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## Turkey's "new" Middle East or more of the same

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## **TURKEY’S “NEW” MIDDLE EAST OR MORE OF THE SAME**

### **ABSTRACT**

Turkey’s Middle East policy has been changed a lot in time but the most dramatic one has happened during the reign of the AKP government. As the political Islam tendency in Turkey has evolved, the economic, political and cultural relations with the Middle East have developed in parallel. Besides, the Turkish democracy, which seems to solve its problems with Islam, is shown by some people as a “model” for the Middle Eastern countries. It is a fact that the recent Gezi protests in Turkey constitute some doubts about the success of this model but the impact of AKP’s new foreign policy on the Middle Eastern politics is clear. With the “zero problems policy” and the “new activism” era in Turkish foreign policy, Turkey has focused on the Middle East more than ever. However, to evaluate this change as a complete turn from Turkey’s century-old westernization and a shift in its identity would be a misreading of the developments. In fact, this change could be interpreted as another phase in its strategic foreign policy enriched with an opening to the East. In this context, this article tries to discuss the new orientation of Turkey upon old grounds in the Middle East according to its new focus between the regional dynamics and global actors.

### **Key words**

Turkey, Middle East, regional actor, role model, AKP’s foreign policy, the USA

### **1. Introduction**

The Middle East constitutes a vital region in world politics. Not only the enormous resources of oil and gas, but also the social, political and religious composition of the region has been of great importance. The balance in the Middle East is so fragile that any local or national tension between the Shiite and the Sunni people, between Israel and Palestine, or between the Kurds and the Turks has a tendency

to turn into a regional problem. As a matter of fact, the Arab uprisings, which had started as a local protest in a small village in Tunisia, spread into Egypt, Libya and the rest of the region in just a few days. Yet, the events were not limited to the region and the protests spread into many European and American metropolises, i.e. London, Madrid, and New York. It is noteworthy to mention that the direction of influence was not from the West to the East, as usual, but from the East to the West. The events that cascaded through many countries all around the world had originally started in the Middle East and then became worldwide. Apparently, the role of the Middle East has slowly shifted from being just a receiver into being the inspiration for change. In fact, the fire that had been ignited is still burning in many parts of the world. Moreover, the recent mass movements in Turkey, Brazil or Bulgaria, which are still going on as this article is being written, look like extended outcomes of this fire kindled in the Middle East.

Within this context of change, the relations of Turkey with the Middle East can be best understood according to its transformation from the Ottoman times to the Republican era, from dismemberment to cooperation, or from being the role model to something that we do not know yet how to describe. The debate on the role of Turkey in global affairs has always been deeply connected with its role in the Middle East. Its relations with individual states in the region and with the USA, in terms of the American policy towards that region have been shaping the Turkish foreign policy. The new active strategy of the Turkish foreign affairs, which had been started by the AKP (the Justice and Development Party) government, has opened a new path of advanced relations with the Muslim countries in the Middle East. As Turkey's social, economic and political relations with the Arab countries and Iran have developed, new horizons of activity have opened for the Turkish foreign policy.

The aim of this paper is to analyze this change in Turkey's Middle East politics that brings a "new" dimension to enhance a strategic turn into a regional actor. The new foreign policy of the AKP cannot be solely explained by some identity issues or a shift of axis; due consideration must be paid to its aim to becoming a regional actor in the Middle East. The rank of the region has immensely risen in Turkey's scope, but it is still far from a break from its western-oriented foreign policy strategy that focuses on cooperation with the USA in the Middle East region. Yet, instead of a total change, a more widened and sophisticated regional foreign policy within the same caliber would be more logical to define this new circumstances of Turkey.

Instead of reactionary, the new policy of Turkey has locked on being active and present everywhere in the region. The decades-long dismemberment form

the Arab world seems to be abandoned, but it is still early to declare the success of Turkey as a role model for democratization and liberalization of the Middle Eastern states, especially after the Gezi Park protests which brought a bitter test for the democratic sensitivity of the Turkish government. These events can be evaluated as the end of dreams about being the “role model” and would be interpreted as the “Middle Easternization” of Turkey instead, but it can also be seen as a step required for developing the Turkish political system. If truth be told, the rhetoric of the AKP about being the apostle of democracy needs to be backed by active politics in order to be an appreciated example of stability of a state that is Muslim-oriented, secular and democratic. The way that the AKP deals with these protests is a new challenge to the Turkish democracy that can elevate it to the western standards of democracy and unlock the gate towards being a regional actor which “deserves” to be the “role model” for the Middle East.

