

The Reconceptualisation of Turkish Identity: Foreign Policy between Grand Strategy and Pragmatism between 2002 and 2019

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Since the AKP ascendancy to power in 2002, Turkey's foreign policy has been reshaped emphasising a new set of foreign policy tenets. The AKP elite has been working assiduously to accentuate Turkey's geostrategic significance and historical depths to play a more influential regional role based on the mantra of zero problems via pursuing soft power tools and economic interdependencies. This paper provides an in-depth analysis of Turkish foreign policy and how it interacts with national identity. Moreover, it explains the changing environment in the Middle East and how it impacts on the attitudes and identity of Turkish foreign policy. The study borrows some insights from realist theory to understand the states' motivations and inspects role theory which provides useful interpretation about changes in participants' behaviour in foreign policy. This paper argues that domestic politics in Turkey and the changing environment in the Middle East, as shown by Arab uprisings, have turned the Turkish emphasis from soft power to hard instruments built on using military capabilities. Simultaneously, the AKP leadership's active involvement in the Middle East does not signal a dramatic shift in Turkey's state identity. Rather, Turkey remains part of western identity and alliance.

Key words: *Arab Spring, Turkish Foreign Policy, Identity, Middle East, Role Conception.*

Introduction

Turkey's conventional foreign policy during the The Cold War era emphasised alliance with the West as a top priority and acted as bulwark against Soviet expansion in the Middle East. Nonetheless, the decline of communism motivated Turkey to readjust its strategic priorities and devote greater attention to Middle Eastern neighbours. Since the AKP's ascendance to power in 2002, Turkey's foreign policy has been reshaped, emphasising a new set of foreign policy tenets, which occasionally deviated from the transatlantic allies' agenda. The AKP

elite has worked assiduously to accentuate Turkey's geostrategic significance and historical depths to play a more influential regional role by developing and improving its relations with all near-by countries based on the mantra of zero-problems via pursuing soft power tools and economic interdependencies. Remarkably, the Arab world with its rapidly changing political setting since 2011 has made an immense impact on AKP policy makers, including Davutoglu, efforts to refashion Turkey's regional relations. That being said, it is no coincidence that Turkey interactions with its neighbours in the Middle East have since then proved to be ever deepening and much more sophisticated materialised in playing an assertive role in the management of security and economic affairs on the periphery.

The rise of Turkey's regional profile and its ambitious political agenda has elicited discussions about the reasons behind its Foreign Policy Activism and realignment towards the Middle East. The crucial question here, is Turkey shifting its axis? This question sparked heated debate and has raised immense debate concerning identity. Therefore, some scholars have argued that Turkish foreign policy underwent a fundamental change epitomised by the policies of the AKP since it assumed power in 2002. Concurrently, there are counterarguments assuming that the novelty of AKP foreign policy represents continuation of what has come before and doesn't denote a new strategic doctrine. This vision assumes that the change that might be seen pertains to the instruments employed to serve grand objectives rather than the strategic goals. Based on this debate, the paper investigates the types of interlocking factors that played a prominent role in shaping the dynamics of Turkish foreign policy and addresses the factors of continuity and change in that policy. The paper discusses how foreign policy and national identity interact. Of particular interest is recognising that domestic politics and foreign policy are intrinsically interrelated and therefore this paper clarifies the concepts of Turkish identity and the national role of the AKP ruling elite in an attempt to explain Turkish foreign policy's orientation towards the Middle East. It should be clear from the outset that attributing Turkey's realignment towards the Middle East towards one factor is misleading as there are a plethora of determinant variables that led to such a transformation in foreign policy including the identity of the ruling elite along with their perception of the strategic choices, structural causes and Turkish domestic politics.

Research Questions

The paper aims to explore the following questions: has Turkish foreign policy changed since 2002 and in what fields? How has the evolving regional environment and in particular Arab uprisings impacted on the making of foreign policy and how has it reflected on Turkey's role about the Middle East? What are the factors of continuity and change in Turkish foreign policy in particular towards the Middle East?

Research Objectives

The paper provides an in-depth analysis of Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East in terms of factors that determine the making of the policy and the instruments employed to serve national interests. Moreover, it explains the Middle East's changing environment and how it impacted the attitudes and identity of Turkish foreign policy. Furthermore, it questions change and continuity in Turkish foreign policy. Additionally, this study aims to serve as a platform for evaluating Turkish interactions with Middle Eastern countries that have attracted insufficient scholarly analyses especially in the context of the Arab spring.

