Turkey: A Rising Regional Power in a Changing Middle East

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Introduction

In 2001 Ahmet Davotuglo, the Turkish Foreign Affairs Minister stated that “Turkey should make its role of a peripheral country part of its past and appropriate a new position” (Davotuglo: 2001). He presented a number of principles for transformation in Turkish foreign policy that would make Turkey a global actor by 2023, the one hundredth anniversary of the establishment of the Turkish Republic. Those principles called for the adherence to ‘a multi-dimensional foreign policy’. Such a policy views Turkey’s relations with other global actors as complementary. An example of which is that it views Turkey’s strategic relations with the United States, its membership process in the EU, its good neighborhood relations with Russia, and its plan for becoming a superpower in the Middle East as integral parts of a consistent foreign policy that complete each other (Davotuglo: 2001).

Recent Arab uprising and new developments in the occupied Palestinian territories have forced Turkey to modify its foreign policy in order to extend its influence in the Middle East. Turkish foreign policy was never based on ties with the Arab people. It was rather based on ties with regimes; regimes that are being overthrown because of their willingness to act with ruthlessness to suppress citizens demanding their rights. Today, Turkey seeks to cement ties with the Arab people through taking the lead in the Arab–Israeli conflict. At the same time, during this time of instability and revolutions in the region, there has not yet emerged an Arab leader that has the pull or credibility in public opinion to take the lead in the Middle Eastern and Muslim causes, which means there is a power vacuum in the region. This power vacuum creates an opportunity for Turkey to become a regional power in the Middle East. This paper seeks to show how Turkey is gaining a lot of influence in the region through its hardline position in the
most popular issue in the Middle East, the Arab Israeli conflict. This paper also attempts to explain how Turkey makes use of the power vacuum in the region to re-enter Arab consciousness, as it seeks to make Arabs look to Turkey as a cultural model, in order to become a regional power and reshape the Middle East according to its own nationalist and Islamist Agenda.

Examination of the Conventional Wisdom

There is a large body of literature that studies the changes in the foreign policy orientation of Turkey and the factors that led to these changes. Among these studies, Gulbahar Aktas (2010) proposed that the official ideology of Turkey, Kemalism had always turned its back on the Islamic world, stayed out of the Middle Eastern politics and identified itself with the West. But since 2002, the Turkish foreign policy of identification with the West and diplomatic distance from the Arabs and the Middle East gradually changed to improving and undoing the damage inflicted on its relations with the Arab World. They became more involved in the Middle East.

Joshua Walker (2010) explained the changes in the Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East, and its increasing engagement in the region as a result of international conditions. He based his ideas on Ahmet Davutuglo’s book “strategic depth”(2001), which states that after the Cold War Turkey had to adapt to changing conditions, and start to find an adequate place in the new world order. Walker argued that the Middle East gained importance in Turkey’s priorities, because engagement in this region would move Turkey from being a peripheral country for the EU and NATO to a more global player. Kemal Kirisci (2009) focused on the economic factor. He argued that the changes in foreign policy towards the Middle East are mainly to make best use of the potential and current opportunities in trade, energy, and economic
cooperation that this region could offer to the Turkish economy. Alexander Murinson (2007) proposed that “Turkey has become part of the Middle East” since the AK party came to power; because of its Islamic identity, and the changed perception of military rule in Turkey. Therefore, countries as Syria and Iran are no longer viewed as enemies. At the same time, he argues that the Turkish foreign policy and involvement in the Middle East are due to domestic pressures. For the Turkish public empathizes with Muslim causes, also the Palestinian cause and dissent against the American invasion of Iraq.

Loannis Grigoidis (2010) investigates the extent Davotuglo’s strategic doctrine has influenced Turkish foreign policy making, and its role in the Middle East. He suggested that Turkey has been successful in having bilateral relations with Middle Eastern countries such as Syria and Iraq. Turkey started to have a mediating role in the region, for example the Iraqi-Syrian dispute, Syria and Israel peace efforts, Sunni-Shitte reconciliation in Iraq and Lebanese reconciliation in Lebanon.

Zyia Onis (2008) argued that Turkey is becoming a “benign regional power” and playing a constructive role in the Middle East through adopting a balanced approach towards conflicts in the Middle East region, and uses diplomatic pressure to resolve such conflicts without using a hardline position. On the other hand, this paper argues, as stated before that recent developments in the Turkish-Israeli relations proved that Turkey is no longer trying to adopt a balanced approach, but it started to take an uncompromising position in the Arab-Israeli conflict in order to appeal to the Muslim and Arab public, and gain strong credibility in the Middle East.

Ozdem Sanberk (2010) further explained Turkey’s Middle East policy as being applied in a framework of five guiding principles in order to create peace basins – establishing contacts
with all countries in the region, holding dialogue with state and non-state actors, recognition of all election results (including Palestine and Iran), having close economic and cultural contacts with most of the countries, and setting itself as a model for democracy and economic development.

But, the above studies were written before the recent events (the Arab Spring) in the region that have put Turkish foreign policy in peril, because Turkey had ties with the regimes, not the people. For example, presently in Syria, where Bashar al Assad suppresses anti regime protestors, Turkey found itself in a lose-lose situation, and does not know which group it should support. If Al Assad regime is overthrown, Kurdish uprising in the north of Syria may have a knock on effect in Turkey. Even if Al Assad holds on to power, Turkey would be criticized by the international community for being unable to convince Al Assad’s regime to meet the protestors’ demands. This would further mean that Turkey has no real influence over Middle Eastern states.

Even in Egypt, where Erdogan called for Mubarak to step down and supported the protestors in Tahrir Square, the idea that Turkish democracy could be a model for Egypt has been rejected by the Muslim Brothers – who got the majority of votes in the parliamentary elections. Even though the Muslim Brothers have close relations with the Turkish AK party, Egyptians are insisting that they can build their own model. Therefore, this paper argues that Turkey started to follow a new path and appeal to the Arab public instead of just allying with the regimes and administrations in order to become a regional power. It does so through presenting Turkey as the leader of the Palestinian cause. So when Turkey speaks for an Arab and Muslim public, it provides it with a huge opportunity to become a superpower in the region.
Some studies, however, have taken a different approach by looking not so much on the international and regional reasons behind the change in Turkey's foreign policy, but on the balance between the state security and regional ambitions. Omer Taspinar clarified this argument by distinguishing between two approaches for Turkish involvement in the Middle East. First, the Kemalism approach which focuses on the state security, and that they believe that the Kurdish challenge is the main threat to the Turkish regional security, and territorial integrity. Secondly, there is the neo-Ottoman approach which uses 'soft power' in projecting Turkey as a regional superpower. Taspinar concludes that Ankara is balancing between both approaches in order to achieve a more peaceful, and pragmatic solution to the Kurdish problem and state security. The purpose of this research is to narrow down Taspinar's argument and focus on how Turkish decision to support the Palestinian cause is a calculated one, and how it would be useful in adopting the neo-Ottoman approach.

On the other hand, little research has been conducted on the Turkish extensive involvement in the Arab Israeli conflict and the Palestinian cause. Paul Salem (2010) emphasized that Turkey staked out a hard line position in the Arab-Israeli conflict to gain more power in the region in order to deter Iran. This paper builds on Salem's argument and further investigates how Turkey is making use of the Arab Israeli conflict to appeal to the Arab public in order to become a regional superpower in the Middle East.

**Methodology and Outline of Study**

This paper relies on a variety of primary sources. Firstly, news agencies, primarily BBC news, The Guardian, a Turkish news agency (English version) Today’s Zaman, South East European news agency(SE times), Eurasia Review, Alarabiya News agency, Turkish Hurryiet Daily Newspaper, and Turkish Weekly newspaper. Secondly, speaches; specifically Prime
Minister Erdogan speeches regarding the flotilla incident in June 2010, his speech in the Davos Economic summit of 2009, the speech he gave during his visit to Egypt in September 2011 and The Foreign Affairs Minister Ahmet Davotuglo’s speech at the SETA in Washington in 2009. Thirdly, an interview with the Turkish ambassador in Cairo Hussayn Awni Batsaly.

This paper is divided into two parts. The first part discusses certain aspects of Turkey’s domestic situation which triggered changes in its foreign policy orientation towards the Middle East. This part contains two chapters. The first chapter discusses the dynamics between secularists and Islamists in Turkey and how domestic policies are reflected in its foreign policy. The second chapter gives an overview of the Turkish booming economy and how it has been increasingly engaged in the Middle East economically. In the second part, the political focus of Turkey is discussed. This part is divided into two chapters; the first chapter examines new Turkish policies for the Middle East and how Turkey is intent on reshaping the Middle East in its own image. Throughout this chapter the Turkish prime minister Erdogan and the Turkish foreign affairs minister Davotuglo’s writings, speeches, and policy practices are studied. In the second chapter, the change in Turkish views towards the Arab-Israeli conflict is covered. How Turkey has been increasingly engaging in the Middle East diplomatically is also examined.
Modern Turkish politics could be viewed as a “conflict between two Turkeys”, which constitutes a division between Islamists and secularists. In Turkey secularism ‘laiklik’, had always been commonly known as the identity of modern progressive people ‘ilerici insanların’, a model for modernization and creating a new form of enlightened Islam and a Muslim society. At the same time secularism in Turkey had always criminalized any religious opposition. Therefore, secularism is a way of redefining the role and meaning of religion in the Turkish society. Secularism becomes a “political mean” for reconstituting religion and controlling it in a way that serves the needs and interests of the state and the political elite who controlled the state since the birth of the Turkish Republic and formulated its foreign policies. However, in the recent years political and economic opportunity spaces have greatly expanded, causing renewal, revision and rejection in the constitutionally protected settlement regarding religion and politics. Thus, the change of the Turkish foreign policy preferences and the emergence of Turkey as a regional power in the Middle East depend on the nature of this new settlement between politics and religion. This chapter examines the key debate over the realignment of the boundary between politics and Islam by focusing on the AK party’s new path.

