Turkish economy needed Erdogan's merchant politics.

When analyzing Turkey's relations with Israel, Iran and the Arab world, one has to take into account this economic necessity: economic liberalization has created a thriving, export-oriented economy in Turkey; from agriculture to manufacturing, from construction to service sector, ten thousands of small, middle and large scale family enterprises seek to enter new markets to further their growth. Only a handful of Turkish companies may not need any political interference on their side to compete in new markets with much stronger international companies. Even the giants of Turkish construction companies, for example, need political support to get big contracts, even in the Arab world.

⁴² "2008'in ihracat sampiyonu Tupras," *Milliyet Newspaper*, June 24, 2009.

⁴³ "3 yıl ust uste ihracat yapan firma sayisi 14 bin," *Milliyet Newspaper*, April 14, 2010.

At this stage of Turkish economic development, therefore, Turkey cannot simply afford to put its relations with any country into danger. Iran and the Arab world, in the most immediate geographical vicinity of Turkey, have acquired particular significance as Erdogan's most favorite foreign market search. Under Erdogan governments, while Turkey's export to EU countries increased by 2.58 times from \$20 billion to \$52 billion, Turkey's exports to the Middle East and North Africa increased by 6.45 from \$4.7 billion in 2002 to \$30 billion in 2010. Improving relations with the Arab world and Iran did not cost the loss of Israel as an export destination either: exports to Israel increased by 2.4 times from \$861million in 2002 to \$2 billion in 2010. Turkey's exports to the Middle East and North Africa also increased in relative terms from 13 percent in 2002 to 26 per cent in 2010 while those to EU countries decreased from 56 per cent in 2002 to 46 per cent in 2010. Improving relations with Iran and the Arab world also paid off in turning Turkey into a popular tourist destination: the number of Iranian and Arab tourists to Turkey increased from around 950 thousands in 2003 to around 2.8 million in 2010, adding further boast to Turkish economy.

Developing closer relations with three neighboring countries, Syria, Iraq and Iran, have been particularly important for the JDP government. First, as already mentioned, Turkey's success in keeping the PKK weak and ineffective critically depends on the continued support of these three countries. Second, these three countries are situated in the south-east corner of Turkey, which happens to be home to the Kurdish minority in Turkey . The Kurdish provinces were also the least economically developed region of Turkey. In 2001, for example, while Turkey's GDP per capita was \$2,146 in 2001, the Kurdish provinces fared badly: \$568 in Agri, \$578 in Mus, \$646 in Bitlis, \$795 in Bingol, \$836 in Hakkari, \$855 in Igdirdir, \$886 in Kars, \$983 in Mardin, \$1008 in Urfa, \$1111 in Siirt, \$1216 in Batman and \$1313 in Diyarbakir.

Even though these Kurdish provinces furnish only 10 per cent of the seats in the parliament, the region has a particular significance for the JDP because the JDP competed with the Kurdish party in the region only. For example, in 2007 elections, the JDP obtained 41 parliamentary seats of the region's total 58 seats, the remaining going to the independent Kurdish candidates. Thus, the JDP can strongly claim that it is the only truly national party in Turkey. Therefore, increasing trade relations with Syria, Iraq and Iran would bring immediate and much needed economic relief to this poverty stricken region of Turkey, which in return would consolidate the JDP's political dominance in the region.

One final factor gave further boast to Turkey's desire to develop stronger relations with Iran at the risk of alienating the US and Israel. In addition to its huge population and highly protected domestic market, hence another attractive market for Turkey, Iran is strategically critical to Turkey's ambitious plan of becoming a major transit road. It should be kept in mind that the European Union is extremely worried about its excessive dependence on Russian gas, which gives Russia a leverage vis-à-vis the EU. Situated in a very strategic location which links the EU countries to the world's largest oil and gas reserves on its east and south, Turkey may thus serve to alleviate EU energy security problem. The EU-proposed Nabucco pipeline project, which will run through Austria, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey, became the JDP government's dream project to realize⁴⁴ Relations with Iran acquired a particular significance for first, Turkey has its own