Research Methodology and Argument

There is a mutually beneficial relationship between Foreign Policy and International Relations theory. Therefore, the study borrows some insights from realist theory. However, systemic approaches or systemic forces as explained by neo-realism provide us with an understanding of state motivations, but doesn't provide a detailed description of the variables or determinants of states' foreign policies. Hence, constructivism is a useful theoretical approach to complement the study methodology for understanding the process of change in foreign policy because it addresses national identity and its reflection on change in foreign policy. Therefore, the research objectives will be designated through inspecting role theory which provides useful interpretation regarding changes in participants' behaviour in foreign policy. Obviously, it can be assumed that state foreign policy behaviours are shaped by the policy makers' role conceptions and therefore understanding the views and perceptions of leaders regarding state role are of particular importance in explaining foreign policy attitudes. This paper analyses Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East since AKP came to power in 2002 and in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings that began in 2011. The paper argues that the interconnected variables in the internal and external environment had played a remarkable role in shaping Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East. Furthermore, it will advance the argument that Turkish domestic politics and the changing environment in the Middle East as shown by Arab uprisings have caused Turkey to change its emphasis from soft power instruments to hard tools built using military capabilities. Simultaneously, the AKP leadership's active involvement in the Middle East does not signal a dramatic shift in Turkey's state identity. Rather, Turkey remains part of western identity and alliance. Central to this argument is recognising that Turkey's new vision towards the Middle East during AKP governments doesn't break with traditional orientations towards relations with the US and Europe. In other words, Turkey's Middle Eastern engagement doesn't shift Turkey away from its Western identity.

Background

Traditionally, Turkey has been viewed with strategic importance to the West and the US in particular during the Cold War era. It has played a critical role in the Western defense system as an ally of the West acting as a bulwark against the expansion of Soviet influence into the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East (Larrabee & Lesser, 2003. p. 1). Turkey's geostrategic importance to the United States is exemplified through the Incirlik Air Base (Migdalovitz 2010 p.1). Kemal Ataturk, the founder of the Republic has established guiding values underpinning Turkish foreign policy shaped by his visions, therefore the political elite has continued its approach towards the West including pursuing isolationism and passive foreign policy (Aras & Gorener 2010 p. 78). The Kemalist approach relied on the perception that in order to modernise Turkey, it needs to break with the Muslim east. However, the understanding and definition of Turkey's national interests has motivated the political elite towards greater activism in the Middle East resulting in a more assertive and less cautious role. Yet, Turkey's perception of internal security needs led to contemplating military intervention where it perceived it necessary (Larrabee & Lesser, 2003. p. 156). Based on this reasoning, some scholars argue that Turkish foreign policy has witnessed a fundamental change and its recent foreign policy infers a clear break from traditional policy that characterised the country for nearly eight decades. Obviously, the most important factor for this dramatic change is the rise of a new political elite with a distinctly different worldview from the ideology of conventional Kemalism (Reynolds, 2012, p.iii).

Admittedly, some change can be noted as Turkey has evidently emerged in the post-2011 Middle East as a prominent regional player with substantial military and diplomatic weight. Turkey has been increasingly promoting zealous cross-regional trade and investment under the policy of "zero problems with neighbors." Obviously, economic successes have provided a convenient platform for Turkey's new approach (Muzalevsky, 2012). While Turkish policy under Ataturk eschewed involvement in the Middle East, this status has been changed recently as Turkey increased its engagement in the region. However, since the AKP's ascendance to power in 2002, policy makers have reshaped Turkey's foreign policy through exploiting Turkey's geostrategic significance by developing and improving its relations with all neighbouring regions based mainly on soft power and economic interdependencies. Ahmet Davutoglu, who was the main architect of AKP's foreign policy has contributed to forming several new foreign policy principles as chief adviser to the Prime Minister and when he became Foreign Minister in 2009, he was able to put into practice the foreign policy assumptions he had earlier presented in his book "Strategic Depth." His professed goal has been to exploit Turkey's geographic and historical depths to enhance the country's position in regional and international levels (Kara & Sözen, 2016 P. 54-55).