In 1997 The Turkish Constitutional Court declared that:

“Secularism’ is a civilized way of life which tears down the dogmatism of the middle ages and constitutes the cornerstone of rationalism, science, improving the concept of freedom and of democracy, becoming one nation, independence, national sovereignty
and the ideal of humanity. In a secular order, religion is de-politicalized and no longer serves a tool of government. It is restored to its original and respectable place and left to the conscience of individuals. Application of secular law to civil affairs and religious rules to religious affairs is one of the principles upon which the republic of Turkey is built. Public affairs cannot be regulated according to religious rules which cannot be basis of regulation” (Yavuz: 2009)

At the birth of the modern Turkish Republic in 1923, its founding father Mustafa Kemal Ataturk faced three residual elements of the Ottoman Empire which were the loyalty of ordinary Muslim citizens to the caliphate and the Ulama, as they were the most important source of legitimacy and the popularity and power of the Sufi orders. In response, Ataturk worked with prominent religious leaders to mobilize public Islamic feelings against the caliphate in Istanbul and the occupation forces. When the Turkish state was established, Ataturk abolished the institution of the caliphate and established the Directorate of Religious affairs ‘Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı’ (DIB) to gain full control over mosques and all religious institutions and place them under state control. All religious leaders became state employees and all Sufi orders were banned. Ataturk believed that religion is the key cause of the country’s economic and social problems. He also believed in secular nationalism as being the most essential hallmark of any modern developing country. He developed the most radical model of secularism ever adopted in the Muslim world. The Kemalist institutions worked to diminish the social role of Islam in the society and defined modernity as an alternative lifestyle free from religion (Yavuz: 2009).

However, Turkish people are historically and culturally Muslims and the largest Muslim Empire in history was ruled from Turkey. It is hard to imagine Turkey without its famous skyline of minarets and mosques. Sociologist Jose Casanova contends that de-privatization of religion is
not an infringement to secularism. Rather, it is a condition for the maturation of “secularity”. According to Casanova “this happens when religions’ legitimate representatives inject their ethical claims into the public discussion of basic issues of public interests, oriented to values such as human dignity, solidarity and all values that secular ideologies do not always promote on their own” (2006). This is because religion is the only secure source of those universal ideas and values. Mark Somer (2007) proposes that Ataturk’s reforms which laid down the basic principles of Turkey’s secular system were influenced by anti-religious ideas, but “the system that emerged does not oppose religion, nor does it envision an absolute separation of religion and the state” (Somer: 2007). Although the laws and institutions which Ataturk established were based on strict secular principles, they show that the state wanted to regulate Islam in general and political Islamic tendencies in particular in the name of secularizing the society and the political arena and leaving room for westernization which he viewed as essential for modernization.

Armando Salvatore (2006) contends that “the issue of secularity should be treated not as a mere question of political culture but as the manifestation of distinctive conceptions of authority and practices of power”. The state under the Kemalist ideology attempted to influence the society’s culture, ideas and norms through offering a non-political version of Islam through the DIB. The state religious services are used to promote a moderate type of Islam in order to maintain a partial monopoly over the political sphere. Therefore, religion was used to mobilize and persuade the public without threatening the state’s monopoly or impinging on peoples’ freedom of conscience. According to Somer, the main threat to this Kemalist system was not radical Islam but another form of moderate Islam (Somer: 2007).

Ironically, Islam’s revival in the political arena came as a result of one of the steps towards further modernization. After the Second World War, a multi-party era started in Turkey due to
internal public pressure and Turkey’s alignment with the United States. Moderate Islamic movements gradually started to participate in politics as a result of democratization and social transformation. Since 2002 the AK party became both an outcome of this transformation of Turkish politics and at the same time the agent of the new wave of change in Turkey.

**A New Political Language**

In 1998 the State Security court charged Erdogan of “inciting religious hatred and calling for the overthrow of the government” because he read out a poem in the south eastern city of Siirt: “the Mosques are our barracks, the domes our helmets, the minarets our bayonets”(Yavuz:2009). The court sentenced him a ten months prison term and ended his office as a mayor. Although the Kemalist intentions were to end Erdogan’s political career, but the prison term was a new beginning for him and enhanced his popularity. Due to the collapse of the government in 2002, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) received two thirds of the seats of the parliament. The victory of the AK party could be explained by different factors. First, as Yavuz argued that the Turkish electorate had a unique characteristic, that the people usually vote to “punish the past rather than govern the future”(Yavuz:2009). Therefore, the widespread dissatisfaction with the political parties and the worsening economy encouraged many voters to vote against old parties and try the untested AKP. The people wanted new faces, different ways of conducting politics and were hungry for a fresh approach. The AKP presented new voices calling for pluralist, capitalist and democratic entities in which secularism is not an ideology protected by the state and its institutions; instead it would be an outgrowth of socio-economic conditions of the country.

At the same time, the AKP provided a new version of conservatism which was never against modernity and modernization, but as Yavuz stated: “was critical of the state-imposed lifestyle in
the name of modernization” (2009). Conservatism for Erdogan and the AK party meant a political identity that stresses the priority of the family institution, morality and orderly change as he argued in one of his speeches that “it is important that conservatism – as a political approach, which accords importance to history, social culture, and, in this context, religion as well – reestablishes itself in a democratic format”(2006). Political conservatism in this context means “change in continuity” (Taspinar: 2001). Ahmet Taspinar contended that: “The biggest issue is this; how and where we will reconnect to our past; all of us are children of conscious and ego crisis. In this framework, AKP followed conservative modernization in favor of top down revolutionary one, which focuses on civil society, urbanization, and free market economy as the medium of change and reconciled with civic religion” (Taspinar 2001).

The AKP stresses the role of religion in defining the good life. They also stress the importance of tested historical arrangements that are derived from Ottoman History and Islam. Erdogan responded to a question posed to him by Ishaan Tharoor(2011) on whether he accepted donning the neo-Ottoman mantle:

“Of course we now live in a very different world, which is going through a scary process of transition and change. We were born and raised on the land that is the legacy of the Ottoman Empire. They are our ancestors. It is out of the question that we might deny that presence. Of course, the empire had some beautiful parts and some not so beautiful parts. It’s a very natural right for us to use what was beautiful about the Ottoman Empire today. We need to upgrade ourselves in every sense, socially, economically, politically. If we cannot upgrade ourselves and the way we perceive the world, we will lag behind tremendously. It would be self-denial. That’s why whether it be in the Middle East or North Africa or anywhere
in the world, our perception has in its core this wealth that is coming from our historical legacy. But it’s established upon principles of peace. And it all depends on people loving one another without discrimination whatsoever” (Erdogan 2011).

His reply shows that the AKP leadership has a strong belief that the Ottoman past holds a key to the future of Turkey. The AKP shares the same aim of the Kemalist modernizing project and progress but they propose a new form of modernity which does not exclude tradition, calls for universality along with locality and at the same time requires a type of rationality that is not ignorant of spirituality and Islam.

Moreover, the AKP has always been seeking to provide performance and services rather than merely focusing on ideology. This characteristic was clear since the 2002, 2007 and 2011 elections, where people did not vote for ideology, instead they voted for the party which represents the interests of the nation. For instance, Erdogan’s image, leadership and ability to represent the people’s interests and at the same time being the head of the AKP played a huge role in the party’s victory at the polls. Thus, the ideology of the party has always been regarded as a secondary issue. Hussein Besli a Turkish MP argued that:

“The AKP has no ideology. This is necessary in order to allow it to become a leader-centered party and, as such, the leader can shape it as he likes. If the party has an established ideology it cannot survive due to the presence of too many diverse groups within the party. Moreover, party ideology could limit its actions. Yet, I also believe that having a party without ideology demonstrates the maturity
of the Turkish society. The people do not need ideology, but rather a leader who will provide ‘hizmet’ [social services] and get things done.” (2009)

Based on the actions of the AKP and Besli’s argument, it is possible to conclude that the AKP has characteristics which distinguish it from other parties and allow it to win the elections for the third term in 2011. It is a ‘Hizmet Partisi’ [party of social service] rather than being an ideological party and at the same time it is very insecure in relation to the state and the outer world and seeks to minimize this sense of insecurity by abolishing the state ideology. Due the dissolution of all previous Islamic parties by the constitutional court, the AKP feels insecure. The leadership of the party has been trying to overcome this deep insecurity by adopting the language of ‘providing better services’ for the people. At the same time the AKP appears to be the most pro-European Union accession political party on the Turkish scene, which deflects the charges of Islamic fundamentalism leveled by the Kemalists. Moreover, the AKP regularly harks back to its Islamic roots and promotes the project of neo-Ottomanism and Turkey’s involvement in the Middle East and the Arab Israeli conflict to keep its grass-roots who sympathize with the Palestinian cause mobilized and to open more opportunities for Turkey in the territories of the former Ottoman Empire.
Chapter 2: Turkish Economic Boom and Economic Engagement in the Middle East

Turkey’s economy is growing dramatically. This could be seen in the economy producing the equivalent of half the entire output of the Middle East and North Africa including Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt and Israel” (Gogaplay:2009). The Turkish Economy grew by 11% in 2011, faster than China or any other developing country. It recorded the third highest growth rate in the G20 economies, at a time when most of Turkey’s neighbors in the Middle East and in Europe are struggling with turmoil and bailouts. The GDP in 2011 was estimated at $1.053 trillion. Figure 1 shows the change in Turkish GDP between 2007-2011. The Turkish economy ranked the 16th in the world and exports doubled till it reached $11.7 billion in 2010. Istanbul became one of the 27 most influential cities in the world economy. The Turkish Foreign Affairs Minister Ahmet Davotuglo in his book “Strategic Depth” argued that economic interdependence is the most important tool allowing Turkey to gain “strategic depth” in the Middle East. He also emphasized the prominent role of the Turkish private sector in driving the country’s “strategic vision” and foreign policy. Therefore, Turkey started to introduce a new positive language of trade and cooperation instead of conflict.

The Interaction between the Economy and Foreign Policy

There is a large body of political economy literature that studies the interaction between the Turkish foreign policy and economy. William Hale examines Turkey’s expanding trade and commercial relations in the 1980s and 1990s. He raised the question whether “trade follows the flag”, concluding that the liberalization policies
of the 1980s and 1990s fall short of being successful. He suggests that in order to overcome these shortcomings, Turkey has to introduce “proactive diplomacy”. By proactive Hale meant preventive. This further means that “Turkey has to put aside its militaristic image and focus on its soft power potential”. (Hale: 2000).

Kemal Kirisci, a leading Turkish scholar argued that Davotuglo’s concept of zero problems with neighbours “simply restates Richard Rosecrans’s idea of the “trading state” and Robert Putman’s notion of “two-level diplomatic games” (Kirisci: 2009). He concluded that Turkey used diplomacy to strengthen its ties with neighbouring countries and thus improve trade relations. This chapter attempts to build on Hale and Kirisci’s ideas through explaining the impact of economic considerations on the Turkish foreign policy of engagement in the Middle East.

*Figure*

The expansionary trend in trade with Middle Eastern states was well established before the AKP and Erdogan came to power. In the 1980s under the leadership of
Turgut Ozal there was a fundamental transformation in the Turkish economy from the Inward looking Import substitution strategy to a new export oriented one. Although this makeover of the economy was long in bearing its fruits, but it began to alter the socioeconomic makeup of the Turkish society. “The most important consequence of Ozal’s reforms was the emergence of a new social class of entrepreneurs who did not owe their wellbeing to the state largesse and contracts”(Barkey:2011). They were located in Anatolia, away from the traditional business centres of Istanbul and Izmir. These new enterprises were export oriented and became known later as Anatolian tigers. The new business elite came from conservative background and in 2001 they became the backbone of the AKP’s political coalition. Turkish exports started to increase and the search for new export markets became essential for the expansion of the Turkish industry. (Figure 2 shows the dramatic increase in the Turkish exports between 1980-2010).