To this extent, Turkey’s new foreign policy in the Middle East will be evaluated and the reasons for this change will be discussed in this article. The intriguing balance between its approach towards the East and West will be analysed within the context of Turkey’s new strategic target to become a regional actor. In order to grasp the picture as a whole, it would be better to start with identifying the Middle East as a region and then to have look at the history of the relations between the Middle East and Turkey.

## **2. The Middle East as a Region: Where to Begin?**

In order to analyze these transformations, we first need to place the Middle East as a region in world politics. As many experts on the Middle East underline, the region is not easy to define and generalise. Neither its boundaries nor its actors are clear. The Middle East, although it sounds like that, is much more than a geographical term. It can also be political, social, religious, or mythical. Being the Middle, and East of the West, itself is problematic in the first place. The identity of the region has been carved according to its role in relation to the West.

The boundaries of the region are highly open to discussion and various definitions are visible in the literature. While Carl Brown<sup>1</sup> includes the states which were once under the rule of the Ottoman Empire within the limits of the Middle East, thus including Israel and Turkey, but excluding Iran and Morocco,

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<sup>1</sup> C. Brown, *International Politics and the Middle East: Old Rules, Dangerous Game*, Princeton 1984.

Stephen Walt's<sup>2</sup> Middle East excludes Iran, Turkey and the North African states. Albert Hourani<sup>3</sup>, on the other hand, suggests the term "Arab world" instead of the Middle East. Michael Barnett<sup>4</sup> also believes in the defining feature of Arabism and takes the founding members of the Arab League: Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, plus Palestine as the Middle East countries.

It is possible to give many more definitions of the Middle East. Yet, for the discipline of International Relations to define what really constitutes a region is a difficult task on its own. To split global affairs into regional zones is severely complex for the scholars. The difficulty is not limited by the borders, but by the criteria of being a region. In some regions, historical commonalities can give that area a regional identity, such as it is in the case of the Balkans. Some regions can be highly uni-polar and everything in that region can be directly or indirectly connected to a dominant power. America can be given as an example of this type of regionalism. In Europe, on the other hand, the balance of power is highly calibrated to the multi-polarity in many ways, which puts many different countries forward.

The Middle East is highly contradictory to define as a region, and the same could be said about the commonalities of the members of that region. Instead of commonalities, literature on the Middle East mostly highlights antagonism as the canon. The endless conflicts within the region have been commonly referred to as a feature of the Middle East. Moreover, unlike many other regions, the Middle East is open to penetration. The USA, Russia, the EU, and China have more impact on this region than the countries of the Middle East themselves. To this extent, regional developments are outcomes of the influences of both the regional and the global powers.

### **3. Transformation of Turkey's Relations with the Middle East**

Turkey is a country that is located both in the Middle East and in Europe in terms of its geography, history, politics and culture. This Eastern-Western duality has been one of Turkey's *sui generis* characteristic. Westernization has been the main drive for the country since the last decades of the Ottoman Empire, whereas

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<sup>2</sup> S. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, New York 1987.

<sup>3</sup> A. Hourani, *How Should We Write the History of the Middle East?*, "International Journal of Middle East Studies" 1991, No. 2, pp. 125–136.