Those who believe that the policy has changed dramatically perceived the tenets of Davutoglu's foreign policy which urged re-engagement with the Middle East as shifting away from the West and getting closer to the Middle East while ultimately establishing new alignments in the region. This exemplified the fact that some of the AKP's regional foreign policy initiatives were at odds with U.S. objectives such as its engagement with Hamas, Iran, and Sudan (Migdalovitz 2010 p.1). This led some scholars to believe that the independence and ambition of AKP's foreign policy have made Turkey a less predictable and perhaps less dependable U.S. ally than in the past (Migdalovitz 2010 p.53). However, Davutoglu blatantly emphasised that Turkey's new vision couldn't be seen as shifting away from its previous Western-oriented policies. In other words, Turkey's new engagement with the Middle East could be interpreted simply as adaptation to a changing environment. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that there have been both elements of change and continuity in Turkish foreign policy. Having said this, the grand objectives remain relatively consistent and the change that might be seen is tactical concerning the tools and instruments employed in foreign policy to achieve national objectives. However, AKP government's active involvement in the Middle East doesn't signalling a departure in Turkey's state identity since the main objective of Turkish foreign policy continues to be European Union accession as a seal of approval of Turkey's Western identity (Aras & Gorener 2010 p. 73). Though there are some scholars who believe that "Western orientation" no longer occupies a central place in Turkey's international relations, as Ankara has enhanced its relations with its Middle Eastern countries and realigned its geopolitical agenda with Moscow (Kardaş, 2010 p.116).

The Implications of National Role Perception on Foreign Policy

As mentioned earlier, national role play a critical role in foreign policy interpretation. A role can be defined as behaviours and attitudes that serve as guiding strategies for coping with situational variables. Participants understand the required behaviour in accordance with their personal image of society. Roles can be understood as a road map through which participants can navigate the world. In other words, national role conceptions consist of policy-makers' understanding of what their nation stands for in the international arena (Sekhri, 2009: 424-427). Moreover, role theory emphasises interaction between the external variables that placing demands on the agent and the agent's self-defined interests that eventually shape its behaviour. Elite perceptions of external and internal constraints are critical in accounting for foreign policy change, therefore, as Bulent Aras explains, shifts in perceptions stand out as the most powerful explanations for major foreign policy realignments (Aras & Gorener 2010 p.. 75-76). Similarly, in "Perception and Misperception in International Politics" Robert Jervis emphasises that the perceptions of top decision makers are of particular interest to explaining and understanding their policies as people in the same situations behave differently since they vary in their perceptions of the world in general and of other participants in particular (Jervis, 1976: 28-29). In other words, understanding and explaining

elite beliefs is of critical importance in understanding how elites recognise events and subsequently formulate policy. Interestingly, the reconfiguration of political elites has played a prominent role in the transformation of Turkish foreign policy. Turkey's approach to become a Western country drove it to embark on more democratic measures and political reform through which participants from various socio-economic backgrounds have got the opportunity to participate in Turkish political life. This in turn led to diverse political elites and subsequently alternative visions of Turkish foreign policy have begun to publicly emerge (Aras & Gorener 2010 P. 79). Consequently, the domestic political reform process has weakened the leverage of traditional participants in foreign policy, signalling a departure from the era of military and bureaucratic influence in state politics (Aydin 2014 p. 14).

Concurrently, since 2002 developments in Turkish politics have enabled new participants with different role conceptions to participate in the foreign policy process. As a result of AKP's decisive victory in both the 2002 and 2007 elections, the foreign policy team has received uncontested power to shape Turkish foreign policy in accordance with their role conceptions. This role magnified as the AKP party occupies a leading position on the Turkish domestic political spectrum. Therefore, Davutoglu has influenced foreign policy directions in terms of rhetoric and practice as he was the intellectual architect of the AKP's foreign policy. There is a consensus that since coming to power in 2002, the AKP governments adopted more active and influential roles in foreign policy which is consistent with the AKP policy makers' understanding of the national role. They perceived Turkey as a 'regional leader,' 'regional protector,' 'regional sub-system collaborator,' 'global sub-system collaborator,' 'example' and 'bridge.' However, it has been noted over time that self-identification as a 'regional leader,' 'regional protector' and 'global system collaborator' has increased while the 'bridging' role has become less pronounced (Aras & Gorener 2010 p. 81).

The majority of AKP elite statements denote Turkey's strong self-identification with being a regional leader. This regional role means that Turkey perceives itself as a country with duties and responsibilities towards states in a particular region. AKP policy-makers have declared a desire to present Turkey as a model or example to other countries in the region. To that end, they present Turkey as a Muslim nation with a secular state and democratic regime. In this regard, Ahmed Davutoglu maintains: "Turkey should guarantee its own security and stability by taking on a more active, constructive role to provide order, stability and security in its environs." He also maintained that "Turkey now enjoys an image as a responsible state which provides order and security to the region" (Davutoglu 2008 p.79, 83). Thus, it appears that various domestic factors have provided a suitable environment for AKP policy makers to execute their policy in the Middle East successfully. The domination of the AKP in the domestic balance of power indicates that the main contours of Turkey's foreign policy towards the Middle East will continue to be shaped by national role conceptions of the foreign policy team (Aras & Gorener 2010 p. 90-91).