Barkey explained that “for the AKP, the most important task in keeping the support of this new economic grouping is not only to effectively manage the economy but to also help in this pursuit for new export markets”(Barkey:2011). This meant that the AKP has to start looking beyond Turkey’s traditional markets. Although the highest percentage of Turkish exports is to the EU markets, but those markets had matured, they became saturated and their growth began to stall. The EU’s share in the Turkish exports decreased from 56% to 46% in the period between 2006 and 2011. (Figure 2) shows how Turkish exports declined in 2009 as a result of the global financial crisis. Most of the decline occurred in exports to the EU markets, which were hard hit by the global economic crisis of 2008. Exports to the UK for example
declined by 27% and exports to Germany declined by 26% respectively. At the same time, much of the new demand started to shift towards the emerging economies as the Middle Eastern economies, which made the overall export picture of Turkey better. Also the new entrepreneurial class drive to develop new markets for their exports have naturally reduced the share of exports to the EU (Ulgen: 2011).

Source: Turkish Statistics Institute (2012)

**Turkey-Middle East Economic Relations**

“Turkey has been experiencing an economic boom since the mid-2000’s, allowing it to eclipse the EU’s collective economies in growth in light of the recent global recession, while its expansion of economic ties with the Arab world have been providing increasingly fruitful trade relations”(James:2011). Therefore, the Turkish foreign policy of opening up to the Middle East could be seen in this context. Turkey signed numerous commercial
agreements with Middle Eastern states, including free trade zones. Turkey started
by signing free trade agreements with Syria, Morocco and the Palestinian authority
in 2004, Tunisia and Egypt in 2005, Jordan in 2009 and Lebanon in 2010. Moreover, Turkey started to open up its borders by providing visa free transition. In 2010, Turkish exports to the Middle East were 21.5% of its total exports. This growth in exports to the Middle Eastern states did not come at the expense of other markets, but as the Turkish economy grew, it expanded in new markets, especially in the AKP years(Uglen: 2011).

Turkish companies have seen exceptional growth through expansion in the Middle East. In an interview carried out by the economist Alisa Roth (2010), Mesut Cakmark, the manager of Besler Flour Mill Company in Anatolia said that:

“The government established good relations with neighboring countries. That makes it a lot easier for investors and businessmen to make deals with foreign firms and trade with them. That's the "zero problems" policy in action. In 2002, the company did about a million dollar worth of foreign trade. Now its foreign trade is about $145 million. About half of the company’s business is with Middle Eastern and Arab clients and neighboring countries account for most of that”
(Cakmark, interviewed by Alisa Roth, the Market place, July 28, 2011)

Alan Liel argued that although Turkish trade with the Middle East has increased in the past decade, but “this ratio falls in line with oil prices” (Leil: 2009). For instance as Walid Radwan noted that “while the region took 22 percent of Turkey’s exports in 1988, the share went down to 10 per cent in 1998 during the oil price swoon and in 2008 rose back to 19 per cent” (Radwan:
An Arab diplomat in Ankara interviewed by Aljazeera news agency explained this by saying that

“Turkey talks about everything, solving problems, multilateral economic cooperation, and interdependence. The only problem is that they are the main beneficiary. They have the industries, the skilled laborers. We have only oil and gas in our favor. Whether Middle Eastern countries will accept not having a balance of trade in their favor is questionable in the long term”

(Mohamed Dawood, interviewed by Aljazeera news agency: February 2010)

Also the Egyptian Centre for Economic Studies carried out an analysis for the benefits of the 2005 Egyptian-Turkish Free Trade Agreement. The study concluded that the agreement has limited dynamic gains for Egypt. This is because the agreement did not promote Egyptian exports in the short run. Also the agreement did not promote the sectors of the Egyptian economy which have comparative advantage in construction services and tourism. Moreover, it did not encourage joint – venture projects between the two countries (the Egyptian Centre for Economic Studies: 2005).

*The Arab Spring challenging Turkey’s Middle East Policy*

The Arab Spring, starting with Tunisia in 2011 became a huge challenge for Turkey’s Middle East policy. On one hand, many Turks sympathized with the Arab population attempting to overthrow their dictators. On the other hand, these revolutions overthrew regimes with which Turkey had established close relations. Traditionally, Turkey had warm ties with Tunisia. But the developments that took place in Tunisia after the revolution proceeded far too quickly for Turkey to come up with a foreign policy response. The case of Egypt was different. Although Turkey and Egypt signed a Free Trade Agreement in 2005, but Erdogan opposed Mubarak on different
issues, starting with Gaza. Moreover, Turkey recently started to take a role in regional politics which has always been considered to be part of the Egyptian sphere of influence, for example its mediation between Syria and Israel and its plan for becoming a power in the region. Undoubtedly Mubarak’s regime did not appreciate this rising Turkish role in the region.

During the January Egyptian revolts, Erdogan called on Mubarak to step down. But for Turkey, the Egyptian case was different and of greater importance than Tunisia because of the economic factor. In 2010, 2 per cent of Turkish exports went to Egypt and Turkey might not afford the setback that a new regime could bring about. But at the same time, the fall of Mubarak’s regime, with which Turkey had little in common would not affect Turkey’s relations with Egypt. Yet, Tunisia and Egypt were not as important to Turkey as the next two countries – Libya and Syria, in which Turkey faced many obstacles. Although exports to Libya accounted 1.6 per cent of Turkish exports (which is less than Egypt), but Turkish businessmen had huge investments in the Libyan construction sector and Turkey had to evacuate 15000 Turkish nationals during the fighting in Libya. Initially Turkey resisted the UN resolution against Qaddafi’s regime. “It is only after finding itself isolated and surprised by anti-Turkish demonstrations in the rebel capital Benghazi that the Turkish leadership, in a series of quick policy shifts, pivoted away from previous policy positions” (Barkey: 2011). Turkey participated in NATO military operation against the regime in Libya and Erdogan called for Qaddafi to step down. After the fall of the regime, the Turkish Foreign Affairs Minister Davotuglo promised the Libyan transitional council $300 million of assistance (Barkey: 2011).

Syria represented the perfect example for Davotuglo’s “zero problems with neighbors”. The Ministry of Foreign affairs of Turkey stated in 2010 that “Turkey’s trade volume with Syria reached to 1.8 billion dollars as of 2009. This number surpassed 2.2 billion dollars in the first 11
months of 2010 and it is envisaged to reach the target of 5 billion in a short period of time” (Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Turkey-Syria Economic and Trade Relations: 2010). But, the rebels in Syria had come as a shock for Turkish policy makers. Erdogan responded in the beginning by saying that the Syrian crisis was “an internal problem”. In fact, the intensification of the level of violence against protestors and the movement of more than 12,000 refugees to Turkey made it impossible for Turkey to ignore the crisis and it had to lose Turkey’s strongest economical ally in the Middle East.

Conclusion

In conclusion, good economic relations with Middle Eastern countries could be regarded as a source of stabilization, because when having close economic relations; this reduces the potential for having conflicts, as the price would be far higher. The Turkish economy has grown tremendously in recent years, therefore its perspectives started to change. Turkey started to look beyond its borders and traditional markets and establish a more active Middle East policy. Turkey also started to plan for becoming a superpower in the region, therefore it had to strengthen economic ties with all Middle Eastern counties and make them dependent on it.
Part II: The Political Focus of Turkey
Chapter 3: New Turkish policies For the Middle East

The Turkish president Abdullah Gul’s visit to Egypt on 3rd of March 2011 marked an important step for Turkey to become a regional power in the Middle East. This visit highlighted the Turkish aim to play the role of a “model” for Middle Eastern countries. The acting president and chairman of Egypt’s Supreme Council of Armed Forces said that “the Turkish experience is the closest experience to the Egyptian people. Turkey is the model to emulate” (Tantawi: 2011). Tantawi was not the only one who praised the Turkish model for transformation in the region. Also Rashed Al Ghanoushi the historical leader of the Tunisian Islamic movement Al Nahda (which became a political party after the 2011 revolution and won 42% if the seats in the parliament) also praised the Turkish model. “Al Ghanoushi stated that his movement takes Turkey as a model because of the freedom it grants for the established political parties, its benevolent evolution in the realm of civil-military relations and its focus on development” (Safar:2012). Moreover, Tariq Ramadan, an influential Muslim scholar and the grandson of Hassan Al Banna (the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood) said at the Leaders of Change Summit in Istanbul that “We must look at how much Islamists have evolved in Turkey”. Ramadan also added that “democratic Turkey should be a template for Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood” (Hürriyet Daily News: 2011).

On the other hand, Sinan Uglen, a Turkish scholar argued that “Turkey cannot serve as a model for those who hope to usher the region through the difficult transition to a more democratic order” (Uglen: 2012). Uglen explains some barriers to applying the Turkish model to the post-
revolutionary Middle Eastern states. For instance, the Turkish western credentials, which lie in its membership in the NATO and its EU candidacy, are obviously not applicable to Arab countries. Moreover, secularism that had always been cherished by Turkish authorities would make it difficult for Middle Eastern and Arab leaders to adopt the Turkish model of a secularist state under conditions of democratic opposition from Islamic groups. For instance, the idea that Turkish democracy could be a model for Egypt has been rejected by the Muslim Brothers in Egypt – who got the majority of votes in the parliamentary elections. Even though the Muslim Brothers have close relations with the Turkish AK party, Egyptians are insisting that they can build their own model.

However, as Samuel Huntington introduced the concept of “demonstrative effect” which points out that earlier experience of transition to democracy provided model for subsequent democratizing countries which share the same culture (Huntington: 1991). In this sense, the Arab and Middle Eastern countries would find the Turkish model more relevant and meaningful than other democratization experiences of non-Muslim countries. The Turkish domestic political developments that took place since 2002, which brought about the AK party which has Islamic roots to power, would also enhance this idea of cultural affinity. At the same time, the Arab uprising presents a historic opportunity for Turkey to become a regional power in the Middle East, through positioning itself as a model for the newly democratizing Arab states. In an attempt to show how Turkey is intent on reshaping the Middle East in its own image, this chapter examines new Turkish policies for Turkey’s regional role in the Middle East.