<sup>4</sup> M. Barnett, *Dialogues in Arab Politics: Negotiations in Regional Order*, New York 1998.

the Islamic and the Middle Eastern dimensions have had a deep impact on its social and cultural background. While the Western type of modernization of the country has been introduced as the ultimate goal, social, religious and psychological landmarks have shown great attachment to the Eastern civilization and societies. Turkish history is full of this contradiction between becoming a Western-style nation-state and following its Muslim social instincts. Yet, until the 1990s the official state policy had insisted upon a total Westernization which had been the continuation of the modernization project of the last decades in the Middle East. This trend goes back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century when the Ottoman Empire started to lose the battle against the Europeans on the battlefields, but also in the fields of technology, economy and science. As military defeats, economic problems and social restlessness were taking the place of the old glorious days of the Ottoman Empire, the necessity for a change and modernization was widely accepted among the statesmen and the intellectuals of the Ottoman Empire. As a matter of fact, modernization and Westernization were used interchangeable, both of which were referring to catching up with the European powers. However, the technological and the intellectual gap between the Ottomans and the modern world was huge. Besides, the already tried and wasted Ottoman identity was not appealing to the non-Muslim citizens when they compared it with the independent state promises of the nationalist movement. Hence, the dissolution of the Empire could not be stopped with these late reform attempts. On the contrary, the limited freedom of speech and press indirectly accelerated the collapse<sup>5</sup>.

The disengagement between the Turks and the Arabs goes back to the years of modernization during the Ottoman Empire. As the multi-nationality of the Empire as a political system did not manage to satisfy the nationalist movements of the international system, some alternative strategies were introduced by the state elites to keep the Empire together. Pan-Islamist strategy of Sultan Abdul Hamid II and the Ottoman nationalism of the Young Turks could not stall the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Yet, the Ottoman Turks also failed to introduce an “exit strategy” from the Middle East. The centralization policies of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP, *İttihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti*) government dramatically augmented nationalist uprisings in the Empire and also in the Arabic region. Under the leadership of Sharif Hussein, the Great Arab Revolt had launched the

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<sup>5</sup> M. Belge, *Türkiyede Zenofobi ve Milliyetçilik* [in:] *Modern Türkiye’de Siyasi Düşünce: Milliyetçilik*, T. Bora (ed.), İstanbul 2003, p. 183.

disintegration process between the Arabs and the Turks. This process continued during the rule of Mustafa Kemal, who began pushing modernization towards the establishment of a nation-state. Meanwhile, the Ottoman dynasty, the Caliphate, and other institutions were all stripped of power to enforce a secular nation state regime. Generally speaking, the abolishment of these institutions, especially the Caliphate, not only did cut ties but also breached the "social contract" between the Turks and the Muslim territories<sup>6</sup>.

During the first years of the Republic (1923–38) under the rule of Mustafa Kemal, Turkey focused on modernization and Westernization even stronger than the last epoch of the Ottoman Empire. However, the interest in the Arab region was highly limited, as the relations with the Middle East began to be more than just border settlements. Hence, Turkey managed to achieve border settlement with Iraq over the oil-rich Mosul area in 1926, with Iran in 1932 and with Syria in 1939. There were also some cooperation attempts with Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan in 1937 (the Sadabat Pact), and with Iran, Iraq, Pakistan and the United Kingdom in 1955. The relations and agreements, however, were parts of the Western security system and did not offer Turkey a viable security assurance. The Cold War years pushed Turkey entirely into the arms of the West and the security priorities concentrated on the two internal threats: the Kurdish nationalism and the political Islam<sup>7</sup>. The governments generally had been controlled by the military; secularism and Westernization were the two important pillars of the state, which should be protected against the threat of the political Islam and the Kurdish nationalism.

These early years of the Republican Turkey passed mostly under the impact of the Western type "Orientalism" toward the Middle East that perceived this region with by a stereotype of inefficiency, superstition, and dubious morals. It was seen as a backward, conflicted region and considered it as an area to be cautious of. The imperial memories of betrayal were combined with cautious, non-interventionist, low-profile approach towards the Arabs. It was only dealt with in cases when Turkey's national security was threatened by some forces connected to this region. Therefore, the early Republican Turkey has kept its distance and limited its involvement in the Middle East. The mistrust towards

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<sup>6</sup> A. Ehteshami, S. Elik, *Turkey's Growing Relations with Iran and Arab Middle East*, "Turkish Studies" 2011, No. 4, pp. 643–644.

