

JOURNAL FÜR ENTWICKLUNGSPOLITIK

vol. XXXII 1/2-2016

TURKEY: THE POLITICS OF NATIONAL CONSERVATISM

Special Issue Guest Editors: İlker Ataç, Joachim Becker

Published by:
Mattersburger Kreis für Entwicklungspolitik
an den österreichischen Universitäten

Journal für Entwicklungspolitik (JEP)
Austrian Journal of Development Studies

Publisher: Mattersburger Kreis für Entwicklungspolitik an den
österreichischen Universitäten

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İLHAN UZGEL

**Turkish Foreign Policy under the AKP Government:
The Failed Hegemony of a Pivotal State**

ABSTRACT This article analyses Turkey's active and ambitious foreign policy under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) governments. Many academics and experts on Turkish politics attributed Turkey's foreign policy activity to the changing of the mentality of the AKP leadership. I argue in this article that the reason for this change lies not only on the capacity, ability and the will of the Turkish Islamists, but also, mostly, on the restructuring of global capitalism, which enabled the emerging powers to gain more autonomy in their foreign policies. The US has supported the growing influence of emerging powers, some of which are its allies, defining them as pivotal states. However, Turkey, under the AKP rule, failed both as an autonomous actor and pivotal state to play a leadership role in its region.

The Turkish Islamists came to power in late 2002 after an unsuccessful but productive experience as part of a coalition government in 1996-97, and after they compromised in order to embrace neo-liberal principles in economic life. The AKP's (the Turkish acronym for the Justice and Development Party) rose to power as a single party government at this time caused optimism on the part of Islamists, conservatives and liberals, and concerns on the part of the secular, republican and centre-left segments of the Turkish society. The AKP's electoral success was surprising, since only seven years earlier, political Islam, together with ethnic separatism, had been defined as the biggest threat to the security of the country in the National Security Policy Document, a secret document prepared by the then powerful military dominated National Security Council. The international and regional context that enabled the AKP to rise to power at the turn of the 21st century was critically impor-

tant, and the Turkish Islamists were able to take full advantage of this domestic, regional and global restructuring process.

This article strives to analyse Turkey's active involvement, engagement and leadership aspirations in the region from the perspective of global restructuring and the changing dynamics of its relations with the US.

The Cold War practice whereby the US provides economic and military aid in return for Turkey's military and strategic cooperation has changed since the 2000s. A relationship wherein the US dictates and Turkey succumbs to US demands, and tries to harmonise its national interests with Washington's strategic needs on the global level, has already ended during the AKP era. The reason for this change, I argue in this article, lies not only on the capacity, ability and the will of the Turkish Islamists to counter US hegemony, but also, mostly, on the restructuring of global capitalism, a restructuring which began in the 1990s. As will be discussed below, the shift in the global reconfiguration of capitalism and global geopolitics allowed the emergence of new powers also defined as Global South, BRIC or BRICS in world politics. This transformation has affected the foreign policies of these newly emerging countries, making them more effective and initiative taking actors in global politics. Turkey is also considered an emerging power in its own grouping (near-BRICS), and along with other rising countries enjoyed a greater autonomy in pursuing its own policies. My second argument is that, Turkey under the AKP rule, instead of pursuing cross-continental coalitions and platforms, preferred to dominate the Sunni Muslim societies, and tried to build a regional hegemony based on a loosely defined Muslim solidarity for which it was unprepared in every aspect. Subsequently, the AKP government's dream of a leadership position in the Middle East failed, with dire consequences for the country.

On the other hand, beginning in the mid-1990s, the US strategy of maintaining security of critical regions globally has been transformed, with the US urging its regional allies to assume more responsibility, to engage in regional security issues and to deepen their geopolitical cooperation. US allies like Turkey were defined as 'pivotal states' and their role and function within the alliance structure have been transformed since then. Turkey, under the AKP rule, has also benefited both from the steady

economic growth that allowed the government to follow an active foreign policy, to pursue assertive regional goals that previous governments repeated, and to engage in regional issues as mediator.

1. The Global South and the ‘rise of the rest’

There have been significant systemic shifts in the organisation and functioning of the world political and capitalist system over the last two decades, which brought the redistribution of world power balances that is based on the pre-eminence of the Western world. The rise of emerging powers such as China, Russia, India, Brazil, South Africa (defined as BRICS) and other countries including Turkey, Mexico, Indonesia, have been associated with the debates on, and widespread discussions of, the decline of US hegemony. While Charles Krauthammer could boldly declare the “Unipolar Moment” in the early 1990s (Krauthammer 1990), American scholars, journalists and researchers today recognise the fact that the US’s role in global affairs has been changing, if not declining. Although debates on US hegemonic decline have always been a popular subject, at least since the Vietnam War, in the 2000s the profound changes in global politics become visible, and the changing position of the US in global politics was defined by many American scholars as the “Age of Non-Polarity” (Haass 2008), “The Rise of the Rest” (Zakaria 2008), a “Post-American World” (Zakaria 2011) and even “No One’s World” (Kupchan 2012). All those works share a common ground, namely that even if the US may not be in a steep decline, with the rise of emerging powers the redistribution of global power has been shifting, and so the US no longer has the capacity to shape the world affairs alone. This change in the global economic and political system came with the economic take-off of countries such as BRICS, and other groupings such as “Next 11” or “near-BRICS”, which includes Turkey.¹ Their share in global output doubled from 20 to 40 percent between 2000 to 2013, and their export volume expanded rapidly from 850 billion US\$ to 9 trillion US\$ in 2012 (Razaqque/Gosset 2014: if.). While some scholars compared the rise of the Global South to the efforts of the G77 in the 1970s (Golub 2013: 1003f.), some scholars and journalists applauded it as progressive, anti-imperialist (Chase-Dunn 2013) and even a