Turkey's Foreign Policy Identity: From Buffer State to Strategic Depth Identity

During the AKP period, a new approach has been explicitly voiced by Davutoglu's strategic depth doctrine aimed at acting as an “active independent” participant. This was evident when the Turkish Parliament rejected to allow American forces to initiate the invasion of Iraq from Turkish territory in March 2003 (Kara, & Sözen, 2016 p. 56). This signalled Turkey's transformation to be more self-confident while formulating its foreign policies. In other words, Turkey became autonomous and sometimes deviated from its Western allies agenda while pursuing its own. Indeed, Turkey has been able to formulate a new vision of foreign policy towards the Middle East based on its historical role and geographical location reflecting the religious-conservative ideology of the AKP party. As Ahmed Davutoglu states: “Turkey's orientation and strategic alliance with the West remains perfectly compatible with Turkey's involvement in, among others, Iraq, Iran, the Caucasus, the Middle East peace process, and Afghanistan” (Davutoglu, 2010).

Interestingly, there are a variety of principles driving recent Turkish foreign policy. The first principle constitutes replacing the “crisis-oriented” attitude that characterised its foreign policy during the entire Cold War era to a vision of the Middle East. This vision is not limited to the struggle against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the radical Kurdish separatist group that committed terrorist actions against Turkey for decades. Rather, Turkey has made expanded its objectives since it tried to achieve Palestinian reconciliation and facilitate the participation of Iraqi Sunni groups in the 2005 parliamentary elections. It was also actively involved in the Iranian nuclear issue. The second principle consists of stretching its relations beyond the Middle East. Hence, Turkey's attitudes in Central Asia and the Balkan and its focus on enhancing relations with nearby countries such as Greece, Iraq, Russia and Syria, are consistent with its vision for the Middle East. The third principle is the pursuit of a new diplomatic discourse through emphasising the spread of Turkish soft power in the region instead of posing threats through pursuing a more co-operative approach via increasing economic interdependence with neighbouring states (see Davutoglu, 2010).

The Evolution of Turkish Foreign Policy

In order to substantiate the assumptions of this paper and explore the factors of continuity and change in Turkey's identity and behaviour, it might be useful to shed light on the ways in which foreign policy has evolved and transformed since 2002. As such, Turkish foreign policy can be categorised into two phases: the first begins in 2002 and continues until 2010 (Zero Problems motto) and the second phase extends from 2010 and continues until the present (Re-setting Priorities and Assertive Policy).

The Principle of Zero Problems with Neighbours (2002-2010)

Traditionally, Turkey has been a partner with the US and Western Europe in the Middle East. However, changes have been observed since Ahmet Davutoglu took the office of Minister of Foreign Affairs in Turkey. He has redirected Turkey's foreign policy towards the former Ottoman geography, primarily the Middle East and Western Balkans, while maintaining Ankara's relations with the West. The new Turkish foreign policy's direction under the rubric "zero problems with neighbors" was infused by Davutoglu's book, "Strategic Depth 2001." Hence, between 2008 and 2011, Turkey mended its relations with the Assad regime in Syria, attempted to facilitate nuclear negotiations between the West and Iran, and actively engaged in trade relations with Iraq, the Gulf States, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and North Africa. Moreover, the "zero problems with neighbors" approach led to the de-securitisation of Turkey's relations with its Middle Eastern neighbours during that period (Coşkun, 2015 p. 187). Thus, as one scholar observes, "Turkey already fits the description of a regional power. It counts as one of the indispensable security stakeholders in several interlocking regions: the Middle East, the Balkans, the Caucasus, and the Black Sea" (Ulgen, 2010 p. 5).

Turkish foreign policy was shaped by soft power and active engagement. Ahmet Davutoğlu's concept of "strategic depth" and his realist thinking of regional and global relations, coupled with the EU anchor, had defined the basic parameters of foreign policy (Keyman, 2017 p.58). Soft power has characterised Turkish foreign policy between 2002 and 2010 where Turkey's proactive policy was observed in the fields of economy, culture, identity, diplomacy, humanitarianism and modernity. However, since 2010, Turkey role has been perceived as more pivotal in terms of security rather than economy, culture, identity and democracy. As a result, Turkey's soft power capacities have declined while hard power capacities have become more visible. Evidently, containing ISIS and Iran's regional ambitions while managing the Syrian refugee crisis have emerged as foremost priorities in Turkey's foreign policy agenda (Keyman, 2017 p. 63).