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem, p. 644.

the Arabs was also a part of the state ideology within this security perception<sup>8</sup>. The Cold War strategy of Turkey would bring little change to the Middle East strategy. Its limited involvement in the region had lacked substance, a consistent regional scope, and, most importantly, a well-defined discourse. Nevertheless, the strict Western-oriented foreign policy prevented Turkish foreign policy makers from adopting an independent neighbourhood policy toward the Middle East.

Yet, the image of Turkey among the Arabs was far from positive. There were psychological and political barriers in the Middle Eastern peoples' views regarding Turkey which had long been considered the Trojan Horse of American imperialism in the region. The end of Cold War was far from changing the Arab public's "terrible Turk" perception. Let alone diminishing, the negative perception was strengthened for several reasons: the rise of pan-Turkism in the Turkish foreign policy and, therefore, activism in Central Asia, military operations in the Northern Iraq against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), water problems with the Syrian state, and the growing strategic cooperation with Israel<sup>9</sup>.

The loose connections of the Turkish state with the Middle East have been largely shaken by the 1995 election. The National View has achieved a remarkable victory together with the Welfare Party (Refah Partisi) under the leadership of Nemettin Erbakan. The earlier mentality of loose connections with the Middle Eastern states was largely turned upside down by Erbakan's new government. As an expected step, Erbakan's government turned its face mostly to the Middle Eastern countries and started a new era for the Turkish foreign policy. The cold relations with the Muslim states were improved and cultivated through mutual agreements, cultural connections and trade. What is striking, as a Prime Minister, Erbakan in 1996 made his first official visits to Iran and then to Egypt, Libya, and Nigeria. Instead of the EU countries or the USA, his priority was set on the Middle Eastern countries.

When Erbakan's government remained in power, the discourse of the state became a critical stand on the Westernization of Turkey. The actors, institutions, process and objective of westernization were questioned in the name of authenticity. The impact of Westernization on the character of the state and society, which were traditionally and culturally under the influence of Islam, was

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<sup>8</sup> E. Dal, *The Transformation of Turkey's Relations with the Middle East: Illusion or Awakening?*, "Turkish Studies" 2012, No. 2, p. 247.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 248.

regarded as a serious problem of Turkey rather than of the West. The National View Movement believed that historically, culturally and geographically Turkey did not belong to the West but to the Islamic world<sup>10</sup>. Erdogan argued that "Turkey should cooperate with the Muslim countries through which it can realize the goal of being a leader, instead of being a servant in the European Union (EU)"<sup>11</sup>.

This change in the attitude has altered the image of Turkey in the eyes of the Middle Eastern societies. Yet, Erdogan's harsh criticism of the West and accusing them as the "mother of all evils"<sup>12</sup> was accepted as a sign for many Arabs that Turkey had abandoned its distanced foreign policy towards the Islamic countries. The transformation of Turkey's Middle East policy has reached its peak with the government of AKP (Justice and Development Party) after the 2002 elections. AKP was formed as a more moderate and neo-liberal form of National View Movement, and inherited its Islamic tendency. The change in the rhetoric was reinforced by the new government and evolved into a new form of policy, which is a combination of Islamic tendency, neo-liberal economy and Westernization.

#### **4. New Activism of Turkey and New Presence in the Middle East**

The new approach to foreign policy of the AKP government is not a total turnabout for Turkey. There is continuity between the previous governments and the AKP in the policy towards the Middle East, however, Erdogan's government foreign policy changes in response to changes in the internal and external dynamics. The Cold War parameters are no longer defining the geopolitics of Turkey in the Middle East. Instead of a cautious approach to this region, as during the Interwar or the Cold War years, Turkey developed a new strategy to be a central country in the midst of the Afro-Eurasia. The Middle East is seen as a key strategic region in world politics, in addition to concerns about access to the region's wide resources of gas and oil<sup>13</sup>. Domestic politics, security and social systems were redefined, as the new foreign policy discourse of Turkey evolved into a new state policy.

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<sup>10</sup> I. Dağı, *Transformation of Islamic Political Identity in Turkey: Rethinking the West and Westernization*, "Turkish Studies" 2005, No. 6, pp. 24–25.

<sup>11</sup> E. Dal, op.cit., p. 249.

<sup>12</sup> I. Dağı, op.cit., p. 24.