source of inspiration for the Left in Northern countries (Sandbruck 2014: 4f.). However, many scholars criticised the optimism of those who attribute to the emerging powers a counter-hegemonic position in the configuration of the global system (Robinson 2013: 1), while some considered the rise of the Global South as deepening systemic interdependence (Stephen 2014: 2). There are also sceptical views even concerning the “anti-systemic” potential of the emerging powers (Sharma 2012: 4; Trenin 2012). Although most of the criticisms levelled at the BRICS and other emerging countries – such as that they have divergent interests and do not share domestic institutions and economic structures – hold true, they have developed new international institutions, groupings and common positions in the world system. Having consolidated their position as dynamic centres of the world economy (Golub 2013: 1001) BRICS countries have been organising annual summit meetings, establishing a G5 process with China, Brazil, Mexico, and South Africa (Cooper/Flemes 2013: 946) developing common positions in international organisations, including the World Trade Organization, and they are actively working on the structural reform of the UN. Moreover, India, Brazil and South Africa formed IBSA (Flemes 2011), which also aimed at influencing global security issues on the basis of the IBSA Dialogue Forum’s Defense Working Group (Cooper/Flemes 2013: 950). Fareed Zakaria argues that the US is not in decline, but that the rest is rising, and this rise is not a challenge but an opportunity to both integrate the rising powers into the world capitalist system, and in the process deepening global capitalism in terms of trade, investment and finance. Describing ‘the rise of the rest’ as the great story of our time in his book *The Post-American World*, he puts it correctly that along with economic growth, the rise and pride among emerging countries has produced political confidence and national pride, and the new powers are more strongly asserting their interests which is the reality of the post-American world. (Zakaria 2008: 32, 37, 45).

This economic growth brought about new developments that were difficult to foresee few decades ago. For instance, Indian automobile company Tata bought the luxurious brands Jaguar and Land Rover (BBC, 26 March 2008), Chinese company Geely took over prestigious Volvo cars (Arnott 2010), and Turkish Yildiz Holding (popularly known for its brand Ülker) bought premium chocolatier Godiva in 2007 (Barriaux 2007;

Hurriyet Daily News, 24 December 2007), and United Biscuits with a 2 bn pound deal in 2014 (Wood 2014; Chesters 2014). Also, Mexico's Carlos Slim became the richest man in the world in 2007 (Luhnow 2007).

Transactions, bilateral and multilateral ties, economic relations and transcontinental linkages have increased on a South-South axis. Those emerging powers have naturally striven for status enhancement and growing influence in world politics, and most of these countries engaged in a diversification of their foreign policies. Not only the emergent powers such as China, Russia and India, that already had autonomous status in the international system, but also many US allies have developed greater autonomy in their foreign policies. Mexico adopted the Castañeda doctrine, named after the foreign minister Jorge Castañeda, which envisaged a more active foreign policy role for Mexico, and as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council at that time, Mexico, together with Chile, resisted the US pressure for authorising the invasion of Iraq (Lynch 2008). Castañeda, who like Turkey's Ahmet Davutoğlu, was an academic, redefined the relations in an article in *The New Republic* entitled: "Adios, Monroe Doctrine" (Castañeda 2009). Former US ally Venezuela, after Chavez's ascent to power, launched ALBA (Alternative for the People of Latin America and the Caribbean) and forged strong ties with Iran, which caused concerns on the part of the US (Brun 2009: 36, 44). Argentina returned to the Non-Alignment Movement, a symbolical move with no practical benefit, and the Kirshner government (together with Brazil) took pride in paying off its debt to the IMF (Thomson/Balls 2005). Brazil followed a policy of "autonomy through diversification" (Vigevani/Cepaluni 2007: 1309) and emerged as a regional power, which, as part of the BRICS, positioned itself in the category of big powers such as China and Russia, without being a nuclear power or having a permanent seat in the UN Security Council. Saudi Arabia too diversified its foreign policy and defined it a "strategic shift", and King Abdullah paid official visits to Beijing (a first time event) and New Delhi (Pant 2006: 46), and the country became a member of the World Trade Organization in 2005.

2. The rise of pivotal states

Along with the transformation of the global economy, the US strategy was changing after the end of the Cold War. The idea of a pivotal state was developed under these circumstances in the mid-1990s by Chase, Hill and Kennedy. A pivotal state, according to the writers, could not only determine the fate of its region, but also affect international stability. Therefore, preventive assistance to pivotal states to reduce the chance of collapse would better serve American interests. They also believed that economic potential is critical and referred to the US Commerce Department's identification of the "big emerging markets" that offer business promises to American business (Chase et al. 1996: 33, 34, 37).

The US was actually urging its allies to assume more regional responsibilities both on security and in other political and economic areas. The US needed a policy toward the developing world that did not spread American energies, attention, and resources too thinly across the globe. Those pivotal countries should play constructive roles in solving regional problems, act as facilitators, and their economic growth would then bolster its region's economic vitality. Thus, the authors regarded Mexico, Brazil, Algeria, Egypt, South Africa, Turkey, India, Pakistan and Indonesia as pivotal states, and supported their regional postures as long as they did not use the relative autonomy in their foreign policies against the interests of the US (Chase et al. 1996: 37, 49). As well as by these writers, Turkey was defined as a geopolitical pivotal state by the leading strategist Brzezinski (Brzezinski 1997: 124-135) and other US experts on Turkey and the Middle East, and as one of the 10 emerging markets by the US Department of Commerce in 1995 (Garten 1997).