⁴⁴ For more on Turkey's energy policy, see Katinka Barysch, 'Turkey's role in European Energy Security,' Center for European Reform Essays, 2007, available at http://www.cer.org.uk/pdf/essay_turkey_energy_12dec07.pdf,> (accessed on June 1, 2011) and Saban Kardas, 'Turkish-Azerbaijani Energy Cooperation and Nabucco: Testing the Limits of the New Turkish Foreign Policy Rhetoric,' *Turkish Studies*, vol.12, no:1, 2001, pp.55-77.

energy problem, already importing oil and gas from Iran, and Turkey desires to become a major energy transit hub. As a major oil and gas producer, excluding Iran from Turkey's calculations has no rationality for Turkey. Moreover, Iran is not only a major gas and oil producer, but also sits on the most convenient transit road to Central Asian Turkic republics. Hence, Iran's participation is critical to the JDP's ambitions to turn Turkey into a major energy transit road.

Conclusion: The Future Ahead

The US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq in the early 2000s produced two outcomes. First, the Arab regimes began to fear the rise of a Shia Crescent in the Middle East more strongly than before. Second, the US and Israel-led efforts increasingly isolated regimes in Iran and Syria in the international community. This regional environment gave ample opportunities for Turkey to pursue an active and dynamic foreign policy in the Middle East. In that perfect environment the JDP leaders could develop very cordial relations with authoritarian Arab regimes, for whom Turkey could possibly tip the balance of power away from Iran, while at the same time polish their images among the Arab masses by criticising Israel in every opportunity. Even cheap talk brought enormous prestige to the JDP leaders.

The Arab revolutions/rebellions, however, changed this situation, putting the JDP leaders in an impossible dilemma. Having long portrayed themselves as the supporters of the Palestinians, they were expected to do the same thing for the other Arabs. That is to defend the demands of the Arab masses in rebellion against the Arab leaders. After a long silence on Tunisia, Turkey positively responded, strongly expressing its support for the Egyptian people in the very mouth of Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Once the rebellions spread to other Arab countries, Turkey could not have renounced its support and adopt a more neutral position. Furthermore, and more importantly, the Arab revolutions/rebellions re-heated the Saudi-Iran rivalry as especially Bahrain and Yemen gave Iran another opportunity to score another victory against Saudi Arabia after Iraq. This is exactly the moment Turkey's coming back to the region would make a difference in the balance between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Turkey has not disappointed Saudi Arabia, probably raising some eyebrows in Tehran, and largely remained silent on the developments in Yemen and Bahrain.

On the domestic front too, there occurred changes. As discussed before, it was mainly a domestic factor, which has driven the JDP leadership to pursue a more active and dynamic foreign policy. Such a policy and a high international profile helped Recep Tayyip Erdogan, an old Islamist, consolidate his position in Turkish politics and open up new markets for the Turkish businessmen in dire need of foreign markets. Especially after the JDP scored a sweeping victory in the 2007 National Elections and the constitutional court decided not to close down the party in the Summer of 2008, Recep Tayyip Erdogan became more secure in power in Turkey soon to challenge the un-challengables of the Turkish politics, the judiciary and then the military. The appointment of Ahmet Davutoglu, professor of International Relations and long-time advisor to Recep Tayyip Erdogan on international politics, to the ministry of foreign affairs completed the circle. Turkish foreign policy making became the sole prerogative of the Erdogan-Davutoglu duo, singlehandedly determining the course of Turkish foreign policy and getting unconditional support from their supporters in the media. Ironically, perhaps, neither the opposition parties and the opposition media have troubled the duo in their foreign policy adventures. Hence, when the Arab revolutions/rebellions broke

out, there was no healthy domestic environment, which could have served as a check on the duo and force them to act more cautiously. In the end, Turkish foreign policy has become too personal, the popularity of Erdogan or that of Davutoglu having become inextricably linked to the popularity of Turkey.