<sup>13</sup> A. Ehteshami, S. Elik, *Turkey's Growing Relations with Iran and Arab Middle East*, "Turkish Studies" 2011, No. 4, p. 646.

AKP has developed an Islamic language in its dialogue with the Middle Eastern countries, while it keeps good relations with the USA and Israel in the region. This pragmatic foreign policy was mostly grounded on the idea of being a great regional power which has more space in its political, economic and social environments. In this regard, in addition to being a cultural or a regional partner, the Middle East has become a new ground for new markets and opportunities for the AKP government.

The real breakthrough came with the arrival of Ahmet Davutoğlu, the current minister of foreign affairs, who introduced the “zero problems policy”. This policy aims to improve and expand Turkey’s relations with its neighbours by a growing interest to seek solutions to the problems of the country from the Balkans to the Middle East. It has engendered considerable Turkish involvement in regional issues, ranging from efforts to mediate between the clashing peoples and countries in the neighbouring territories. Even if these mediation efforts have not always ended with success, there is no doubt that it has helped to change Turkey’s image in the eyes of the Arab world. Turkey has come to be known as a country that uses a much more soft, multilateral, and cooperative language than ever<sup>14</sup>.

Davutoğlu mentions Turkey as a “central country”, and that its geographic location cannot permit it to pursue merely reactive policies. Since its security is closely interconnected with the regional developments that Turkey is a part of, a proactive policy has to be implemented in order to advance the national interests and to ensure the state’s survival<sup>15</sup>. In his recent article, Davutoğlu highlights similar points and says “In rejecting a reactionary foreign policy approach, Turkey develops its positions on regional and international issues with careful consideration of its own conditions”<sup>16</sup>. In fact, when Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan gave his famous balcony speech after his electoral victory on June 12, 2011, he declared the continuation of Turkey’s increased engagement in the Middle East, when he said: “All friendly and brotherly nations from Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut, Cairo, Sarajevo, Baku and Nicosia... the hopes of the victims and the oppressed have won”, and “Beirut has won as much as İzmir.

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<sup>14</sup> K. Kirişçi, *Turkey’s ‘Demonstrative Effect’ and the Transformation of the Middle East*, “Insight Turkey” 2011, No. 2, p. 43.

<sup>15</sup> Ş. Kardaş, *Turkey: Redrawing the Middle East Map or Building Sandcastles*, “Middle East Policy” 2010, No. 1, p. 124.

<sup>16</sup> A. Davutoğlu, *Principles of Turkish Foreign Policy and Regional Political Structuring*, Ankara 2012, p. 1.

West Bank, Gaza, Ramallah, Jerusalem have won as much as Diyarbakır. The Middle East, the Caucasus and the Balkans have won, just as Turkey has won”<sup>17</sup>.

## 5. “Role Model” for the Middle East?

According to Larry Diamond, a well-known American scholar on democracy and democratization, a “model” would be an inspiration for reform and transformation among the Arab countries. In fact, he thinks that there is an absence of such a model in the Middle East, which complicates the prospects of democratization in the region<sup>18</sup>. Samuel Huntington also mentions the importance of the demonstrative effect as a model for the democratic change. He describes this process as a snowballing effect of earlier transitions that allow “stimulating and providing models of subsequent efforts of democratization”<sup>19</sup>. In other words, earlier experiences of democratic transitions can constitute examples for the latecomers.

Yet, recently, Turkey has been referred to by some prominent personalities as a model or an example for the transformation of the Arab world, which has shaken with the uprisings in 2011. The Tunisian opposition leader Rashid al-Ganouchi and Tariq Ramadan, the grandson of Hasan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, have underlined Turkey’s importance as a model. As a matter of fact, it is not a new development for Turkey. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the journal “Economist” announced Turkey as the “star of Islam” and a model for the Central Asian republics when the issue of reform and democratization emerged in the former Soviet republics. About a decade later, American President George Bush pointed to Turkey as a model once again when he launched the BMENA initiative. In general terms, both of these cases are taking Turkey as an appropriate “model” because of its credentials as a secular Muslim country and a democracy with a liberal market economy.