Turkey was a staunch ally of the US during the Cold War years, and was considered as a bulwark against the Eastern Bloc in the Southeast flank of NATO. Its close cooperation with the US was renewed in the 1990s and Turkey emerged as a pivotal state in US strategy. In practical terms, Turkey's role was critical in a vast swath of land stretching from the Balkans to the Caucasus and Central Asia after the collapse of the socialist regimes. The US supported Turkey's active engagement in these regions, and Turkey was also eager to fill in the political and strategic vacuum in the early 1990s (Fuller/Lesser 1994). Moreover, in the Middle

East, Turkey's role was indispensable in the 'double containment' of Iraq and Iran, both of which the Clinton administration attached great importance to. Starting from 1993, Turkey also emerged as a viable partner for the US and NATO in peacekeeping and peace implementing missions from Somalia to Bosnia, and from Kosovo to Afghanistan, during the 1990s and early 2000s (Gause 1994).

Despite Turkey's limited cooperation in strategically important regions and issues, the country's domestic weaknesses have gradually been making it a difficult partner for the West and the US, and its capacity to be a functional pivotal state was in doubt in the 1990s. Turkey's political and economic conditions deteriorated during that period and the country suffered from political instability, while the short-lived and weak coalition governments were incapable of tackling the challenges posed by globalisation and domestic and regional dynamics. Nationalism was on the rise (Makovsky 1999: 159), both the public and civil-bureaucratic elites were taking an anti-globalisation stance, and the successive governments were dragging their feet in making economic reforms in line with the liberalisation of the economy. The economy went through three consecutive crises in 1994, 1999 and 2001, while the inflation rate was around 60 percent annually and growth stalled during this period.

With the heavy-handed approach to the Kurdish issue, the Turkish military, which had already been a powerful actor in politics, wielded more influence on political life, which culminated in the so-called 'postmodern' coup in 1997. Both the US and the EU were critical of the persistence of the 'strong state' in Turkey, which was fortified by the growing role of the military (Larrabee/Lesser 2003: 21). Although the Turkish military was cooperating in peace implementation missions from Bosnia to Afghanistan, it gradually became the backbone of an emerging intransigent anti-globalist coalition. There were severe and widespread human rights violations and Turkey resisted the demands, both to reorganise civil-military relations and to make reforms in the area of democratisation and human rights. Moreover, Turkey had problems with all its neighbours; it came to the brink of war with Greece over the islets in the Aegean, and with Syria due to the Kurdish issue, and was launching cross border military operations into Iraq, which made it difficult for Turkey to play a stabilising role in the region (Oran 2010: 654, 669ff.).

3. The crisis of Kemalism and the rise of the moderate Islamist pivotal state

As discussed above, Turkish society, politics and economics were going through a crisis in the late 1990s, at a moment when the country was supposed to play a pivotal role and transform the state structure along neoliberal principles. At the root of the crisis was the inability of Kemalism as an ideology to adopt itself to the neoliberal principles and the wave of democratisation of the time, and at the same time its insistence to be part of the Western world.

The domestic social and political circumstances, as well as regional and global dynamics, enabled the Turkish Islamists to rise to power with a newly revised and globalisation-friendly political programme under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Abdullah Gül and Bülent Arınç, who represented the younger and moderate wing within the traditional Islamist movement in Turkey.

The AKP, as a political party, was an offspring of the non-violent Islamist National Outlook movement led by Necmeddin Erbakan. When the Welfare Party, the movement's representative in the political front, formed a coalition government in 1996, it realised the limits and contours of its power, and it did not even come close to implementing its already unrealistic 'Islamic UN', 'Islamic NATO' and 'Islamic common market' ideas. Instead, the party leadership had to work under the strict supervision of the military and secular sections of the Turkish bureaucracy. Consequently Erbakan, as the first Islamist prime minister, was forced to step down from power after 11 months (Robins 1997: 82).

The Justice and Development Party was established in August 2001 with a liberal programme, and in its first period its leadership persistently denied the allegations that they were Islamists, and tried hard to prove that they adopted "conservative democracy" as its new ideology (Akdoğan 2004). Some observers even compared the ideological transformation of the Islamists to the Christian Democrat parties in Germany and France (Hale 2007: 293).

While adopting a new ideology for itself, the party leadership also built up new and working coalitions. It could receive the support of both the highly secular and Western-oriented Istanbul-based business

sector (Küçükali 2015: 122) and the conservative/Islamist Anatolian-based emerging business sector. In the hope of a democratic transformation, the liberal intellectual circles supported the government in the first term of the AKP government, which embraced a strong pro-democratisation discourse. The Gülen movement and other religious brotherhoods wholeheartedly provided their support, in the hope that the AKP government would open new opportunities in social life and in bureaucracy (Şen 2010: 63). Internationally, the AKP government, through its reconciliatory image and moderate discourse, could appeal both to the US and the EU, and, using its Islamist roots, could get the support of the conservative Gulf countries. Therefore, it became part of the new historical bloc whose common ground was the transformation of the Turkish state and society along neo-liberal lines.