Turkish-Middle East Policy in the Pre-Arab Spring Era: Economy, Security and Identity

Turkey has increasingly embraced a new liberal foreign policy, emphasising a grandiose rhetoric of zero problems with neighbours and the use of soft-power instruments. This policy has paid off, as Arab intellectuals and activists have expressed their interest in what is called the "Turkish Model" (Elhousseini 2018; see also Aras 2014 p.8). It can be useful to understand the AKP's focus on adopting pro-active and multi-dimensional foreign policy within the context of economy, security and identity. From an interest outlook and state-centred perspective, the objectives of economy and security were at the core of the 'zero

problems with neighbours strategy' architected by Ahmet Davutoglu, as the advisor to Prime Minister Erdogan. During the first phase of the AKP era (2002 – 2007), EU membership was the major goal of Turkish foreign policy. Nonetheless, the party exerted efforts to diversify Turkey's external relations and to improve relations with all neighbouring countries. Rapprochement with neighbouring countries received additional momentum during the AKP era and the period was characterised by a marked improvement in relations with Russia, Iran and Syria. Moreover, security has been a major concern for Turkey, as securing borders is important for domestic stability in light of the Kurdish conflict and the activities of the PKK which had a strong transnational dimension. Furthermore, maintaining border security is essential for economic considerations since trade, investment, labour flows, tourism and other economic aspects are beneficial for the Turkish economy (Öniş 2014).

During the post-2007 period, EU accession no longer constituted the major concern for Turkish foreign policy. Rather, during the second phase of the AKP in government, Turkey continued to intensify the multi-dimensional approach in foreign policy including the diversification of Turkey's external relations in the absence of a firm EU anchor. Indeed, the dramatic power shifts in domestic politics resulted in growing emphasis on the Middle East. More notably, key participants in Turkish politics such as the military and the Kemalist bureaucracy have lost their dominant status and subsequently the AKP has increasingly acquired a hegemonic position in the Turkish political system (Aydin 2014 p.7) Such transformation in power relations in Turkish domestic politics has facilitated concentration on the Middle East and Western orientation no longer constitutes the overriding factor in Turkish foreign policy. The AKP which has powerful a religious-conservative background was able to engage with the Muslim world, compared with its predecessors, including key elements of the secular, Kemalist establishment. In other words, a rediscovery of the Ottoman past in Turkish politics has elevated the Arab and Muslim world in general to occupy higher priority on foreign policy agenda. This change was made possible not only by mutual economic interests but also by common identity based on cultural affinity. These changes signify Turkey's new perception of its role through which the AKP positioned itself as an independent regional power in the Middle East, drawing its strength from mutual economic interests and common Muslim identity not as a state making the EU memberships its focal point in its foreign policy. Turkey was willing to strengthen its relations with key Middle Eastern states as partners on grounds of mutual economic interests and a common cultural heritage (Öniş 2014). In this respect, Turkey has signed various economic and trade agreements, including energy deals, with Middle Eastern countries, especially Iran, Syria and Iraq. Apparently, Turkey's policy leaned towards pursuing a sphere of interest rather than a classical sphere of influence which proved to be a more realistic approach. Clearly, interest-based policies based on various economic, political and strategic goals are viewed by Turkey as the best option to serve its national interests (Kardaş, 2010 p. 123-129).

Re-setting Priorities and Assertive Policy (2011-Present)

The strategic depth principle relies on a policy of zero problems with neighbours which translated to maximum co-operation. However, as this policy got underway, the eruption of revolutions in the Arab world has significantly changed this policy. The critical question is, are the Arab spring and the Syrian crisis in particular signalling the end of Davutoglu's vision of foreign policy? Since 2011, the Arab uprisings and the increasing threats of ISIS in Syria and Iraq in 2014 have generated unprecedented security challenges, which compelled the AKP elite to reset its foreign policy. Evidently, political reforms in Turkey have weakened the influence of conventional policymakers in foreign policy and subsequently allowed new participants bearing different role conceptions to participate in foreign policy making. Accordingly, Turkey's role perception has changed in 2011 in light of the Arab uprisings. The breakout of the Arab uprisings has enabled some roles to come into prominence. Therefore, the roles of "central/pivotal country," "active independent country," "developer," "protector of the oppressed" and "model/example country" have been elevated into the foreign policy agenda. Unlike the roles built on soft power tools in the period prior to the turmoil in the Arab world, the new roles require harder power and material capabilities rather than emphasising soft power mechanisms to create influence (Ozdamar 2014, p. 102).