As Turkey has risen as a successful example of a combination of Islamic tendency and democratic system, it won over some liberal Arabs as well. Hence, when Turkey was accepted as a candidate to open accession negotiations with the EU in December 2004, some Arab journalists presented it as a model of reform

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<sup>17</sup> B. Yinanç, *PM Poses as a Middle Eastern Rather than a European Leader*, “Hürriyet Daily News” June 13, 2011.

<sup>18</sup> K. Kirişçi, *op.cit.*, p. 34.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*.

for the Arab world<sup>20</sup>. Being a candidate for the EU as an Islamic country was something that was attractive for the people who are looking for the expected compromise between Islam and democracy. This highlighted aspect of Turkey, to a large extent, seemed to be appealing to the Arabs, because according to a survey conducted by Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV) in 2010 in seven Arab countries, 61% of the respondents considered Turkey as a model for the Arab world. 63% agreed that Turkey constitutes a successful example of coexistence of Islam and democracy<sup>21</sup>.

Unquestionably, economic development is important for this positive image of Turkey. The growth of the economic capacity of Turkey, the rise of income per capita, the animated trading relations, and the increasing number of internal and external investments of Turkish enterprises contribute to this positive perception. In fact, the AKP government is very sensitive about the growing economy of Turkey up to a point of largely implementing a liberal visa policy to open the doors of Turkey to any foreign trader or investors. Kemal Kirişçi, a respected scholar on Turkey's foreign policy, explains this attitude of Turkey with the term "trading state", that is to say a state whose "foreign policy is increasingly shaped by economic consideration and a country whose foreign trade acquires an important place in the GNP"<sup>22</sup>. The middle class and liberal capitalism have also grown during this economic prosperity, which makes Turkey one of those centres of attraction for a new opening for the economies of the Middle East trapped between oil revenues and the rentier state model.

In addition to the economic statistics, Turkish media, and especially the Turkish TV series, are also influential on the societies of the Middle East. The way of living depicted on TV looks like a Western style grounded in Muslim culture, which is attractive for the Arabs, especially for women, youngsters or marginalised groups, who are look for more liberalism in their countries. Hence, beyond the economic or the political instruments, Turkey's image has been constructed sociologically by the media and filming industry. Turkish series and popular artists seem to be representing the image of Turkey on the "Arab street".

Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan's popularity had mounted among the Arab people especially after his rise against the Israeli president Simon Peres in 2009 at the Davos World Economy Forum. His emotional reaction supporting the

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<sup>20</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>21</sup> M. Akgün et al., *The Perception of Turkey in the Middle East*, Istanbul 2009, pp. 21–22.

<sup>22</sup> K. Kirişçi, op.cit., p. 37.

Palestinians against the "cruelty" of the Israeli military operations has been known as "one minute". This reaction was seen as a change in the Turkish foreign policy, which used to be a supporter of American interests in the region and a collaborator of Israel. However, it should be mentioned that Turkey's popularity as a model was not always welcomed by the elite groups, who were toppled by the recent protests. There are some doubts about the sincerity of Turkey in its Middle East policies. The state might look like more American than Islamic in many dimensions to these people. In this sense, the new activism of the Turkish foreign policy has been interpreted as an extension of new imperialism. Yet, the discourse on Turkey's role as a model for the Middle Eastern states can be considered in a broader scope of analysis. To evaluate the new activism of the Turkish foreign policy within its global and regional politics would not be a conspiracy theory. In fact, to be a model for the Middle Eastern states would be in favour of Turkey in its quest towards being a regional power than of the Arabs who are "seeking" for a model. To be followed by others would perhaps serve Turkish political interests more than the needs of Arab populations. For some people, "The use of the Turkish Model is perhaps largely a Turkish or a Western tool used to enhance Turkey's discursive power or to contribute to the western hope that the Arab Spring states could become as amenable to Western interests as Turkey has been in the past"<sup>23</sup>.