While the AKP's energetic reform agenda was supported and praised by the Western world, it followed an active foreign policy especially toward the Middle East. I argue here that both, the US support to the AKP government to act as a regional pivot, and the steady economic growth, which started after the severe crisis in 2001, laid the ground for its active foreign policy. The Turkish economy enjoyed an uninterrupted real growth of 7,2 percent between 2002 and 2006. The economy shrank five percent during the crisis in 2009 but recovered quickly and recorded an impressive nine percent growth in 2010, and it slowed down afterwards to 2.9 in 2014 (Sidar/Tuncalp 2015: 2). The inflation rate fell from 29 percent in 2002 to nine percent in 2004 and maintained that level in the period. GDP per capita tripled from 3,400 \$ in 2002 to 10,500 \$ in 2012 and has remained almost the same since then (Karagöl 2013: 117ff.). Moreover, Turkey cleared its debt to the IMF in 2012, and for Erdoğan and pro-government media this became one of the claims that Turkey, under the AKP government, has turned from a debt receiving country to a net contributor to the IMF (Hurriyet Daily News, 2 October 2012). However, this economic growth has its weaknesses and limits too. It is excessively dependent on foreign capital flows, and in 2015, Turkey, along with India, Brazil, Indonesia and South Africa, was defined as one of the "Fragile Five" economies (Sidar/Tuncalp 2015: 3).

While economic growth brought electoral successes and helped the AKP to expand its popular base, it also provided self-confidence for the

government in perceiving its position in the region. In its initial stages, the AKP government was successful in combining its own ambition to play a more influential role in the Middle East, with the US strategy of relying on pivotal states. The US, as part of its strategy, was not disturbed by Turkey's activism in the Middle East, and unlike the dynamics of the 1990s, when the relationship focused on security issues, Washington highlighted the democratisation efforts of the 'new Turkey' as a model for the Islamists in the Broader Middle East. Therefore, with the AKP's coming to power, it has been Turkish Islamists' moderate Islamic identity, not the geo-strategic location of Turkey, that has gained priority for the US. In other words, Turkey's pivotal role continued in the 2000s with a new content and with a newly emerged actor. In particular, the Bush administration's 'forward strategy of freedom' required a more active role for the Turkish Islamists in the Arab world, and the AKP governments were willing to play such a role. A certain optimism was dominated amongst the 'Turkey experts' and in the policy making groups in the US at that time. While Stephen Larrabee was refuting the claims that there is a "creeping Islamism" going on in Turkish foreign policy and attributed Turkey's new activism to structural changes (Larrabee 2007: 113), Graham Fuller was heralding the end of the Kemalist era in Turkey and was applauding Islamists for their ideological transformation, and suggesting this change as a model for other Islamists. Interestingly, Fuller named the title of his book *The New Turkish Republic: Turkey as a Pivotal State in the Muslim World* (Fuller 2007). Many experts on Turkey have realized that Turkey could be an enthusiastic partner in assuming more responsibility in the Middle East. For instance, Stephen Kinzer argued in an op-ed that the US should stop acting as if it, alone knows what is best, and instead, seek a Muslim partner. For him, Turkey is the logical choice. It is a longtime NATO ally and booming capitalist democracy, and has unique influence around the Islamic world (Kinzer 2011). The US support for the AKP government was critical, and the US, through various channels, disapproved of the Kemalist attack on the AKP, which manifested itself in the closure case for the governing party by the Constitutional Court (Abromowitz/Barkey 2008). The US policy of democracy promotion and of supporting Turkey to play a pivotal role in the region was bipartisan and continued during the Obama administration (Dunne 2014). Obama made Turkey his first

overseas visit, where he addressed the Muslim world in the Turkish Parliament. The relations between the two countries were defined as a “model partnership” (Tan 2010), which emphasized Turkey’s partnership with the US, and its portrayal as a model for democratisation in the Middle East. Furthermore, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton designated Turkey, along with China, India, Russia, Brazil, Indonesia and South Africa, as one of seven rising powers with which the US would actively collaborate to resolve global problems (Yetkin 2009). Turkish Islamists embraced neoliberal principles, energetically pursued membership in the EU and adopted a liberal discourse in foreign policy at least until 2010, and they were willing to converge Turkish foreign policy with the US strategy. The US policy was to see Turkey, under the Islamists, projecting its transformation to other Islamist groups in the Broader Middle East, and to initiate mediating efforts in the region. There has been a hot debate about whether Turkey under AKP rule has the capacity (Abromowitz/Barkey 2009: 43) or will to promote democratisation (Kirişçi 2011: 33) in the Middle East or to solve the problems in the region. However, the AKP government emerged as a keen supporter of the strategy of democracy promotion, and Erdoğan participated in the G-8 summit in Georgia, US, in 2004, where George Bush launched the controversial “The Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative”, and Turkey was declared a “democratic partner” of the Initiative. Erdoğan became the co-chairman of a Democracy Assistance Dialogue the aim of which was to foster regional cooperation on democratization in the broader Middle East (Hurriyet Daily News, 11 June 2004; Uzgel 2011: 267). Although the US was not happy to see Turkey’s growing relations with such actors as Hamas, Syria and Iran, the AKP government was legitimising its ties with those actors as attempts to convince them to moderate their policies.