Since 2011, both Davutoglu and Erdogan have emphasised the roles of "central country" and "pivotal country." They focused on the role of a defender of the oppressed and the starkest manifestation of this policy has been Turkey's efforts to promote the rights of the Syrian people. This role has been also evident through Turkey's support for Gaza's population with the objective of protecting the people affected by the Israel's blockade. Evidently, this policy caused criticism of Turkey as it has moved from a decade of "zero problems with neighbors" to "zero neighbours without problems," indicating growing tensions between Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Armenia (Ozdamar 2014 p. 104-106). These tensions have also occurred occasionally with the US, Turkey's main ally, as demonstrated by the Syrian crisis which caused dismay between the two parties over supporting Kurds Militias in their fight against ISIS. Basically, Kurds' empowerment was viewed by Turkey as a national security threat. Furthermore, proactive "moral realism," encompassing hard power-based military assertiveness and humanitarian norms were the main principles of the new Turkish policy to respond to security threats. Turkey accepted huge numbers of Syrian refugees and at the same time involved military in Syria against both ISIS and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Keyman, 2017 p. 56).

Turkish-Middle East Policy in the Post-Arab Spring Era

Turkish engagement policy in the Middle East reflects an important mechanism for establishing the role of regional power. The AKP political elite have supported political

change and democratisation in the Arab countries that underwent revolutions. Remarkably, there is a conflict of interest between Turkey's aspiration to play an ambitious key regional role in the Middle East based on the doctrine of 'strategic depth' (Davutoglu, 2013) and pragmatic approach given the limitations of Turkey's ability to play a grand leadership role. This dichotomy is demonstrated by Syria as a case study. Turkey's policy towards Syria experienced setbacks; Turkey's ambition to play a leading role in conducting regime change in Syria has failed and as a result of its active involvement in Syrian domestic politics, it has been drawn into sectarian conflicts. This role in Syria has aggravated its relations with key regional powers including Iran and Iraq, and concurrently undermine its positive image in the region (Öniş 2014).

The risks of Arab uprisings were far from negligible. The unrest has ushered in a new direction led by AKP leadership to change its course and began to assume a role of activism in Syria through supporting the discourse of democratisation and propping up political openings in Syria. This action intended to put more pressure on the Assad regime to undertake political reforms. However, this attempt proved to be futile and Assad's regime began to brutally crush opposing forces. This pushed Turkish policy towards change. The AKP government declared its opposition to the Syrian regime and its support for opposing forces. Turkey provided support to opposition groups and showed its willingness to be part of an initiative to implement a multilateral humanitarian intervention to end the civil war in Syria, similar to the earlier NATO based initiative in Libya (Öniş 2014). The shift in Turkey's role could be envisaged as pragmatic and a resilient reflection of the turmoil that recently swept the region. This perceived shift would eventually boost Turkey's leverage in the region (Elhousseini 2018 p.2). Some observers argue that value-based principle to develop national interests is the best description of Turkish foreign policy which continues to pursue a realist foreign policy in the Middle East (Karacasulu, 2015 p.35). This equally opposes the idea that Turkish foreign policy is ideologically grounded, or that it is fundamentally distancing itself from the West. In a 2019 interview, President Abdullah Gul rejected any indication that Turkey had turned its back on the West. The unfolding events engulfing the Arab world since 2011 have been challenging for Turkey. However, Ankara's policies towards the turmoil fundamentally contradict the ideology of "zero problems with neighbors" and the increased influx of Syrian refugees fleeing Assad's crackdown triggered a defiance of the Davutoglu doctrine as Ankara's influence over the Assad regime to initiate significant change was not successful. Furthermore, its frequent criticism of Assad's practices caused deterioration in Turkish-Iranian ties since Iranian officials have openly criticised Ankara's stance on Syria (Cornell 2012 p. 18, 22).

The Arab Spring has compelled Ankara to rebrand its foreign policy. The rapid pace of events in the Middle East has considerably invalidated Turkey's endeavour to play an influential role as regional power. That being said, some scholars even argue that despite

AKP leaders' attempts to project Turkey as a central country in the eastern Mediterranean, it has neither the power nor the strength to sustain a core role (Robins, 2013 p.382). In other words, the turmoil in the Middle East since 2011 signifies a gap between Turkey's rhetoric and actual influence. Turkey's regional influence is taking place on an incremental basis rather than an immediate result of the hyperactivity of Davutoglu's diplomacy. The pragmatic propensity of Turkish policy could be demonstrated through recognising that Turkey and the West usually co-operate whenever their interests converge and not as a result of shared values. This urged some scholars to believe that Davutoglu's policy of "zero problem with neighbors" began to deviate as it was always predicated on flimsy foundation. In other words, it is a policy built on the unrealistic assumption that Turkey's neighbours' interests were convergent rather than divergent (Cornell 2012, p.22-24).