Turkish leaders are trying to promote the Turkish model in the Arab world not just through showing what Turkey is, but most importantly through showing what Turkey does. Sinan Uglun asserted that, “wisely, Turkey does not actively try to impose itself as a model; rather, it offers
elements for inspiration, an approach that is better received by its neighbors” (Uglun 2012). In essence, Turkey started to promote itself as an active and influential actor in the region. As the Turkish foreign affairs Minister Ahmet Davotuglo described his vision in 2010 saying that “The new global order must be more inclusive and participatory. Turkey will be among those active and influential actors who sit around the table to solve problems rather than watching them." (Davotuglo, Daily Zaman: 2011). In fact, the Arab uprising has served as an opportunity for Turkey to become a primary actor in the region and influence other Middle Eastern states.

Turkey and the Arab Uprisings

The Tunisian Revolution:

Traditionally, Turkey and Tunisia used to have warm ties. However, the events in Tunisia developed too fast for Turkey to come up with a coherent foreign policy response towards the uprisings. As soon as the revolution succeeded in toppling Ben Ali’s regime, Erdogan managed to inspire the Tunisians by taking their side and offering Turkish support. Prime Minister Erdogan said in an interview with "El-Sherouk” Tunisian newspaper on 8 May 2011 that : "since the beginning, Turkey defended the idea that these events in the Middle East and north Africa region proved the impossibility of postponing demands and aspirations of peoples of our region. These popular movements voided the previous verdicts and the corrupted ideas which assumed that democracy cannot be achieved in our region. The present stage will represent a great historical conversion”. He added: "I believe that the position in the Middle East has proved to us that democracy, freedom and human rights should not be monopolized by any group. We indicate the necessity of settling a common democratic rule based on the events that started from the street. Political, economic and social reforms should be achieved and rulers should respond to the aspirations of peoples without delay" (Tunis press: 2011). Ankara does not have a great deal
to contribute with, therefore Erdogan and his government tried to muscle into regional politics through giving speeches, supporting the Arab people and encouraging them.

Erdogan also said that: "undoubtedly the events witnessed by Tunisia represented an aspiration source for the other popular movements in the Middle East and North African countries. The Tunisian people opened the change and conversion gates in the Middle East. Our appreciation to the Tunisians is deep. We try to present our support to Tunisia and our assistance to it in several fields, especially legislative and executive fields, which would be done through the communication between the parliamentarians and government officials. From the other side, we give great importance for the development of economic relationship with Tunisia especially for raising the cooperation level in the tourism field" (Erdogan: 2011). Then, he added: “I believe that success of the transformational period in Tunisia will represent an important indicator for achieving a multiparty democracy. Turkey is ready for presenting its support to Tunisia till terminating the democratic transformation period quickly. That is in the frame of respect and coordination between the two countries”(Erdogan:2011).

The matter did not stop for Erdogan and his government at the spiritual support. But Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmed Davotuglo visited Tunisia in February 2011 (one month after success of the revolution). In addition, Akin Algan, the Turkish ambassador in Tunisia said that the Turkish committee delegated to Tunisia after the revolution was joined by 20 representatives for the Turkish tourist agencies who came to support Tunisian tourism sector.

This shows that Turkey started to further its influence in the events taking place in Tunisia through offering support in different fields. However, Tunisia would not be the sole beneficiary from this support; Turkey also will benefit both politically and economically. First, politically as Turkey is going to provide assistance to Tunisia in the legislative and the executive fields which
means that it would position itself as a model for Tunisia to emulate through advising the Tunisians how to apply Turkey’s successes and this could be regarded as a huge step towards shaping the region in the Turkish image. Second, economically through cooperation in the tourism field, where Turkey and Tunisia signed a tourism cooperation deal in April 2012, which meant that more Tunisian tourists would visit turkey and more Turkish tourists would visit Tunisia, thus raising the Turkish income of tourism sector and benefiting the Turkish economy in general.

The Egyptian Revolution:

The Turkish situation regarding the Egyptian Revolution was based on fixed and clear strategy, no contradiction or variance. Turkey adopted a strategy of alignment with the Egyptian people and their fair demands since the beginning of the uprisings. On 2 February 2011, Erdogan in a press speech called for quick responding to demands of Egyptian people and urged the creation of a democratic climate that guarantees freedom of opinion and expression. With rising of protests requesting the stepping down of Mubarak, Erdogan in a speech delivered in the Turkish parliament and broadcast by television said:

"Mr. Hosni Mubarak. I want to present my extremely pure greetings. My extremely frank warning. All of us will die and we will be asked what we have left behind us". He added: "we, as Muslims will be put in a hole, its size does not exceed two cubic meters. Therefore, I'm asking you to listen to the people's voice and their uttermost humane demands. Welcome the will of the nation for change without any hesitation”. He urged Mubarak to listen to requests of the Egyptian people that "touch the heart", adding that “If there is a problem, so the solution is in the voting boxes"(Erdogan, Al Haram: 2011). These declarations were on the day that the Egyptian revolution witnessed events of the famous Battle of the Camel.
Also, Erdogan in his speech warned from foreign interference in the Egyptian, Tunisian and Libyan affairs using the famous quote of Mohamed Farid: "Egypt is for the Egyptians, Tunisia is for the Tunisians and Libya is for the Libyans"(Erdogan:2011) clarifying that that he explicitly does not want to interfere in the internal affairs of Egypt and refuses to interfere of any other country in the Egyptian internal affairs, stressing Once again on the friendship and brotherhood between the two countries(El Sergany:2012). One could say that Erdogan using a famous quote for the Egyptian and Arab poet Mohamed Farid could be regarded as an attempt to enhance the idea of cultural affinity between Turks and Arabs, in order to show that Arabs could emulate the Turkish model because it’s the most relevant to their culture.

Then in a telephone call between Erdogan and the American President Obama, he assured that Egypt ought to carry out elections as soon as possible in order to make constitutional modification, establish democratic values and practice political freedoms. In addition, Erdogan requested from Obama during the call that the United States have to ensure that the state of Israel does not interfere in the Egyptian affairs (El Sergany: 2012). This shows that Erdogan was trying to make it clear that he opposes any foreign interference in the Egyptian internal affairs and especially Israeli interference, in order to appeal more to the Egyptian public and be viewed as the protector of all the Muslim nations against any foreign intervention.

After the Egyptian revolution succeeded and President Mubarak stepped down, Erdogan said in a speech in Sakaria on 12 February 2011:

"Egypt should establish a constitutional democracy and carry out free and fair elections immediately in order to deter any possible crisis and disorders resulting from exterior influences. Also, we called Egypt to solve its economic crisis by holding an international meeting that each of us lays his contribution for assisting Egypt to exceed this crisis. If the problem is in food,
treatment and clothing, we confer on unto the Turkish Red Crescent the provision of the utmost necessities and to make these needs available. We look at demands of the Egyptian people proudly and we could not say as some of them said: "they do not deserve democracy", or "they are not ready for it. These people aroused and demanded democracy as being their natural right. The ones who said yesterday: that democracy is not suitable for the Egyptian people, are now silent. When democracy coincides with their interests, they say ‘democracy is one of right of human rights’. When it contradicts their interests, they are silent and deny it. The pains of the Egyptians and Tunisians are our pains. So, we look at the events residing in the region and we request listening to the voice of the people. We got out and talked with a brotherhood incentive.

We did not look to the events in Egypt from the perspective of personal interests. We took into consideration the neighbouring right. We live with the Egyptian people, their happiness and sadness. We will adopt the necessary steps for Egypt. Egypt will exit from this period more powerful and greater. Between us and them, there is a brotherhood relationship. We will continue in supporting the internal security of Egypt. I from here send my greetings and my people's greetings from Sakaria River to the Nile river and to Cairo”(Erdogan, Al Ahram: 2011).

Erdogan’s speech shed the light on different policies that Turkey is adopting in regarding Egypt. First, in his speech Erdogan again assured his opposition to external influence and interference in the Egyptian affairs by urging Egyptians to carry out elections immediately. The Turkish ambassador in Cairo clarified Erdogan’s position by saying: “we see that times of dictators are over, therefore, the region should not be under the monopoly of Christian powers”1. In fact, this could be regarded as an attempt by Turkey to increase its popularity in the Middle East through raising the awareness of the Arab public about the Western powers’ interference in Arab affairs,

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1 An Interview with the Turkish Ambassador in Cairo, Hussayn Awni Batsaly, on Thursday 17th of May 2012
which is already met by resentment in the Arab streets. By this Turkey would become more popular in the Arab world and thus would be able to become a regional power.

Second, Erdogan’s speech showed that Turkey is willing to support Egypt by all possible means in order to pass through its current crisis. The Turkish ambassador in Cairo also made it clear by saying: “we want a strong Egypt, we want a prosperous Egypt. We are not in competition with Egypt; it is a win win situation. We are not Arabs. Turkey will not replace Egypt and Egypt will not replace Turkey, but both countries present an axis of power”. He added “the sun rises differently when the Egyptians and the Turks shake hands”\(^2\). This shows that Turkey is aware of the difficulty to become a regional power in the Middle East because it is not an Arabic speaking country and that it would experience competition with some Arab countries as Egypt. Therefore, Turkey decided to take the opportunity of the fall of Mubarak’s regime and ally with Egyptian people and support them. So that Egypt and Turkey would develop together as allies but not competitors and become an “axis of power” in the region as Ambassador Hussayn Awni said.

Third, Erdogan in his speech tried to promote Turkey as a model for democracy for the rest of the Middle East to follow and learn from. Also the Turkish ambassador in Cairo said: “Egypt should learn from Turkey but not exactly replicate it. We should not tell the Egyptians what to do and we do not put any conditions for Egypt to follow Turkey, but Turkey has achieved many successes. Egypt should study Turkey as a case, some of the formulas could be taken, but Egypt has also to learn from Turkey’s failures”\(^3\). Moreover Erdogan in his speech tried to portray Turkey a country fighting for the freedom of the Arab people and calling for democracy, although Turkey used to have good relations with Arab dictators and their old regimes. The Turkish Ambassador in Cairo also stated that “People who are wearing the headscarf are not inferior

\(^2\) An Interview with the Turkish Ambassador in Cairo, Hussayn Awni Batsaly, on Thursday 17\(^{th}\) of May 2012
\(^3\) Ibid
to any other; they do not have to go London to experience democracy and freedom”⁴. This shows that in order to cement ties with the Arab people after those regimes were overthrown; Erdogan and Turkish diplomats are calling for democratic transformation in Arab countries.

Turkey took actual steps for clarifying its position towards assisting Egypt. President Abdullah Gul visited Egypt on 4 March. He was the first President to visit Egypt after the revolution. During his visit, he assured the necessity of Egypt exceeding the present political and economic positions and regaining its regional role. Also, he assured the powerful Turkish support to Egypt during the transitional stage and increasing horizons of cooperation with it in the shade of the distinguished friendship between both countries. Moreover, during his visit the Turkish president met with a group of Muslim Brothers headed by the guide of the group Dr. Mohamed Badie. This indicates that the Turkish President and Erdogan’s government are well aware of the real power in Egypt and that they want to have good relations with this new political power.

