

## The Impact of Changing Islamic Identity on Turkey's New Foreign Policy

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**Abstract :** *Much praise and calumny has been heaped on the new Turkish Foreign Policy (TFP) for its peculiar record in the last decade. In particular, probing into whether Turkey drifts from the West have recently become something of a cottage industry. Systematic studies analyzing complexities and nuances of the new TFP are scarce. Instead, both the champions and critics of the new TFP often cloak normative and empirical debate in hastily designed conceptual edifice, which not only tend to simplify and misconstrue the whole debate on what is at stake in Turkey's changing identity and foreign policy, but also expose deep misperceptions and confusions rather than scholarly communication. This article seeks to offer an analysis of Turkey's new foreign policy orientations in relation to its identity-changes affect policies and positions of Turkey in world politics. It first provides a general overview of the approach developed by the founding figure of the new TFP, Ahmet Davutoğlu. Secondly, it identifies theoretical underpinnings of the new TFP with a view to evaluating the role of its religious and cultural identity. Then, a selection of discussions both from the advocates and critics with regard to empirical cases including the Iraq and Israeli conundrums are put under scrutiny. Thirdly, the much-hyped debate as to whether the new TFP drifts from the West and its ideals are put into context order to provide a more balanced view of what is at issue in Turkey's changing foreign policy orientations.*

**Keywords :** Turkish Foreign Policy, Ahmet Davutoğlu, Strategic Depth, Islam, Middle East, Shift of Axis

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## Introduction

Turkey has a unique state identity as a Muslim-populated state with a long-lived Western alliance. Emerging out of the Ottoman Empire, which for centuries exercised not only political, but also religious authority over its territories and peoples, the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, was marked by the abolishment of the caliphate and the formal disablement of Islam as the state religion. In addition to domestic reforms, Turkey's Western commitment was underlined internationally as a NATO ally as well as by its relations with Israel, and membership in various European organizations. Often labeled as a "cultural revolution", these moves represented an attempt for a "civilizational shift" according to American political theorist Samuel Huntington, and to him this has been unsuccessful in Turkey's case.<sup>1</sup> Since the redefinition of a state identity also required the receptiveness of the host civilization, he claims that, not being truly embraced by the Western camp, Turkey remained a torn country internally as well as externally. Carley describes this situation as an "identity crisis, or at least an identity dilemma" with regard to Turkey's location and seemingly paradoxical aspirations: The contradictions were manifold as Turks are only loosely part of the Middle East and neither ethnically nor linguistically Arab, whereas at the same time, its attempts to fit in with the West have been complicated by Western ambivalence toward Islam. This latter observation seems to be even truer since the incidents of 9/11.<sup>2</sup>

Since the elections in 2002, the AK Party (Justice and Development Party, JDP hereafter) with its main figures Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Abdullah Gül has been forming a single-party government in Turkey. It actually is a moderate offspring of the Welfare Party founded by Necmettin Erbakan, the grand seigneur of Turkish Political Islam. It is interestingly under this JDP government that developments in Turkey have frequently been analyzed with reference to what is named as "Europeanization". The latter, in simple terms, means the process of a third country converging with EU-wide economic, political and social norms, including democratization. Such transformation of Turkish domestic as well as foreign policies has sometimes been seen as a paradox, particularly when remembering the JDP's openings to Muslim-conservative elements both domestically and internationally. To Dietrich Jung, democratization and certain re-Islamization of Turkish society are not necessarily mutually exclusive processes.<sup>3</sup> The economic as well as partly political liberalization under former Prime Minister and later President Turgut Özal gave rise to the success of the religiously conservative, nevertheless economically globalist businessmen now known as the "Anatolian tigers" or recently also "Islamic Calvinists"<sup>4</sup>, which represent a great share of the JDP's electorate.