Examining the Factors of Continuity and Change

Despite Turkey's drive towards Europeanisation, the Middle East emerges on the top of Turkey's foreign policy agenda. The Arab world in particular becomes the focal point of Turkish diplomatic efforts which are quite different from traditional Turkish policy. A closer look at Turkish foreign policy activism in the second phase of the AKP government reveals certain departures in the style of foreign policy. What characterised the second phase is a pronounced weakening of the commitment to EU membership and the desire to act as an independent regional power via emphasising assertive and active foreign policy (Öniş, 2011 p.50). As a result, critics of Turkey's growing role in the Middle East argue that Turkey has shifted its axis in foreign policy away from its traditional Western orientation. They maintain that the foreign policy team in Ankara has prioritised relations with the Arab world over the transatlantic agenda as a result of concerns over domestic political survival and identity-based policies (Kardaş, 2010, p. 117).

The impact of key individuals in the foreign policy circle is of particular interest in explaining the change in foreign policy. Ahmet Davutoglu was a key player in the formulation of AKP's foreign policy and his influence has grown in prominent ways as he has become directly responsible for the formulation and implementation of foreign policy during AKP's second phase. His "strategic depth" vision, which highlighted Turkey's focal role either regionally or internationally as a "central country," has become the guiding principle of foreign policy initiatives. As the new president, Abdullah Gül, has also played an influential role in Turkey's pro-active foreign policy initiatives as demonstrated by negotiations with Armenia. In addition, Erdogan has also played an important role in Turkey's foreign policy initiatives. Erdogan's defence of the Palestinian issue echoed the sentiments of a large majority of Turkish citizens and this approach was consistent with public opinion. Accordingly, to a large extent domestic politics intertwined with foreign policy, at the same time foreign policy activism has become a major instrument for gaining

competitive edge in domestic politics (Öniş, 2011 p. 53-57). In recent years, Turkey's foreign policy activism has represented a legitimate response to the changing domestic and regional environment that made diversification of relationships compelling. In this context, Turkey's confidence in terms of economic and democratic credentials and its desire to play a more active and assertive role in shaping regional and global developments constitute the core objectives of Turkey's foreign policy (Dinc, 2011 p.62).

The change that might be observed is that Turkey seeks to play a leading role in Middle Eastern affairs in lieu of its traditional non-interference policy. This attitude, however, does not replace the objective of EU membership. Fundamentally, Turkish involvement in the Middle East has three priorities. Firstly, fighting against Gulenist terrorist groups and cutting its domestic networks; secondly, minimising PKK's and ISIS' ability to undermine national security through downgrading their internal and cross-border capacities, Thirdly, propping up economic growth via regional cooperation (Aras, 2017 p.10). Overall, there are more continuities than deviations from past policy directions and some scholars even argue that the liberal attitudes in foreign policy are not brand new and have not been unleashed by the AKP when coming to power. Rather, economic integration, cooperative security, geographic vision and asserting Turkey's regional power role along with multilateralism were in place in foreign policy during the early post-Cold War era, long before the rise of the new foreign policy elite. In other words, the reconfiguration of the domestic political landscape does not introduce a radical shift in Turkey's strategic thinking. The realist theory has some insights to present as state strength is a precondition for activism in foreign policy. Structural changes had allowed Turkey to embark on an extended role, which Turkish political leaders were determined to assume. Moreover, the consolidation of state strength during AKP rule has enabled a more effective implementation of foreign policy and pursuing a liberal approach to the Middle East. The structural factors also played a certain role in Turkey's shift in foreign policy. This was embodied through changing security perceptions as Turkey no longer looking at Russia as a conventional threat. Therefore, it directed its efforts towards developing closer economic relations with its neighbours. Turkey's major remaining security concern in the Middle East is the regional dimension of the PKK threat which plays an important role in maintaining its alliance with the US and Israel for defence cooperation and tackling the PKK security threat (Kardaş, 2010 p. 117-120).