Then, Erdogan personally met with a delegation of some youth of 25 January revolution after a conference in Istanbul in early 2011, where the youth delegation gave him armour as an appreciation of the Turkish role in supporting the Egyptian revolution. The Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan advised the youth delegates to make their own experiment and urged them to adopt the manners of Prophet Muhammad, God's Messenger May Peace Be upon Him and assured them that the successful politician should have straight ethics, honesty and conduct and to be in the position of people's confidence. He also indicated that when Prophet Muhammad May Peace Be upon Him entered Al-Medina, he attained the hearts of non-Muslims, Jewish and others. That was not achieved by using the weapons but through honesty. (Montasser: 2011).

One could say that Erdogan by reminding the Egyptian youth with Prophet Muhammad’s acts,  

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⁴ Ibid
he was trying to stress more on the idea of cultural affinity between Egyptians and Turks by showing them that both Turkey and Egypt share the same Islamic history and heritage and that they should follow what Prophet Muhammed has done in order to succeed in rebuilding their nation. Also Erdogan tried to portray himself as a model for this group of Egyptian youth as he was trying to make them understand that all the success he has achieved was because he followed the same path, rules and moral codes of Prophet Muhammed and that they have to do the same thing in order to transform Egypt into a better prosperous country.

Libyan Revolution:

The Position of Erdogan towards the Libyan revolution was not different from his position during the Tunisian and the Egyptian revolutions. Through a telephone call at the beginning of March 2011, Erdogan explained the Turkish point of view regarding the events in Libya and he advised the Libyan Colonel Muammar Al Gaddafi to step down in order to satisfy the people’s demands and stop the bloodshed and sufferings in Libya.

In May 2011 he declared the failure of the initiative performed by his state for solving the crisis in Libya by saying: "we tried with Gaddafi to search for an exit to the crisis, but he ignored our demands”, adding: " Libya is not owned by anybody or a single tribe, the Libyan people should find a solution for the crisis, we hope that the Libyan leader leaves Libya. Step down immediately for his own sake and the sake of the future of his state… for stopping more bloodshed and ruin" (Al Jazeera: 2011). But at the same time, Erdogan criticized the interference of the United Nations and NATO as a party in this crisis. Erdogan’s opposition to the NATO and the UN interference in Libya raised several questions about the Turkish position towards the Libyan revolution. In fact Erdogan’s opposition was appreciated by many Arabs, as Ragheb el Sergany, an Egyptian Islamist scholar explained that Erdogan was put in a critical position, and all his decisions had to be calculated accurately. He also said that when we evaluate decisions of the individuals and governments, we take into consideration their history. History of Erdogan, Justice and
Development government is good and bright. He explains that Turkey feared that the NATO would provide the revolutionists with weapons which would worsen the situation in Libya. He also contends that “the West does not present aid for free; there must be a return” (El Sergany: 2012), which might be putting Libya under European and American military, political and economic occupation because of presenting this military aid to the revolutionists. This shows that Erdogan declared his opposition to the interference of the NATO and providing the revolutionists with weapon not as to support Gaddafi, but to show the Arab and Muslim world that he is keen that Libya would remain independent and free from any external interference. At the same time, Turkey is a member of the NATO and it wants to join to European Union. Thus, it cannot oppose the NATO because of its fear and care about the independence and freedom of Islamic countries. Hence, it requests the non-armament of revolutionists in Libya.

In an attempt to show the Middle East that Turkey looks for the best interest of the Libyan people in the long run, Turkey managed to make use of the opportunity of working with the international community in blockading Qaddafi’s regime and weakening it. The Turkish President Abdullah Gul in early July 2011 signed a resolution which states freezing all the bank accounts of Qaddafi and his family in Turkey. In addition, he prevented exporting any Turkish weapon or to Qaddafi’s regime by any means and imposed other penalties in the fields of commerce and marine transportation (El Sergany: 2012).

**The Syrian Revolution:**

Before explaining the role being performed by Turkey in the Syrian revolution, one has to point out that there is a long history of hostility between Syria and Turkey since the fall of the Ottoman Empire. “Both countries had come to the brink of a war in 1998. The main sources of tension between the two countries were due to water issues and the activities of the Kurdish insurgency” (Yilmaz: 2010), whom the Syrian President Bashar Al Assad used to assist. When justice and Development government came to power and started applying Ahmed Davutuglo’s policy of ‘zero problems’ with all its neighbours, consequently it settled its problems with Syria. Both countries opened their borders and positions improved much more than before. So, from one side Turkey does not want a setback in its
relationship with Syria. From the other side, maybe Turkish leaders see that Turkey should be neutral in order not to lose Al Assad’s regime, with which it had good relations, in case he does not step down and at the same time not to lose the Syrian people in case Al Assad was ousted from power.

From the third side, the Turkish government suffers from interior problem concerning the Alawites living in Turkey. They represented a serious opposition and security problems for the previous regimes, and they had many demands. The AKP government tried to solve this internal problem through setting different policies as teaching Alawite ideology for Alawite students in the schools and allowing some of the important personalities to participate in the government and allowing them to construct temples for the tribe. Therefore, if the justice and development party adopted procedures against the Alawite Syrian regime, this would threaten the Turkish internal stability, as interior problems would be renewed in Turkey between the government and the Alawite tribe (Radwan: 2009).

Therefore, Erdogan addressed the Syrian president Bashar Al-Assad advising him to respond to the demands of his people by carrying out political reforms. He said also in an interview with journalists from Al Jazeera that "Turkey is concerned with what is happening in Syria. We cannot remain silent towards what is going on. We share borders with length of 800 km with this state and we have kinship relations with the Syrians" (Aljazeera: 2011). Then with the development of the events and the continuation of oppression by the Syrian regime to its people, Erdogan warned of the repetition of Hamah slaughter that occurred in 1982 - where thousands were slaughtered at the hand of the previous Syrian president Hafez Al-Assad’s troops. He also warned that the violence and use of force by the Syrian regime now against the revolutionists will oblige the international society to respond and interfere either through imposing sanctions or interference in the internal affairs of Syria, and he assured that Turkey would adopt the same strategy in this case. Erdogan also presented suggestions for stopping bloodshed in Syria through saying: "we requested from the Syrian officials to introduce some reforms by which they can regain the confidence of people, we also sent to them suggestions based on serious studies. But the regime responded by shooting its people "(Al Jazeera: 2011).
International federation of Muslims scholars headed by Dr. Youssef Al Qaradawi declared its astonishment of complete silence to Arab League and Islamic Conference Organization for what occurred and still occurring in Syria. At the same time they called upon Turkey as a neighbour country to Syria and having good relations with Al Assad’s regime to press more on Al Assad’s regime and convince him to stop the use of force against the Syrian people. Al Qaradawi called Erdogan personally to double his efforts and try to make sure that Syria does not convert into a new Libya – concerning international interference – which the Muslim community would refuse as a whole. This clearly shows how Turkey is becoming an influential actor in the region and how the Arabs and Muslims started to look to Erdogan as the leader of their causes.

Erdogan and his government responded immediately where Turkey received more than 300 Syrian politicians and leaders opposing Al Assad’s regime in order to draft plans and programs for change in Syria. The Syrian leaders that participated in the meeting said that this conference made Turkey and the government of Erdogan becomes a basic partner and a major player in what is going on in Syria. Also Turkey opened its borders for the Syrian refugees who escaped from the oppression of Bashar Al-Assad regime. Erdogan said in June 2011 that Turkey "will not close the gate" in the face of the refugees escaping from the oppression in Syria (Saleha: 2011)

**Yemeni Revolution:**

Turkish officials expressed their support to the demands of the Arab peoples and demands of the Arab youth who aimed for freedom and democracy in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria or any coming revolution in other countries of the Middle East. But the Turkish position and role in those uprisings may differ from one country to another. This depends on the Turkish relations with this country. Although Turkey does not have close ties with the Yemen because it was never interested in Yemen as a strategic partner, however, Turkish officials tried to play an active role in regional diplomacy during uprisings in Yemen. Erdogan addressed the Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh requesting him to step down immediately.
When Saleh refused signing the initiative suggested by Gulf Cooperation Council for ending the crisis in Yemen, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed its fears that these events would lead to a great political crisis in the region. The statement of the ministry stated the following: "the political crisis faced by Yemen affects the security and economic position of the country and would make it incapable of satisfying the needs of Yemeni people. We felt severe distress when we knew that the initiative of the Gulf Cooperation council – which realizes and addresses the danger of this crisis on Yemen and neighbouring countries – have been coincided with the refusal of the Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh. In case of continuation of the failure to reach a quick solution for the crisis in Yemen, the matter will be worse". It also added: “It is our most sincere wish that the future of Yemen be decided through reforms and a democratic transition that will be carried out within a process of national dialogue joined by all segments of the society”(Today’s Zaman: 2011).

Welcome to the Power of the Media

Who said that capturing the hearts and minds in the Muslim world is mission impossible? Many still think that active diplomacy is just the exchange of diplomats and politicians who can struggle on televisions in order to promote and achieve a certain foreign policy. However, four hundred years after the decline of the Ottoman rule in the Middle East and rise of nationalism, the Arab people are “opening their living rooms and flocking around their television set to watch over 140 episodes of second rate Turkish series that do not even do well in Turkey itself”(Bilbassy:2011).

The Turkish series called Gumus (or Noor in Arabic), attracted 85 million viewers in the Middle East. There were many other Turkish series on Arab screens for example Fatmagül’ün Suçu Ne (known in Arabic as Fatma) which attracts about 75 million viewers in the Middle East. “These
serials show what the closed societies of the Middle East long to see, hear, even live: being Muslim with a modern style, a high standard of living and equality between men and women” (Sahin: 2011). The broader impact of these TV series is that a simple television production can be utilized as a potent social tool to effect change and influence thinking and in the process win a few million hearts and minds. Through the small TV screens Turkey was able to achieve a huge influence in Arab homes and helped to promote cultural exchange between Turkey and the Arab world. Many Arab women admired the personality of the title character Muhannad in the Turkish series ‘Noor’. As Dr. Shafira Alghamdi, a Saudi pediatrician said that “A lot of Saudi men have gotten seriously jealous of Muhannad because their wives say, ‘why can’t you be more like him?’” (Alghamdi: 2008). This rising popularity of the Turkish drama could be regarded as rise of Turkey’s soft power in the Middle East. The Turkish serials draw an image of an idealized Muslim and secular country, portraying Turkey as a role model for its neighboring Muslim countries.