4. Redefining Islamist foreign policy

In order for the AKP to play such a constructive role in the Middle East, its leadership had to adopt its foreign policy to the changing international and regional dynamics, which required it to soften its traditional anti-Western and confrontational approach. The Islamists did not have

any coherent framework in their approach to foreign affairs, except for their bold anti-Westernism. This has been one of the areas where Islamist politics has been weak in developing elaborate ideas, necessary concepts and intellectual richness. Ahmet Davutoğlu's book has been an important exception in this sense, and it tries to embody the incoherent set of ideas in a comprehensive text. Davutoğlu's academic work *The Strategic Depth* (Davutoğlu 2001) is a text that is heavily based on Realpolitik and does not contain any of the liberal concepts such as soft power and zero problems with neighbours that were developed during the AKP government. Instead, this lengthy text frequently refers to concepts like rimland, heartland, geopolitical bottlenecks, river and steppe basins, and he has no problem in using the term living space (*hayat alanı*) for Turkey's geopolitical needs (Davutoğlu 2001: 152, 154, 170). He does not develop an original theoretical framework, but inspired by 1930s German geopolitics, he offers a guideline for regaining Turkey's influence on former Ottoman territories (Uzgel 2009). Davutoğlu criticises the Kemalist understanding of foreign policy for its Western orientation, and claims that Turkey has responsibilities towards its neighbours, simply because those regions were formerly dominated by the Ottomans (Özkan 2014: 123). He argues that even if Turkey turns its back, those Muslim societies demand Turkey's leadership, and Turkey owes them such leadership. This is indeed a flawed interpretation of both Ottoman history and Turkey's place in the region. Installing Turkey's influence over the territories once ruled by the Ottomans was both an overambitious and unrealistic target, and Erdoğan and Davutoğlu followed such a path, starting in 2010.

However, the AKP at this initial stage, did not directly take *The Strategic Depth* as its guidance, and instead adopted a liberal discourse, both in domestic and foreign policy. At this stage, liberal intellectuals, media, think tanks and scholars in Turkey contributed enormously to the production of a new discourse and to the legitimisation of the AKP and of its transformative power within the country. The AKP either adopted this political language or produced a political discourse that was in line with liberal principles. The adaptation of liberal concepts by the AKP government came with flamboyant and high profile definitions of foreign policy, such as “zero problems with neighbors”, “soft power”, (Altunışık 2008; Oğuzlu 2007) “Europeanization of Turkish foreign policy”, (Kaliber 2013)

“trading state” (Kirişçi 2009) “Kantian foreign policy”, (Aydın-Düzgüt 2006), “Liberal Turn in Foreign Policy” (Dağı 2009), and “benign regional power” (Öniş/Kutlay 2013: 1141). In particular, the “zero problems with neighbors” slogan came to characterise Davutoğlu’s approach to foreign affairs and it, until the start of the Arab Spring, became the central pillar of moderate Islamist foreign policy.

This liberal line has manifested itself in various shifts in traditional Turkish foreign policy. Policies such as becoming involved in regional disputes, or pursuing a democratisation agenda with the region’s Islamists, were unimaginable a decade ago. To play a pivotal role also required solving the ossified problems Turkey had had for decades, such as the Kurdish issue, the Cyprus problem and the Armenian issue. Those assertive initiatives launched by the AKP government in the first term of its power were important as part of its ideological transformation. Those new policy initiatives such as deepening the relations with Israel and supporting the Annan Plan, which envisaged the withdrawal of Turkish troops from Cyprus and the formation of a new state there, and its courageous policy changes such as the Kurdish and Armenian openings were applauded by liberals inside the country. After forming the government, Erdoğan was again bold enough to contradict his own worldview and his constituency by accepting the award of Profiles in Courage in January 2004, awarded to him by the American Jewish Congress (AJC) (*Hürriyet Daily News*, 28 January 2004). However, it should be noted that the AJC asked for its return after the Davos incident in January 2009, and, realising that the return of the award benefited him, Erdoğan readily returned it. On the other hand, both countries enjoyed close relations, business ties and cooperation in military ties, in particular, have grown stronger, and Erdoğan paid an official visit to Tel Aviv in 2005 (Benn 2005).

The AKP government made a dramatic change in Turkish policy in Cyprus, which was based on maintaining Turkish troops on the island. This was considered as a guarantee for the survival of the Turkish community there, and both the Islamists and the secular sections in Turkey were determined to defend this position. It was especially inconceivable for a conservative party to change this policy. With its conservative identity, the AKP government could dare to change this policy, first by accepting the Annan Plan, named after the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan,

which envisaged the withdrawal of Turkish troops and the merging of the Turkish Cypriot Republic into a new state (Çelenk 2007: 351). Moreover, the AKP government made another bold move and forced the leader of the Turkish Cypriots, Rauf Denктаş, whose name was almost identified with the issue and who became an iconic figure of the nationalist grouping, not to be a candidate in the pending presidential elections. Although the Annan Plan was rejected by the Greek Cypriots and thus could not be implemented, this courageous policy change by the AKP government was a sign that showed its determination to make changes, both in its ideological stance and in Turkey's traditional security-centred policy. The radical policy change in the Cyprus issue, and the attempt at finding a lasting solution to the problem, along with EU association negotiations, made the AKP government a reliable actor in the eyes of the liberal-minded circles in the country and among its supporters in the US and the EU.

When the Turkish Islamists came to power, they have found themselves with a mission to spread and promote democracy to the region's Islamists, a mission that also required a prominent role in the region. Thus, the AKP would pursue a leadership role in the Broader Middle East and North Africa, and at the same time would have the blessing of the US and the EU.