## The Doctrine of Strategic Depth and the Davutoğlu Effect in Foreign Policy

Due to economic and democratic progress in recent years, many scholars observe an increasing regional standing of Turkey, combined with the credibility and declared will of the JDP government under PM Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to pursue a foreign policy of “Strategic Depth”. Titled after his book, Ahmet Davutoğlu understands the “strategic depth” of Turkey to imply its activist engagement in the neighborhood, especially Muslim-populated former Ottoman regions, and as Erdoğan’s chief advisor on foreign policy and since 2009 Foreign Minister, he has been decisively influencing Turkey’s external relations with this doctrine. A diligent student of foreign policy and later a champion of the new TFP is Bülent Aras. He avers that “more than an advisor, Davutoğlu is the intellectual architect of Turkey’s new foreign policy”.<sup>5</sup> The “construction plan” for his foreign policy architecture has been provided by Davutoğlu’s book, whose core idea is that Turkey’s value in international relations stems from its rich history and geostrategic location. Situated in the midst of several important regions and having cultural ties with the Balkans, the Middle East, and Central Asia, Davutoğlu regards Turkey as well-suited to play an active geopolitical role.<sup>6</sup> As these ties mostly stem from Turkey’s past as an empire, a certain “neo-Ottomanism” is arguably implicit in the sense of revitalizing these often neglected ties in modern Turkish history. However, the term “neo-Ottomanism” implies imperialism, thus Davutoğlu and other JDP officials tend to avoid this term. According to Davutoğlu, in the aftermath of September 11, a redefinition of his country’s position was urgently needed and “Turkey’s new position has both an ideational and a geographical basis”. He further claims that Turkey has “multiple regional identities that cannot be reduced to one unified character”. By calling it a “central country”, he compares Turkey to Russia, Germany, Iran, and Egypt, which all have in common that they “cannot be explained geographically or culturally by associating it with one single region”. As for the implications of this status, Turkey shall be capable of maneuvering in several regions simultaneously and, in contrast to traditional Turkish foreign policy, “a central country with such an optimal geographic location cannot define itself in a defensive manner”.<sup>7</sup> As the Strategic Depth doctrine further suggests, by actively opening up to its former Ottoman regions, Turkey’s often one-sided attachment to the West shall also be counterbalanced by establishing multiple alliances, which would enhance Turkey’s freedom of action and increase its regional and global leverage. This flexible and all-around approach to external relations is what Davutoğlu likes to call Turkey’s “360 degree diplomacy”. Closely connected is the principle of “zero problems with the neighbors”, according to which Turkey tries to be on better terms with all the neighboring states and beyond, which implies opening up to states it formerly had uneasy relationships with.

Davutoğlu expects Turkey to intervene in global issues consistently using international platforms in order to make the most out of its potential and possibly even transform “from a central country to a global power”. The success of this

transformation, however, only depended on the government (unlike in earlier times), but has been a result of the performance of all actors involved in foreign policy, namely civil society, business organizations, and numerous other organizations, “all operating under the guidance of the new vision”.<sup>8</sup> Addressing the Foreign Affairs Committee in Parliament for the first time after he became foreign minister, Davutoğlu reportedly said “[d]raw a circle and put Turkey in the center. Anything that happens a thousand kilometers away from us concerns us.” According to Semih Idiz, this statement “fits with the grand vision that Davutoğlu has for Turkey as a major player, not just regionally but also globally”.<sup>9</sup> As Walker argues, traditional measures of Turkey’s national power tended to “overlook the cultural links fostered by a shared common history”, which are now the core elements of Strategic Depth policy.<sup>10</sup> In a similar vein, Davutoğlu argues that Turkey is the natural heir to the Ottoman Empire and therefore exhibits the potential to become a Muslim regional power. It is equally true that the regions in question are mostly Muslim-populated, especially the Middle East and the great parts of Central Asia. Considering an earlier article of Davutoğlu, he indeed appears to have always placed a great emphasis on this religious community: “This region is an integral part of the same civilization, namely the Islamic civilization”.<sup>11</sup> As an outspoken criticism of Samuel Huntington’s thesis, this article suggested that Islam has been exploited by the West as a civilizational difference to justify operations seeking control over geopolitical and economic potentialities of the Muslim world.

Such suspicions are sometimes seen as signs of what Murinson recently observed: “Ahmet Davutoğlu’s intellectual antagonism to the process of Westernization in Turkey and its philosophical critique found their expression in his reinvigorated neo-Ottomanism”.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, several Turkish academics also take critical stances *vis-à-vis* Davutoğlu’s concept ascertaining a connection between the history of the Ottoman Empire and Turkey’s enhanced understanding of the region as neo-Ottomanism despite the fact that these Muslim countries mostly became independent and therefore do not seem to await a new Turkish hegemon.<sup>13</sup> Common Ottoman history did not imply good memories and especially the Arab revolt contributing to the dissolution of the Empire shows that common religion apparently did not prove to be a sustainable factor for Muslim cohesion either (as provided by the Islamic concept of the “ummah” as the union of believers). Aras disagrees with these critics’ tendencies to present Davutoğlu as a neo-Ottoman, and their emphasis on most of Turkey’s newfound foreign policy activism in the former Ottoman territories. He claims that Turkish foreign policy in the neighboring regions does not assume a hegemonic role for Turkey, but rather cushions an inclusive and constructive approach for “building peace and security” based on the dynamics within these regions.<sup>14</sup> In this context, it can be argued that the well-known motto of Kemal Atatürk “Peace at Home, Peace in the World” could even be better conceived not as a changed principle but actualized one due to the new TFP, enjoying a diplomatically peace-activist notion rather than passive one.<sup>15</sup>