Turkish TV series being previewed on Arab channels are not only about opulence, passion and secular values beneath an Islamic mask. Recently Turkish series have been tackling political issues in an increasingly direct manner. An example of this is brand new hit series, *Sarkhet Hajar (Cry of a stone)*, as it appears to dramatize daily news headlines. The main plot of this TV series is the concentration towards the lives of the Palestinians under Israeli subjugation, which has resulted in dissension amongst Arab viewers. This TV series could be regarded as an attempt by Turkey to illustrate its solidarity with Palestinians, in order to appeal more to the Arab public.

In the end one could say that “if only the sultans knew that it could be done on the cheap, through movies and TV series, they could have dispatched these handsome men and women and assembled them to conquer hearts and minds in the Arab world on their behalf, saving the
 treasury endless amounts of cash”(Bilgin:2011). Finally, These TV series could be regarded as
an attempt to enhance the idea of cultural affinity between Turks and Arabs, in order to cement
ties with the Arab and Muslim world. At the same time to show that Arabs could emulate the
Turkish model because it’s the most relevant to their culture.

Conclusion

Turkey will have to be more cautious in its approach to the region’s domestic politics. It can no
longer rely on coddling the Middle Eastern regimes. Also because in the last decade it became
more than ever ensconced in this region, it had to prepare itself for alternative contingencies.
Turkish efforts in supporting the Arab revolutions were clear and obvious. It was praised by all
Arab and Islamic peoples. In addition, Erdogan was praised by official Islamic authorities
especially the International Federation for Muslim Scholars and also Al-Azhar establishments in
Egypt where senior Imam Dr. Ahmed El-Tayeb – Sheikh of Al-Azhar mosque praised the efforts
of the Turkish Prime Minister Ragab Tayeb Erdogan in supporting the Arab and Islamic peoples
revolutions in Syria, Libya, Yemen, Egypt and Tunisia against tyranny, his attempt for unifying
the rows of the Muslim nation and removing strife and tension between them. That was during
his meeting with Dr. Hussayn Awni Batsaly, the Turkish ambassador in Cairo on 9 June 2011(El
Segany: 2012).
Chapter 4: Turkey and the Arab Israeli conflict

The Arab leaders during and after the United States 2003 war on Iraq were not doing well to halt the invasion. No Arab country stopped oil exports to the United States. Taha Yassin, the Iraqi vice president at that time commented on the Arab leaders meeting after the invasion at a news conference in Baghdad saying:

“The meeting of the Arab foreign ministers in Cairo on Monday was ‘meaningless’ and that concrete action was needed from the Arab world to try to halt the war. Why don't they decide to suspend oil exports to the states that are launching aggression against us? Why don't they close the embassies of the states who are committing aggression against Iraq? Why don't they block their waters to American and British vessels and why don't they close their airspace to American and British warplanes and missiles? Several Gulf Arab countries have allowed the U.S. and Britain to use their territory for the attack on Iraq. The land invasion of Iraq was launched from Kuwait, and Qatar hosts the U.S. Central Command war headquarters. The U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet is based in Bahrain. Jordan had stopped importing Iraqi oil. I tell the Jordanian people that the one who suspended Iraqi oil exports to your country is your government” (Diplomatic observer.com:2003)

Turkish leaders have seen silence of the Arab countries during and after the US Invasion of Iraq. In addition, Ankara did not find any understanding, welcoming or solidarity from the Arab countries to respond to the crisis in Iraq except from Syria. At the same time, after the United States entered Iraq and became a neighbor to Turkey, the Turkish foreign policy had to be
revised. Therefore Turkey started to take the opportunity of the Arab silence and play an active role in the regional conflicts, in order to become a superpower in the Middle East. In an attempt to show the Turkish involvement in Middle East conflicts, this chapter examines the Turkish role in the Arab Israeli conflict since the US invasion of Iraq.

*Turkey Playing the Role of a Mediator in the Arab Israeli Conflict*

Turkey began by improving its relations with Israel and playing the role of a broker in the Arab Israeli conflict. The Turkish president Abdullah Gul received the Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs Silvan Shalom in April 2003 in Ankara. This meeting was pressured by the Zionist lobby in America in attempt to mediate between Israel and the Arabs. Also Representatives from the Jewish lobby visited Ankara in early 2003, at a time when most of the Arab Capitals were ignoring the domestic developments in Turkey and the rise of the Islamic AK party to power. Washington and Tel Aviv seemed to be acting for exploiting the full Arab absence in the Turkish arena in order to convince the AK party leaders with all its views towards Iraq and other Middle Eastern countries such as Syria, Iran and Palestine. The United States and Israel are aware of the fact that the Turkish people sympathize with those Middle Eastern countries for religious reasons. But to what extent the Turkish public opinion will have great influence on the Turkish foreign policy at a time where Turkey is met with no Arab concern. In an attempt to make use of this Arab silence and at the same time benefit from the existence of the United States and Israel in the region, Turkey started to improve its relations with Israel and play the role of a mediator between Israel and the Arab countries, so as to increase its influence in the region.

The Turkish Israeli relations started to improve beginning with a sudden visit of the Turkish army president General Helmy Uzkock to Tel Aviv on first of April 2004. He met with the Israeli Minister of Defense Shaoul Mufaz. Also the Israeli President Musha Katsav visited
Ankara on 9\textsuperscript{th} of April 2003. The Palestinian Minister of Foreign Affairs Nabil Shaath visited Ankara in mid-April too, paving the way for the visit of the Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas, which could be regarded as a step for Turkey to mediate between Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

\textit{Two Sides of the Same Coin: Economic/Security Ties and Political Condemnation (late 2003 - 2004)}

Turkish–Israeli relations worsened once again following the cooperation of Tel Aviv with Iraqi Kurds. The prominent Israeli journalist Avi Yellin published an article in the Israeli national news agency on 1\textsuperscript{st} of October 2003 saying that:

\begin{quote}
"Israeli military and intelligence agents are currently operating in Iraqi Kurdistan. Their primary role, according to the reports is to train elite Kurdish commandos in guerrilla warfare and anti-terror tactics. The Kurds – whose country is currently occupied by Iraq, Turkey, Iran and Syria – are reportedly again, after many years accepting Israeli assistance in the struggle of independence" (Yellin: 2003).
\end{quote}

The Kurdish question remains a red line in Ankara and for decades it viewed this Kurdish problem as one of fighting terrorism of the separatist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). In addition, there was an attempt by Israel to purchase the lands rich of petroleum in El Musel region (Northern Iraq). Turkey had no choice but to show its anxiety regarding Israeli actions. Israeli Badiout Ahrnout newspaper on 21 October 2003 published an article saying that Turkey recently warned Israel of the consequences of its activities in northern Iraq. Also the Turkish public newspaper announced that "Israel purchases petroleum regions, a second occupation of Iraq" (Today’s Zaman: 2004). Moreover, the Turkish journalist Pelin Turgut wrote in Today’s
The Turkish – Israeli relations were tested by the refusal of the Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan to meet with the Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon in Turkey on 6th of November 2003. However, after the Istanbul explosions targeting Jewish temples, security coordination resumed. In early 2004, a Turkish security delegation visited Israel, including Istanbul's security manager, Galal El-Din Garah, and officials from the terrorism control administration. A security agreement was signed, allowing Turkey to export one billion cubic meters of drinking water to Israel for twenty years, considered a strategic achievement for Israel (Mahli: 2004).

But, in response to the American bombing of civilian cities in Iraq and the Israeli attacks on Rafah refugee camp, the Turkish Foreign Ministry condemned the Israeli helicopters’ attacks on Palestinians, killing at least 15 people, including children, and injuring many. These operations were illegal and like terrorist activities. Erdogan declared, “history and human conscience will not forgive them for what they do” (Mahli: 2004). The Turkish president Abdullah Gul described the Israeli bombing of Rafah refugee camp as very savage and declared Turkey could not accept it. Then, he said that the Turkish government will call its ambassador in Tel Aviv for closer understanding of the situation.
developments in the region. Prime Minister Ragab Tayeb Erdogan also said that Israel treats Palestinians as Nazis treated the Jews (Mahli: 2004).

Moreover, Gul indicated that his government decided to raise the diplomatic representation level in Palestine. That was done by appointing the previous Minister of Education Wahby Dingarlar as a coordinator for the Palestinian affairs. His task is following up the program initiated by the government for assisting the Palestinian people in political, economic and administrative fields. This Turkish government’s decision came after a closed meeting with the Parliamentary members of the AK party on 25th of May 2004. The Turkish Parliamentary delegation members explained their impressions of their visit to Palestine especially Rafah camp. Many of the Parliamentarians could not restrain their tears while they listened to the stories of the Palestinian people. In addition, members of the delegation passed through Yasser Arafat’s gratitude and appreciation of Erdogan’s role in defending the Palestinian people as the Ottoman Sultan Abdel Hamid defended Palestine.

Erdogan suddenly called the Israeli Minister of Infrastructure Joseph Partiskey who was in Ankara on 26th of May 2004 and warned the Israeli Minister saying that Tel Aviv should refrain from its policies of assassination and murdering of the Palestinian people in order not to oblige Ankara to adopt practical moves against Tel Aviv. Sources said that during his meeting with Paritzky in his office, Erdogan said:

"Killing of a person (Sheikh Yassin) who was kept in your prisons but later released as he was a quadriplegic person was unacceptable. What is happening at Rafah refugee camp is unacceptable. All of this deeply harms my people and myself. We are a country that welcomed Jews when they were expelled from Spain in the 15th century. Now the same treatment is imposed on Palestinians. We have to find a way out. We don't want these developments to
destroy our relations with Israel. We feel the need for warning you." (Turks daily World News: 2004).

Also, he repeated his refusal to Sharon’s invitation to visit Tel Aviv (Radwan: 2006). In fact, one could argue that Turkey was trying to maintain good relations with Israel, because they had close ties in different fields especially economic and military ties and this was clear when Erdogan warned the Israeli infrastructure minister saying “We don't want these developments to destroy our relations with Israel”. But at the same time they cannot be silent towards what is happening in Palestine as the rest of the Middle East countries for two reasons. First, the Turkish people and public opinion sympathize with the Palestinian people and if the AK government ignored the public opinion and maintained good relations with Israel, they are going to lose a huge electorate. Second, Turkey was trying to be outspoken and show its anxiety regarding the Israeli actions in order to appeal to the Arab public and appear as the only Muslim country calling for Palestinian rights, which was clear in Erdogan’s refusal to visit Israel.