If projecting democratisation to the Middle East was a newly acquired policy of the rising Islamists in Turkey, the other was to take responsibility in mediating as a third party in ongoing disputes and conflicts. The AKP governments have also found a big opportunity in this area, which allowed it to play a bigger role in regional matters. Turkey organised a meeting in Istanbul that hosted Zalmay Khalilzad and Sunni representatives, with the aim of convincing the Sunnis in Iraq to participate in the elections in 2005 (Akdeveliođlu/Yeşilyurt 2009: 59), and tried hard to convince Syria to accept a UN mission to investigate the assassination of Hariri in 2005 (Hurriyet Daily News, 27 December 2005). Turkey spent its greatest efforts in mediation as a third party between Israel and Syria, and Israel and Palestine. In 2007, Israeli President Shimon Peres and his Palestinian counterpart Mahmoud Abbas delivered speeches to the Turkish Parliament. Additionally, Turkey launched indirect talks between Israel and Syria in May 2008 in Istanbul and Ankara (Mitchell 2015: 172). *The Economist* described Turkey as "The Great Mediator" (19

August 2010) at that time, and Davutoğlu himself contributed to a journal with an article in which he tried to develop his own theoretical approach to mediation (Davutoğlu 2013).

Despite its liberal turn in foreign policy, the AKP government also became an active part of NATO's engagement in the Gulf region. In 2004, Turkey hosted a NATO summit for the first time since it became a member, and at this meeting the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) was launched, which opened a channel for the Gulf countries to cooperate on defence and security issues (Kishk 2009: 37).

In this period of adaptation and moderation, the AKP government could blend its liberal soft power approach to foreign policy with the US strategy of relying on regional allies, dubbed pivotal states. Turkey was considered a successful emerging power, with an active foreign policy that mostly focused on the Middle East. However, its deep involvement in the Middle East at the first phase of its power was balanced with its bid for membership in the EU and a stable relationship with the US. The economy was growing, democratic reforms were underway, and Turkey, under the moderate Islamist government, became a centre of attraction for the Arab street. Positive perception of Turkey in the Middle East reached a record high. A survey conducted in 2009 disclosed that the public in Arab countries perceived Turkey as a major actor which had influence on the region. Syrian, Palestinian and Lebanese respondents in particular were most supportive of Turkey playing a bigger role in the Arab world (Altunışık 2010: 11). Turkey assumed institutional roles as well, and a Turkish citizen became the Secretary General of the Organization of Islamic Conference, while Turkey became a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, which provided the government the opportunity to play a stabilising role in the region.

However, the tide of liberalism and moderation began to fade, and, together with the electoral successes, economic growth, the US and EU support for a more influential role in the Middle East, and positive public perceptions in the region, the AKP leadership moved into a policy direction that sought a dominant position based on Islamic identity.

5. The return to Islamism and the search for a regional hegemony

When Ahmet Davutoğlu, who was the chief advisor to the Prime Minister, became the new Foreign Minister in May 2009, there was hope that Turkey's already active foreign policy would be more pro-active, Turkey's democratisation at home would be consolidated, and its foreign policy would continue its conciliatory and problem-solving track (Keyman 2009; Çandar 2009).

However, starting in 2010, the Turkish Islamists gradually made another historical shift which culminated in the Arab Spring, and by jettisoning their conservative democrat identity, they returned to a discourse that was Islamist and polarising at home, and anti-Western and anti-Israeli in foreign policy. While the AKP government increasingly moved away from the West, its policy in the Middle East shifted from promoting democracy to establishing hegemony.

Early signs of this policy shift became visible during the nuclear crisis between the US and Iran. Turkey, in cooperation with Brazil (both were UN non-permanent Security Council members then), brokered a deal with Iran, and the three countries, with a diplomatically high profile show off, issued the Tehran Declaration, which allowed Iran to swap its nuclear isotopes. The US immediately rebuffed the bargain, since the Obama administration was preparing a new round of sanctions against Iran (Sanger/Slackman 2010). When the US brought the draft resolution to the UN Security Council, again the AKP government, as a non-permanent member, voted against the sanctions. There was deep disappointment on the part of the US administration, that while the UNSC members like Russia and China had already voted in favour, its ally Turkey preferred a no vote (Dombey et al. 2010). When the infamous Mavi Marmara flotilla incident occurred, where Israeli special forces raided the vessel that was carrying humanitarian aid to Gaza, and killed nine Turkish citizens, diplomatic ties were downgraded and military ties were suspended with Israel, and Washington's two allies came to the brink of war in the Eastern Mediterranean. These developments led to a serious concern for the Obama administration that Turkey was heading east, "shifting its axis" and that its commitment to NATO and partnership with the US was questionable

(Abramowitz/Edelman 2013). On the eve of the Arab Spring, Turkey's ties with the West had already begun to fray.

With increased diplomatic and political involvement, the Middle East gained a new importance for Turkey's economy, as the share of the region in Turkey's total exports increased sharply. Between 2002 and 2012, Turkey's exports to the region jumped from 3.4 billion US\$ to 42 billion US\$, surpassing its traditional trade partner, the EU, whose share in Turkey's total exports declined from 56 percent to 38 percent during the same period (Öniş/Kutlay 2013: 1414). Turkey signed free trade agreements with Morocco, Tunisia and Palestine in 2004, with Egypt in 2005 (Akdevelioğlu/Yeşilyurt 2009: 64f.), with Syria in 2007, with Jordan in 2009 and with Lebanon in 2010.