Thus, to discuss further the subject of being a "model", it is necessary to identify the reasons behind this "demand". To bring stability and a more Western-type modernity to the region would also bring easy access to the region not only for Turkey but also for the Western countries. Stable political systems and liberal economies are more open to dialogue and to develop connection with these powers, especially with the USA, which probably has held the position of the "most unfavoured nation" in the minds of the Middle Eastern people. To have an ally like Turkey in the Middle East would be very welcome by the USA as it also brings a more peaceful and controllable access to the people of the region. For Turkey, being a model country for the region would provide the expected position of being a regional power and also a candidate to a global actor. Yet, the card of the Middle East is the strongest one that Turkey has in its hands in world politics and it would not want to lose it as it did before.

The AKP government has come a long way in its Middle Eastern policy and strengthened its position as a regional power. The rhetoric of "zero problems"

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<sup>23</sup> A. Stevens, *The 'Turkish Model' in the Arab Spring: Discourse and Foreign Policy Metaphors*, "The Journal of Turkish Weekly" July 2, 2012.

would be reasonable and attractive, but it has required more than just good intentions. In fact, the tense reaction of Turkey towards the civil war in Syria constitutes a challenge for the peaceful philosophy of “zero problems” neighbourhood policy. The profile of “always with the peace” has been distorted by the “anytime can get into war” image of Turkish foreign policy during the recent crisis between Syria and Turkey. The financial and military support for the “aggressive” opposition group in Syria, the Syrian Liberation Army, has been questioned by many groups in Turkey because of its risks and irrationality. Despite the visibility of risks, the AKP government has been probably calibrating its foreign policy according to the vision of Turkey as a regional power in the Middle East. As the global dynamics have been changing in the region, Turkey seems to use its initiative as a “reactionary state” more than being an “apostle of peace”.

Moreover, the success of Turkey’s role as a regional actor and a soft power depends largely on the stability of its domestic politics, the peaceful resolution of the Kurdish question and the place of political Islam in the secular state.<sup>24</sup> As the hope for the Kurdish rapprochement has been diminished by mutual reluctance of the PKK and the Turkish government, domestic politics have also been shaken by the recent turmoil. The Gezi Park protest in Turkey, which had started as a small protest, has been challenging for the AKP government both from the inside, as a source of instability, and from the outside, as a stain on the state’s image. The outcome of these events is still away from certainty, since they are still going on during as article is being written. However, it is a fact that they would be an important experience for the improvement of democracy in Turkey. The rhetoric of democracy, which has been used as a “model” for the developing democracies of the Middle East, have finally found an opportunity to be practiced. There would be ups and downs in every democracy, but what matters is the way how that government deals with these problems. The emergence of pluralism and a comprehensive form of democracy in Turkey would bring hope not solely to Turkey, but also to the Middle East.

## 6. Conclusion

Turkey and the Middle East have had a history of a very changing relationship. The close cultural and religious relations have been damaged during the last decades of the Ottoman Empire and did not improve with the establishment

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<sup>24</sup> A. Ehteshami, *op.cit.*, p. 658.

of the Republican Turkey. The late Ottoman and early Republican Western-oriented and secularist policy orientation drove Turkey even further away from the Middle East. With the rise of the political Islam in Turkey, the tendency of the governments to move closer to the Middle East started to be more evident in the foreign policy. The Arabs' perception of Turkey has also been transformed during these developments, especially during the AKP government. With the new policy of the AKP government, relations between Turkey and the Middle East have been closer than ever. The cold relations had warmed up within this new environment. Numerous publications were released on Turkey's new foreign policy in the Middle East. The change in Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East has been named the "Shift of Axis" by some scholars, pointing out its new identity orientation towards the East instead of the West. However, instead of evaluating this process as an identity transformation, evaluating the developments from the perspective of strategic reformation in its foreign affairs would be a better way to understand the new AKP policy in the region.

In this regard, "Turkey's new activism has aimed at keeping its old alliances in balance while establishing relations with a new power centre in the Middle East"<sup>25</sup>. Within this context, the new strategy of Turkey is mainly to maintain the status quo in the region and to avoid regional conflict. Creating relations of interdependence by using political, social and economic channels is a useful way of realising this new strategy. In contrast to the Interwar or the Cold War politics, Turkey's new strategy and entrance into the Middle East has not been perceived by the Arab Middle East as a hegemonic threat or a Western influence, but rather as a balancing power<sup>26</sup>.