The Turkish Parliament’s position was similar to Erdogan’s position. The Turkish parliament’s president refused a request from the Israeli ambassador for giving a speech to the Turkish parliament in order to clarify the policies of his state towards the Palestinian issue and the region in general. What is astonishing is that the Israeli ambassador presented such a request to the Turkish parliament at a time when neither the Palestinian ambassador nor any other Arab ambassador even hold a journalists’ conference thanking the government, the state, the people and the Turkish Parliament for their solidarity with the Palestinian people. This shows the silence of the Arab nations regarding the Palestinian cause and that the Arab leaders at the same time were ignoring the rising role of Turkey in the Arab Israeli conflict.
During his meeting with the editor in chiefs and managers of international newspapers who participated in the international conference for newspapers in Ankara in July 2004, Erdogan described Israel again as a ‘terrorist state’. He also said that “the Israeli Prime Minister Arial Sharon is the one who destroyed the peace process in the region”. He added: “The terrorist policies of Israel prevented Turkey from mediating this peace process which delivered support from Syrians, Palestinians and Lebanese, but Sharon refused it” (Erdogan: 2004). In fact, this conference could be regarded as an attempt by Ankara to use the media in order to show the Arab public that Turkey is supporting the Palestinian cause.

After the American journalist Simour Hirsh published a report in New York Times magazine about the activities of the Israeli Mossad agents in Iraq (2004), the Turkish Israeli relations became worse. The Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs declared that his state follows up Israel's activities in Iraq and northern Iraq in particular. Turkey was anxious about Israeli presence in Northern Iraq because of its fear that Israel would assist the Kurds against Turkey. Therefore, one could argue that Turkey was not weakening its ties with Israel because of the Israeli actions in Iraq, but because of its fear that Israel would support the PKK. In response, the Turkish security authorities refused allowing the Israeli Mossad agents who were authorized to protect the Israeli planes to wander in Turkish airports with their own guns. That led El-Aal Israeli Company cancel its trips to Turkey.

The Israeli vice president Ehud Olmert visited Ankara in Mid-July 2004 for the purpose of returning warmth to the Turkish Israeli cold relations. But Erdogan refused to meet him because he didn’t have enough time. However, Erdogan found sufficient time for meeting the Syrian Prime Minister Nagy Al-Etry. This shows how Turkey is trying to how the Middle East countries that the Arab Turkish relations are more important than Israeli-Turkish relations, in order to gain
more popularity in the Arab world. Also Erdogan continued his campaign against Israel by saying: "there are children from one side throwing stones and Israelis shooting rockets. If the children are terrorists, how can we describe the ones who shoot rocket?" he added, “this is a terrorist state" (Erdogan: 2004).

In spite of the Turkish condemnation for the Israeli practices, Turkey and Israel agreed that Israel finances 6 projects for irrigation in a Turkish project for developing south east of Al-Anadoul and Sahl Konei region. The value of investments of Israel in these six projects reaches 870 million dollars. One could say that Erdogan’s campaign against Israel was not to completely cut ties with Israel but to attract the attention of the Arab public and re-enter the Arab consciousness.

Under the pressure of the Zionist Lobby in both the United States and in Turkey and in the shade of full Arab neglect to the Turkish role in the Middle East regional politics, Erdogan sent three of his consultants to Israel on 30th of August 2004, as an attempt to decrease the tension in the Turkish – Israeli relations. Those consultants were Shabaan Dishly, the vice president of the AK party and the two members of parliament Omar Shalik and Maouloud Shaoush Ughlou. It is well-known that Baghish and Shalik are connected to the Zionist Lobby in the United States. This shows that Turkish policy makers were still keep about their good relations with Israel and the Turkish foreign policy against Israel is not to fully cut ties with Israel but to appear as the champion of Islamic causes.

However, Ragab Tayeb Erdogan continued his attacks on the Israeli policies towards the Palestinians. He said that Israel’s policies against the Palestinian people provoke feelings of hostility and anti-Semitism. He also denied any American pressure on his government for developing good relations with Israel. He said: “nobody can impose on the Justice and Development government and Turkish Parliament any certain policies” (Erdogan: 2004).
Erdogan repeated his willingness for mediation between the Palestinians and Israelis. But he said that Israel is replying with rockets and planes to the stones thrown by Palestinian children. He added that “Turkey has a historical and religious responsibility for defending the Palestinian brothers”, however, taking into consideration continuation of the ties with Israel in all of the fields. This again shows that Turkey wants to maintain its ties with Israel, but is trying to raise its popularity in the Arab world through becoming a voice for criticism of Israeli actions, which many Arabs have viewed as vital to be voiced. In addition, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs called the Israeli ambassador in Ankara and handed him a formal memo calling upon the Israeli forces to stop the use of force against the people of Gaza immediately (Radwan: 2006).

In general, 2004 was a historical year in Turkey’s relations with the Middle Eastern countries. During this year the Syrian President Al-Asad visited Turkey and Erdogan visited Damascus and Tehran. These visits were considered as an ‘inauguration’ in the relations with the Arab and Middle Eastern world. The Turkish Parliament’s refusal of allowing the passage of American troops across the Turkish lands to north Iraq and Turkey’s strong criticism to the actions of Israel has given an impression to the Arab and Islamic world that Turkey is not an American ally. But it gave the Turkish Islamic democratic model more respect and trustfulness in the Arab world.

By the end of 2004, Turkey found itself in the best location since establishment of the Republic in 1923. With exception to the weakening of the Armenian-Turkish relations, it could be said that Turkey today has either excellent or good relations or without problems with all of its neighbors and the other powers in the world. This is a non-preceded achievement especially that most of these powers were in hostility or competition with Turkey.
The 2008 Gaza War and Turkish-Israeli Relations Reaching a Low Point

Erdogan’s second government witnessed great deterioration in the Turkish Israeli relations till the matter reached its lowest point during last Gaza war. The messages of the Turkish government were powerful and clear. It accused the State Israel frankly of committing crimes against Humanity.

Al-Anadoul news agency carried out an interview with Erdogan on the following day of the beginning of war on Gaza. He replied to the questions of the journalists by saying that: “the means used by Israel are considered a hit to the peace initiatives in which we exerted much effort” (Erdogan: 2009). He insisted on the necessity of stopping this war on Gaza as soon as possible. In addition, as Daud Abdullah (2010) argues that the Turks sense of national pride was wounded as they felt that they were betrayed and stabbed in the back after the Turkish government performed for months the role of a mediator in indirect negotiations between Israel and Syria. The Turkish government was angry because the Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert during his visit to Ankara five days before the beginning of the war promised a peaceful approach to the Palestinian question. What added salt to the injury is the fact that while Israelis were secretly planning for a war on Gaza, Turkey was trying to promote peace in the region by playing the role of a mediator in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Thus, the war on Gaza naturally forced a re-thinking on the Turkish side. Also the Turkish ambassador in Cairo said that “starting from the Israeli attack on Gaza relations started to experience a set back as a result of the views of both Turkish government and public opinion which saw Turkey as a dominant power that can dictate its opinions on the neighbors”5. One could argue that the Turkish government had to take a hardline position in the Arab Israeli conflict after this war because the Israeli war on

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5 An Interview with the Turkish Ambassador in Cairo, Hussayn Awni Batsaly, on Thursday 17th of May 2012
embarrassed Turkey in front of the Middle East as the Turkish government was not respected by Israel, which in fact could undermine Turkey’s plan for becoming a superpower in the Middle East.

Moreover, it seemed that Israel underestimated the shift in centers of power in Turkey. For decades Turkish-Israeli relations were coordinated through the Turkish Military establishments. “Turkey’s military grip on the political life of the country endeared it to the Israelis” (Abdulla: 2010). However, now things have changed with the growth of Turkish democracy, leading to a shift in centers of power from the military to the people. The war on Gaza brought out huge numbers of Turks on to the streets in protest against Israel and in solidarity with the Palestinian people. Therefore, the government was obliged to respond to the peoples will and sentiment.

*Turkish-Israeli Relations Reaching a Boiling Point at the Davos Economic Summit-2009*

The situation escalated more and more when Erdogan participated in a panel discussion with the Israeli president Shimon Peres in Davos economic Summit on 29th of January 2009. This was a session participated by Shimon Peres and Erdogan, Secretary General of the United Nations Ban Ki Moon and Secretary General of Arab League Amr Moussa and chaired by the American journalist David Ignatius. According to request of Perez, all spoke before him. They criticized Israel’s actions during the Gaza war. The most intensive and sharp criticism was made by Erdogan, who said that “Israel murders the Palestinian children without sin”. He also revealed that he sat with the Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert for period of 7 continuous hours in Ankara – four days before the war and he advised him that Turkey is capable of achieving another peace agreement with Hamas and that it is possible to reach a mutual deal through which Hamas could liberate the Israeli captured soldier Galad Shelit.
Peres replied by reading the paragraphs of Hamas’s decree that talk about ruining Israel and the impossibility of peace with it. He said: that despite the fact that Hamas murders the Israeli children, Israel withdrew from Gaza strip and removed the settlements. Then, Peres shouted: “what happened to you? Are you crazy? Would you allow Mr. Erdogan 100 rockets to be shot per day or even 10 rockets on Istanbul?”(Peres: 2009) Here, the audience clapped enthusiastically to Peres. Erdogan requested the right to speak, but the chair tried to prevent him claiming that he has to grant the audience the right to ask questions. But Erdogan insisted. So, the chair allowed him to speak for one minute. He attacked the audience clapping for the ‘murderers of children’ and replied to Peres loudly: "you are not the owner of the right. Your argument is weak. So, you chose to raise your voice in undiplomatic manner. But the reality remains that Hamas shot primitive rockets which most of them fell in open regions. You bombarded houses and destroyed them over the heads of its families including children and women. It was possible reaching peace. You chose the war way. You Mr. President Murderer of children"(Erdogan: 2009). Here, the chair requested Erdogan to stop his speech. Prime Minister Erdogan then stood up and left the hall and said that he will not be back to Davos once again.

For the Muslim world, it was the first time that a Muslim leader challenges an Israeli president with this sharpness and bravery. Of course, Erdogan's behavior was praised by all the Arab peoples and also Hamas' leaders praised Erdogan for this “honorable situation” (El Sergany: 2012).

Al-Azhar scholars in Egypt praised the reaction of the Turkish Prime Minister Ragab Tayeb Erdogan in a statement issued where Erdogan was described as being one of the greatest leaders in the Muslim world. They addressed him by saying: "by your honorable situations for humanity, you were the best successor for the best predecessor. God made you to your nation as the
aspirated hope and initiative for near happiness. Your actions uttered with the righteous after the tongues of the preachers and jurisprudents lost this rightness…”(Al Sergany: 2012)

Israeli thinkers were astonishment by the Turkish foreign policy towards Israel under the rule of the AK party. Roun Ben Yashay, one of the prominent Zionist analysts said that "the bitter reality is that we have to confess that Turkey at the present stopped to be a trustful secure strategic partner to Israel. It is a reality which represents actual harm for the national security of Israel"(today’s Zaman: 2010).