In this context, Syria became the focal point of the AKP's aspirations for regional hegemony. The AKP spared no effort to entangle its relatively smaller neighbour, and established the Quadripartite High-Level Strategic Cooperation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Turkey 2016), pulling Jordan and Lebanon together, in an attempt to form a regional bloc. On the economic front, Turkey invited Syria, Jordan and Lebanon, which it called The Levant Business Forum in December 2010, where the formation of a free trade area among all these countries was decided (Tür 2011: 37). Turkey also launched the necessary infrastructure efforts that would connect them, and deepen their economic integration. A railroad line connecting Turkey, Syria and Iraq was opened, and Turkey planned to construct a high-speed train between Gaziantep and Aleppo (Mufti 2011: 3).

Through deepening economic and political ties, Turkey began to dominate the Syrian economy, which was about 1/12th of the Turkish economy. From 2009 onwards, both countries signed around 50 agreements on trade, culture, education and other related areas. In 2009 they abolished visa requirements, the abolition of which made travel and doing business easier, and also boosted the cross border trade. Both governments held joint cabinet meetings in October 2009, and their ties took on a personal form when Erdoğan and his wife went on holiday in a Turkish resort with the Assad family. Davutoğlu himself visited Syria 61 times (Analiz Merkezi, 17 October 2011), showing the importance he attached to Turkey's neighbour, and during the Arab Spring, implicitly criticising the Kemalist regime's neglect of the Middle East, he was boasting that he knew

Damascus and Aleppo street by street (Turktime, 13 July 2012). In short, beginning from 2009, Turkey was on the verge of creating a free trade area and economic integration with Syria, Jordan and Lebanon, which would turn into a political-economic regional bloc (Yanar 2011). At that stage, Turkey's regional aspirations had somehow been limited to those countries, and, as I will discuss below, it was during the Arab Spring that the AKP leadership was extremely confident that it could extend its regional influence.

6. The Arab Spring, the civil war in Syria and the break-up with the West

In fact, the outbreak of the Arab Spring, which began in late 2010, was supposed to create another area of cooperation between Turkey and the West. After all, it had been the US policy since 2004 to promote more democratisation in the Broader Middle East and North Africa, and, as stated above, the Obama administration gave a new boost to this policy, attributing an even more active role to Turkey.

The collapse of the authoritarian regimes in Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen was welcomed by Turkey, and Erdoğan was the first leader to ask Mubarak to step down from power (Turktime, 29 July 2013). When the waves of uprisings spread to Libya and the warnings came from the US, Turkey's position was hesitant initially. But thinking that it may lose ground there, Ankara, although not actively taking part in the military intervention, sent its warships and fighter jets to the shores of Libya in a show of support.

When the Arab Spring spread to Syria in March 2011, it turned into a disaster for Turkish foreign and security policies. Initially, Turkey and the US worked together to provide assistance to the newly formed opposition groups organised under the Syrian National Council. The AKP government was sure that the Assad regime would eventually collapse, and Erdoğan was confident that he would have his prayer at the Umayyad mosque in Damascus (Hürriyet, 5 September 2012). Bent on ousting Assad at any cost, the government began allowing not only the moderate opposition forces but also the Islamist jihadists to use Turkish territory for transit, for logistical needs and for training purposes (Hersh 2014). While Russia,

Iran and Hamas gave their full support to Assad, the US, fearing that the sophisticated armaments might fall in the hands of the radical Islamist groups, backpedalled the support it had provided to the opposition forces and officially confined its assistance to “non-lethal weapons” (Blanchard et al. 2015: 15).

Assessing that the collapse of the secular, autocratic regimes would pave the way for the ascent to power of ideologically close Muslim Brotherhood members in those countries, Erdoğan and Davutoğlu redirected Turkey’s policy from promoting democracy to forming a regional bloc, a policy that it had started on a smaller scale before the Arab Spring. In September 2011, Erdoğan took a high profile tour to Egypt, Libya and Tunisia with a delegation of 280 people, including ministers, businessmen, journalists, bureaucrats and members of civil society organisations (Inter-nethaber, 11 September 2011). Notably, in Egypt, Erdoğan addressed a large crowd who were carrying his posters, saluting him as the new leader of the Middle East. With a shrewd political tactic, Erdoğan, in his address, strongly criticised Israel, defended the case of the Palestinians and asked for the Arab world to create the future in unity (Haberturk, 15 September 2011). Both regional and international media paid attention to Erdoğan’s visit and its impact on the region, since it became evident that Erdoğan was trying to take advantage of the Arab Spring to install Turkey as a regional hegemon, and was trying skillfully to position himself as a regional leader (Diab 2011). To this end, the AKP government followed a two layered strategy: on the one hand, it developed strong ties with the new regimes in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt, which were ideological brethren of the AKP, and on the other hand it played out the anti-Israeli discourse and presented itself as the defender of the Palestinian case, thus making its appeal easier to reach out to the Arab street. The AKP invited leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood to its convention immediately after they come to power. The list included Mohammad Morsi of Egypt, Gannuchi of Tunisia, and Hamas leader, Mashal. Morsi gave a speech and expressed his gratitude for the support the AKP had provided it during and after the elections, which included both a loan amounting to two billion dollars as well as technical support during the election campaign. Mashal too praised Erdoğan as the leader, not only of Turkey, but of the whole Muslim world (Hürriyet, 30 September 2012).