In fact, what makes Turkey closer to becoming a regional actor within the Middle East is the AKP's new foreign policy strategy of focusing on the Arab states more than any other Turkish government. This new strategy of getting closer to the Middle East is sometimes misinterpreted as a detachment of Turkey from the West. However, the new activism of Turkey on the Muslim lands is a part of its general international relations strategy. To be an active player within the region, which had been neglected for a long time, could certainly give Turkey a broader perspective on the world politics. In this sense, Turkey needs to play its cards on two tables. On the one hand, it needs to consider the regional dynamics and act as a regional actor. On the other hand, it has to keep the balance between

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<sup>25</sup> A. Ehteshami, S. Elik, *Turkey's Growing Relations with Iran and Arab Middle East*, "Turkish Studies" 2011, No. 4, p. 658.

<sup>26</sup> A. Ehteshami, op.cit., p. 646.

the global actors. This bilateral task can be confusing in evaluating Turkey's new policy, but treating the transformation of Turkey's foreign policy towards the Middle East as a disconnection from the West would be an oversimplification. This new era is an extended version of its Westernization. An increased effectiveness of Turkey in the region, an improved image among the Arabs and more effective economic relations with the Middle Eastern economies would raise the importance of Turkey for the global actors, as this is the aim of the AKP government. Within this context, the role model talk would do nothing but support the position of Turkey in the Middle East.

Apparently, the Middle East has never been an isolated region as the great powers' interests have been clashing on it. Any slight shift of balance within the region could mean a change on the global arena. Therefore, Britain, France, Germany, Russia and the USA have always given great importance to the Middle East in their foreign affairs. Among these powers, Turkey has had a special political, strategic and military link with the USA. Actually, as the leading global power in the world, the USA has paved the way of Turkey for importance as a both democratic and Islamic country in the region. Yet, for the USA, Turkey's significance has always been connected with the Middle East, which was not always welcomed by the Turkish authorities during the Cold War years. In the aftermath of the Cold War, the Middle East became one of the most crucial elements of the Turkish-American alliance, a development that was largely accepted by both sides<sup>27</sup>. Turkey's close relation with the Middle East would be helpful for Turkey to strengthen itself and for the USA to have access to the Arab societies.

The USA may be an important power, but the Middle East has been changing as a region and the balance of power in the region has been changing. It is moving from being a multipolar system to bipolarity between the poles around Iran and the USA. Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Shiite government in Iraq, with support from Russia and China forms the group which supports Iran. Israel, Jordan, and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, with the support from the European allies, stand against that group as the opposing pole in the region<sup>28</sup>. Multipolarity in the region used to give Turkey an opportunity to play a balancing role in the region and to increase its influence by using a soft power

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<sup>27</sup> M. Altunışık, *The Middle East in Turkey-USA Relations: Managing the Alliance*, "Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies" 2013, No. 2, p. 157.

<sup>28</sup> L. Martin, *Turkey and the USA in a Bipolarizing Middle East*, "Journal of Balkan and Near East Studies" 2013, No. 2, p. 175.

paradigm grounded on expanding trade networks, diplomatic mediation and enhancing cultural ties with the Arab world and Iran<sup>29</sup>. However, a bipolarizing region will likely increase threats to Turkey's national interests in the Middle East. The future threat of Iran armed with nuclear weapons, the need for securing energy sources, while reducing reliance on Iranian supplies, and expanding the capacity of trade and investment would be among the upcoming challenges for Turkey's foreign policy<sup>30</sup>.

Apart from the tension between Iran and the USA, the civil wars in the region have been challenging for Turkey's stable foreign policy. Turkey needs great dexterity to handle these challenges all alone<sup>31</sup>. An active foreign policy, in this sense, necessitates a strategic turn strengthened by the regional and global dynamics. Cultural bonds, religious similarities and growing economic ties would bring more and more substance for Turkey in the Middle East, as it is developing both its regional activism and, at the same time, its stability in the world politics. The Middle East gives the right strategic horizon for Turkey to expand its vision.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibidem, p. 176.

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem, p. 181.

<sup>31</sup> A. Ehteshami, op.cit., p. 646.