Also The Hebrew copy of Yadiout Ahrounot newspaper published an essay written by Professor Dorour Zaify – chairman of the Middle East studies at Ben Gorioun University, in which he said that Turkey initiated a strategy of returning and investing in its distinguished relations with the Arab world and its depth in region. The intensive anger that spread among the Turkish people because of the Israeli aggression on Gaza war was not pushing for reducing the level of the relations with Israel to the farthest extent. Hence, the actions of Prime Minister Erdogan and the AKP government are done for paving the way for the "new Ottomans"(ynet news: 2012). In other words, Turkish leaders made use of the Gaza war and took a hardline position in the Arab Israeli conflict in order to raise to raise Turkey’s popularity in the Middle East, appear as the champion of the Muslim causes and pave the way for Turkey becoming a superpower in the Middle East.

*The Israeli Aggression on the Freedom Flotilla*

The freedom Flotilla is collection of eight ships led by a component consists of the European campaign, Gaza free movement and human succor in Turkey in addition to two Greek and Swedish campaigns. The flotilla carries 650 persons from more than forty states including 44, European and Arab personalities. On the board of its ships, it carries about ten thousand tons of
humanitarian aid and assistances directed to Gaza inhabitants including six thousand tons of steel and two thousand tons of cement in addition to electrical generators, medical devices, medicine and food.

On Monday 31 May 2010 Israel launched their Armed Forces on the civil freedom flotilla. Victims of this attack reached 19 persons were killed, in addition to hundreds of the prisoners; most of them are Turkish because Israelis directed their first attack to the Turkish ship "Mavi Marmara" that led the flotilla.

Immediately after the attacks, Erdogan started warning Israel from provoking Turkey since its aggression is powerful as its friendship. Then, he canceled three military maneuvers with Israel and a football match for the team of his state with an Israeli team. He withdrew the Turkish ambassador from Tel Aviv and he called the international and regional organizations for meeting in Ankara in order to research this crime in addition to his insistence upon continuing presenting all what he can including support for the Palestinian issue where he told his Palestinian counterpart Ismail Hania during a telephone call after the attacks saying: "we will still be supporting you whatever the price even if we remain alone" (Erdogan: 2010).

The United Nations mandated an inquiry report into the raid. The report was released in labeling Israel’s blockage of Gaza as ‘legal’. Turkey announced a series of measures against Israel. These measures were suspending bilateral military agreements and downgrading Turkish Israeli diplomatic ties to the level of second secretary. Now Turkey insists that it will not normalize relation with Israel unless Israel refrains from violent acts against the Palestinian people.

The investigation into the events on the Turkish-flagged ship *Mavi Marmara* was headed by Sir Geoffrey Palmer, a former prime minister of New Zealand, aided by Alvaro Uribe, the former Colombian president, along with a representative each from Israel and Turkey. their report said
that the “six-vessel flotilla acted recklessly in attempting to breach the naval blockade set up by Israel around Gaza”(Al Jazeera:2011). Also called for Israel to make "an appropriate statement of regret for the raid and pay compensation to the families of the dead as well as to injured victims”(Al Jazeera:2011). The Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davotuglo, told the Hurriyet daily: "If Israel does not apologise and does not declare a willingness to financially compensate the families of the dead and those injured, Turkey will put in place certain sanctions."(Hurriyet daily news: 2011). Also Prime Minister Erdogan said on Tuesday 7th of September 2011 that “Ankara is totally suspending military, defense industry and trade relations with Israel” (Hurriyet Daily: 2011). However, Turkish officials clarified that Erdogan was referring to defense trade ties not all economic ties, as the Turkish Minister of Economy Zafer Caglayan said that “Turkey would do nothing ‘so far’ to change its economic ties with Israel”(Hurriyet Daily: 2011). In fact this shows the hesitancy of Turkish foreign policy makers regarding Israel. Erdogan performs these actions in spite of knowing the powerful relations that connects Israel and the Turkish military establishments. Maybe he did not adopt a decision of cutting the relations completely with Israel in spite of knowing that such this action will be met with approval and welcome of the whole Turkish people and all of the Arab and Islamic peoples and would raise Turkey’s power an influence in the Middle East. But he appreciates that such a decision at that time may push the army to a coup d’état or would make Turkey lose an important economic partner in the region.

Furthermore, when several huge fires waged in El-Karmal mountain region near Haifa city in the occupied Palestinian lands in December 2010, Erdogan reacted to this accident by sending two water shells for participating in fire extinguishing which astonished the world. Such behaviors increased the size of love and appreciation to the Muslim leader Ragab Tayeb Erdogan in the
souls of the peoples of the world as a whole. Even Ismail Hania, president of the leading "elected" Palestinian government in Hamas named his grandson who was born on 1 August 2010 "Erdogan" as loyalty to the Turkish Prime Minister for his situations and of all the Turkish people towards Palestine in general and Gaza Strip in particular.
Conclusion

Nowadays Turkey is experiencing a silent revolution which contains three fundamental interrelated transformations that led to a new foreign policy regarding the Middle East. These transformations are first, religious transformation, which could be seen in the de-privatization of Islam, as Islamic values and ideas are contemporized. Second, economic transformation as a result of the introduction of market conditions, which led to the rise of a new entrepreneurial class. Third, political transformation, which could be seen in democratization of the state and strengthening of civil society. These transformations pressured Turkey to revisit its Middle East foreign policy and look for new geostrategic horizons and opportunities in the region. Also the AKP leadership has a strong belief that the Ottoman past holds a key to the future of Turkey. They wanted to make use of the wealth that is coming from their historical legacy. Therefore, the Turkish foreign policy of identification with the West and diplomatic distance from the Middle East gradually changed to improving and undoing the damage inflicted on its relations with the Arab world and became more involved in the Middle East.

A new generation of diplomats, business men and even television stars are all establishing connections in the Middle East, in order to raise Turkey’s profile and soft power in the region. Turkey’s new policy of intensive involvement in the Middle East and the charismatic appeal of its leaders to the Muslim nation under the rule of the AKP made Turkey able to dig for itself a new position of a superpower in the region, a new position that made the country an important player that the Middle East and the whole world need to take into account.

However, this foreign policy transformation recently met a number of implications. Recent Arab uprising and new developments in the occupied Palestinian territories have forced Turkey to
modify its foreign policy in order to extend its influence in the Middle East. Since Turkey began to engage with the Middle East, its foreign policy was never based on ties with the Arab people. It was rather based on ties with regimes; regimes that are being overthrown because of their willingness to act with ruthlessness to suppress citizens demanding their rights. Today, after the Arab spring and the new wave of democratization that is sweeping the Arab world, Turkey seeks to cement ties with the Arab people and not the regimes. It does this through taking an uncompromising position in the Arab–Israeli conflict, in order to gain strong credibility in the Arab public opinion. This could be seen in, the Turkish Israeli relations starting to deteriorate dramatically till it reached its highest point in 2011 when Turkey dismissed the Israeli ambassador in Ankara. This made Turkey gain huge influence in the region. Moreover, someone like Prime Minister Erdogan able to speak to the Muslim Nation, and thus makes Turkey appear as the champion of the Islamic causes and this provides a huge opportunity for Turkey to become a superpower in the Middle East.

At the same time, during this time of instability and revolutions in the region, there has not yet emerged an Arab leader that has the pull or credibility in public opinion to take the lead in the Middle Eastern and Muslim causes, which means there is a power vacuum in the region. This power vacuum creates an opportunity for Turkey to become a regional power in the Middle East. Therefore, Turkey makes use of the power vacuum in the region to re-enter Arab consciousness, as it seeks to make Arabs look to Turkey as a cultural model. Turkey offers elements for inspiration for its neighbors to be emulated as a model, in order to have great influence in the region and thus become a regional power and reshape the Middle East in its own image.

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Regarding future predictions for Turkish regional power in the Middle East, deterioration in the Israeli-Turkish relations is expected. Turkish-Israeli relations had been strained since May 2010 after the flotilla incident. After the UN- mandated inquiry report into the raid was released, labeling Israel’s blockage of Gaza as ‘legal’, Turkey announced a series of measures against Israel. These measures were suspending bilateral military agreements and downgrading Turkish Israeli diplomatic ties to the level of second secretary.

Now Turkey insists that it will not normalize relation with Israel unless Israel refrains from violent acts against the Palestinian people. After cutting its ties with Israel, Turkey started to enjoy a huge influence and position in the Middle East and the Arab public views Erdogan as a role model for all Muslim heads of states. Therefore, Turkey might fear a setback in the position it acquired in the Middle East if it normalized relations with Israel. However, Turkey could normalize its relations with Israel under one condition – if the Turks are the ones who established the terms of this normalization. In fact this would make Turkey the biggest power in the Middle East. For long time ago the Arab-Israeli card has helped many states and heads of states to achieve tremendous popularity in the region. For example Gamal Abdel Nasser and Saddam Hussein built huge popularity through taking a hardline position in the Arab-Israeli conflict, but none of them were able to dictate their terms on Israel. Therefore, if Turkey was able to reach normalization with Israel under Turkish terms, this would promote it to the level of a regional superpower.

At the same time, in order to become a superpower in the region Turkey has to bear in mind that it will meet competition from some Middle Eastern states as Egypt and Iran. It would be more beneficial for Turkey to make use of powers as Egypt and Iran and form an axis of power instead of competing for regional leadership. Although many argue that Turkey is not motivated to
establish a strong Turkish, Egyptian and Iranian axis because of Turkey’s opposition to Iranian nuclear weapons proliferation; reflected in its mediation efforts between Iran and the US. Nevertheless, an alliance between Tehran, Ankara and Cairo would increase Turkey’s strength as a regional actor. These three countries are trying to play a prominent role in political, cultural and economic advances in the Middle East, as well as spearheading regional developments. At the same time, these three countries have huge underground resources, geopolitical positions and abundant manpower. Iran has just approved a 20 years Vision Plan in order to rank the first in the Middle East by 2025 in terms of development indices. The Turkish Economy grew by 11% in 2011, faster than China or any other developing country. It recorded the third highest growth rate in the G20 economies. Turkey and Egypt have better access to modern technology than Iran. Also once Egypt establishes a new government; it could create a positive environment for investment and attract a lot of foreign investment. In the view of these facts, Even if this Turkish-Iranian-Egyptian axis could be seen as temporary and limited because of the nuclear proliferation issue stated before, but it would pave further expansion for economic, security and political relations among these three countries away from western influences in the region. Therefore, if these three countries allied and made use of their huge potentials, this would certainly help them acquire a powerful position in the region and in the world.
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