Turkey, at that critical moment, provided full support for the Morsi government in Egypt, and together with Qatar, helped him with a 4 billion US\$ loan to avert painful economic reforms being urged by the IMF (Worth 2013). Additionally, the AKP government tried to hold the Morsi government in Turkey's orbit, and, recognising the inexperience of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood in power, Turkey's Islamists assumed a leadership role, and tried to influence their policies (Aktifhaber, 24 January 2015) while Erdoğan even sent his National Intelligence chief, Hakan Fidan, to meet with Morsi (Rotahaber, 25 October 2013).

While trying to direct the regional politics through engaging the region's Islamists, the conflict in Syria deepened, and criticism against the AKP mounted to the extent that it allowed jihadist fighters to pass through Turkey. There have been numerous news and reports that Turkey became a "jihadist highway" (The Wall Street Journal, 4 September 2014; El Arabia, 10 September 2014; The Independent, 24 August 2014).

While Turkey was drifting away from the US and the EU from 2010, and tried to build a regional hegemony, it lost almost all its allies in the region. The Morsi government was ousted from power after a military coup in July 2013 in Egypt, Ennahda in Tunisia had to step down from power in September 2013, and the National Transition Council that the AKP government supported could not wield its control over the country. The moderate Islamist opposition groups could not succeed on the ground in Syria and they almost disappeared from the scene. With its porous borders and relaxed attitude to stopping the jihadists passing through its territory, Turkey, an associate member of the EU, was associated with rising Islamism at home and helping radical Islamist factions in Syria.

7. Conclusion

The developments in the global political economy in the last two decades have enabled the emerging powers to have more influence, not only in their own regions, but also in the international realm as well. Turkey enjoyed a tremendous opportunity to gain more autonomy in its foreign policy in the 2000s, due to a myriad of changes in the restructuring of the world economy and US global strategy, but it squandered this for

its ambitious and unrealistic project of building a Sunni-centred regional hegemony. Turkey, under the AKP rule, tried to set up a hub and spoke system, whereby Turkish Islamists would lead the region's Islamists who were members of the Muslim Brotherhood. Rather than pursuing a south-south perspective and enlarging the scope of its political and economic advantages, the AKP government chose to follow a Neo-Ottomanist policy based on (Sunni) Islamist internationalism. The AKP government did not develop an IBSA-like cross continental partnership, nor did it become part of a bloc of countries to have bargaining power in the WTO negotiations.

The journey that the Turkish Islamists began at the beginning of the 2000s has turned into a big failure in almost every aspect of social and political life, and in foreign policy. After 13 years under AKP rule, Turkey is now less democratic and more Islamist, its leadership has lost its direction, the society is more polarised, the Kurdish issue has become more complicated and more difficult to solve, and Turkey has no friends in its neighbourhood.

The AKP government's obsession to oust the Assad regime in Syria and in general its opportunistic approach to the Arab Spring process had a heavy toll, not only on the country, but also particularly exacerbated the situation in Syria.

As of 2015, Turkey's diplomatic relations with Syria, Egypt and Israel have become broken or downgraded. Turkey's relations with Tehran, Moscow, Baghdad and Tripoli have been strained due to the Syrian crisis, and at the same time Turkey has already drifted away from Washington and Brussels.

Consequently, Turkey has lost its position as a pivotal state, since democracy promotion has already been dropped, and it is no longer regarded as a reliable ally in the region. Furthermore, its bid for regional hegemony under the ambitious and over-confident AKP government brought the country to the brink of war with Syria and Russia, rendered it vulnerable to ISIS attacks, as seen in the bloodiest terror attack in Ankara in October 2015, as well as ISIS attacks on the bordering Turkish towns. The Syrian crisis had its cost in a staggering refugee crisis whose number well exceeds 2.5 million, in the exacerbation of the Kurdish issue, as well as the collapse of trade and human ties with Syria and Iraq.

- 1 Like BRICS, this grouping was also developed by Goldman Sachs. Goldman Sachs identified another group of economically dynamic and promising developing countries, creatively labeled the “Next 11”, in its 2005 Economics Paper No. 134 How Solid are the BRICs? The other countries included in this group are: Mexico, Nigeria, Egypt, Iran, Indonesia, Korea, Pakistan, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Bangladesh.

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ABSTRACT Dieser Artikel analysiert die aktive und ambitionierte Außenpolitik der Türkei unter der AKP-Regierung (Gerechtigkeits- und Entwicklungspartei). Viele WissenschaftlerInnen und Türkei-ExpertInnen erklärten die Neuausrichtung der türkischen Außenpolitik mit einem allgemeinen Bewusstseinswandel der AKP-Führung. Ich argumentiere in diesem Artikel, dass diese Veränderung nicht nur in der Leistung, der Fähigkeit und dem Willen der türkischen Islamisten begründet liegt, sondern vor allem in der Umstrukturierung des globalen Kapitalismus, die aufstrebenden Ländern mehr außenpolitische Autonomie ermöglicht hat. Die USA haben die Schwellenländer (zu denen einige ihrer politischen Verbündeten zählen) in ihren Bestrebungen nach mehr außenpolitischem Einfluss unterstützt und den Status von ‚Schlüsselstaaten‘ (pivotal states) zuerkannt. Dennoch ist die Türkei unter der AKP-Regierung sowohl als selbstständige Akteurin als auch als Schlüsselstaat daran gescheitert, eine führende Rolle in der Region einzunehmen.

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