The regional turmoil in Syria and Iraq compelled Turkey to adjust the 2002-2010 strategy of activism through multilateralism, ending up emphasising strategic options of involvement in security alliances to secure its survival in an anarchic environment. Since 2015, Turkey policy has shifted from soft to hard power as it has participated in geopolitical arrangements through building alliance with Russia, the U.S. and Saudi Arabia. The bilateral relationship with Russia gained momentum in 2017 and this has made an effective contribution to the success of Turkey's fight against ISIS and preventing the establishment of a cantonal state in

Syria. What distinguishes the post- Davutoglu era is that foreign policy shifted from strategic depth, to moral realism combined with humanitarian intervention along with the use of hard power, thus emphasising more security-oriented priorities (Keyman, 2017 p. 64). Turkey's involvement with Syria and Iraq concurs with the realist approach of international politics, proposing that in an anarchic system, states become sceptical of other states' behaviour, driving states to increase their hard power to guarantee their survival (Ikenberry 2011, 2006). Therefore, according to structural realists, the system itself pushed states for power competition so as to survive in an anarchic system (Mearsheimer, 2010: 78). Turkey's Operation Euphrates Shield is an irrefutable example of such realist thinking. Since 2015, the realist propensity has received momentum in foreign policy in terms of rhetoric and strategy, though it differs from conventional realism in the fact that it places particular emphasis on humanitarian issues as demonstrated by the Syrian influx of refugees. Generally speaking, a significant shift can be observed from the general activism between 2002-2010 to re-setting priorities more realistically in order to adapt and engage with regional developments (Keyman, 2017 p. 65). Therefore, 'zero problems' was an object of criticism, not to mention the fact that it was unattainable particularly in the aftermath of the Arab spring. However, it was a novel outlook that provided the country with new tools to pursue a constructive approach towards its neighbours (Aras 2014 p.2).

Conclusion

This study aimed to analyse Turkey's role in contemporary world politics using a holistic method. Although many publications have addressed Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East, few have discussed this topic within the context of the Arab Awakenings and its ramifications on policy creation. Therefore, this paper approaches the subject through connecting a variety of factors to understand the complex transformation in Turkish foreign policy. This is a stepping stone towards articulating sound analysis of Turkey's foreign policy. Another novelty featured in this paper is its contribution to providing a framework through which role perceptions and elite rule in the decision making process were discussed. During the Cold War, Turkey used to be a buffer zone against Soviet expansion, operating as a bridge located at the crossroads between East and West. It is unequivocal that Turkey's shifts in foreign policy could be understood as the product of a unique combination of factors including structural, domestic politics, the agency and identity of the ruling elite and interest-based motivations. Furthermore, the paper elaborates on Turkey's traditional Western-oriented foreign policy and the changes that affected it. Additionally, special attention is paid to the factors that contributed to provoking the policy transformations materialised in realignment towards the Middle East and the redefinition of Turkey's ties to the West.

However, Turkey aspiration to play a regional role with growing influence does not negate the various security-driven reasons that compel it to remain engaged in the Middle East, not least to prevent potential descent into threats emanating from terrorism especially as regional developments dramatically deteriorate. This approach turns out to use convincing logic where Turkey accords a far higher priority to the cooperative-security approach as the nucleus of further involvement in the region. Undoubtedly, its security is closely interconnected with developments in its periphery. Therefore, Turkey's foreign policy elite acted to shape regional political developments with the ultimate objective of protecting its national security and advancing its geo-political and economic interests. Turkey's recent foreign policy embarked on a unique strategy that blends both ideology and Realpolitik in its regional orientations.

Remarkably, the new perception of Turkey's role as a regional predominant power or central nation was made clear in Davutoglu book "Strategic Depth" which was characterised by two interrelated principles: a geopolitical approach based on Realpolitik and a cultural approach based on Turkey's cultural and historical legacy in the region. Thus, Turkish policy in the Middle East under APK leadership has undergone a restructuring process through which the main Turkish diplomatic toolkit includes Soft power, cooperative security instruments and economic interdependence. Central to the above goals has been the normalisation of relations between Ankara and its neighbors. Nonetheless, the Arab spring and relations with US, Syria, Iraq, Iran and Russia shaped the contours of Turkey's foreign policy more than the "zero problems" policy. Hence, successful foreign policy would depend largely on the ability of policy makers to balance between identity and Realpolitik, therefore since 2002 Turkey has been perceived as a pivotal state and regional power and this perception continues hitherto to direct foreign policy. Therefore, Turkey was acting with the dual identity of a Middle Eastern and Western/European country. Rather than pursuing a purely ideological agenda, the APK elite have recalibrated its role in the region resulting in a mixture of options to serve Turkey's national interests. Value-based principle contributes to illustrate Turkey's engagement in the Middle East. As such, attracting foreign direct investments and gaining access to new markets for Turkish exporters is a driver for Turkey's Middle Eastern policy. Additionally, the Turkish policy in the Middle East remains largely dependent on realist tendencies while changes have been more adjustment/tactical than strategic in nature.



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