Aras concurs that Davutoğlu's policies represent continuity with Turkey's gradually developing activism since the end of the Cold War, but Davutoğlu also formulated a more comprehensive foreign policy vision and developed policy mechanisms to tackle the challenges of globalization in an era of "post-nation state". By utilizing the term "post-nation state", Aras underlines the importance of ideational ties such as religion, culture or history, which actually form the essence of the controversial notion of alleged "Ottomanism" within Davutoğlu's vision. But for Aras, such post-modern affinities are advantages in Turkey's regional contour and making boundaries *de facto* meaningless while respecting national sovereignty has created geopolitical imperatives to return to the backyard of the former Ottoman Empire. Aras further states that the "relationship between 'bordering and othering' lost its meaning after removing the strains of domestic threat perceptions in regional policy". He therefore claims that Turkey's relations with its eastern neighbors had been strained mostly because of its domestic problems such as political Islam and Kurdish separatism that were allegedly supported by Syria and Iran.<sup>16</sup> As these issues posed an immediate threat to Turkey's identity construction, these neighbors were "othered" in the sense that borders with them also symbolized an ideological wall. This novel geographical imagination shall at last put an end to the alienation of Turkey's neighboring countries, as negative images and prejudices pertaining to the Middle East are once overcome. In addition to Turkey's improved positive reception of the regional states and their socio-cultural attributes, there is also "a new recognition of Turkey's historical and cultural roots in the neighboring regions". Such ideational factors notwithstanding, Aras does not delimit his analysis only to the former factors but suggest that the new TFP also stems from the growing importance of economic interdependence, hence offering a rationalist explanation which can be combined with the observed rise of new influential social actors such as the aforementioned Anatolian tigers.<sup>17</sup>

As Larabee and Rabasa claim "Davutoğlu's book was seen as little more than the musings of an academic with a pro-Islamic background when it was published",<sup>18</sup> however, his elevation to the position of Erdoğan's chief foreign policy advisor gave him the opportunity to directly influence Turkish foreign policy at the highest level and his current position as the country's foreign minister even more so. Although Davutoğlu's theories are controversial and an exclusive focus on him might underestimate other important actors in the foreign policy making process, there is nonetheless a general consensus that Davutoğlu has been playing a very influential role in the reformulation of Turkish foreign policy since 2002.

### **Turkey's New Religious Identity and Foreign Policy**

Ali Bulaç from the daily *Zaman* points to a changing national consciousness in Turkey, a rediscovery of Ottoman-religious traditions that explained the massive

electoral successes of the JDP, he had this to say: “Ten centuries ago, Turkey embraced Islam and this opened a new chapter for the Turkish nation and the world [...] The victory of the JDP is the result not only of mismanagement, economic crisis, and graft, but also of the assault against national values.”<sup>19</sup> The religious identity of the new government was clear to have foreign policy implications at least in the sense that the JDP would address Middle Eastern issues: “The bloodbath in the Middle East causes a great deal of concern for the Turkish people, who have cultural and historic ties with the region [...] In this context, Turkey will continue to support efforts to bring peace to the region.”<sup>20</sup> However, for Rabasa and Larabee the new government’s greater focus on the Middle East does not reflect an “Islamization of Turkish foreign policy, as some observers fear”, even though they admit that “there are certainly elements within the JDP whose foreign policy views are religiously motivated”.<sup>21</sup> Robins notes that “old school Kemalism would have avoided activism in the Middle East”, but “this approach had been more difficult to sustain since the end of the Cold War, and especially since 9/11. Trans-national phenomena, like the spread of radical Islamism and terrorism [...] have forced Ankara to take the Middle East more seriously”.<sup>22</sup>

In light of above discussion, a constructivist approach should start not by displaying a deterministic picture of Turkey being “forced” back into the Middle Eastern spheres of influence. It should rather emphasize that the new government’s emphasis on the Middle East has been an identity-turn that is in large part due to a changing mindset of the ruling political class in general and state elites in particular. Turkey’s interests have in turn been redefined rather than the other way around. This is why the US observers note the fact, “since coming to power in 2002, Turkey’s ruling Justice and Development Party, or JDP, has made a strategic choice to reintegrate Turkey into the regional Arab political system”.<sup>23</sup> It is also important to highlight the domestic political capital this new identity can bring about, as the Middle East, precisely the Muslim and Arab world, seems to offer a very good opportunity to JDP to forge international relations which could strengthen its internal position.<sup>24</sup> This is also a mutually constitutive process of identity-building: “Important sections of the Arab world, due to their common Muslim faith, represent a logical outlet of solidarity to Turkey. This group of states qualifies as a natural ally to the JDP, a political party strongly identified as (pro-) Islamic”.<sup>25</sup> Hence, in line with Wendtian constructivist reasoning, we assume that a structural change in relations with the Middle East and also other regions occurred because political elites of Turkey redefined “who they are and what they want”.<sup>26</sup> Taking Ahmet Davutoğlu’s Strategic Depth doctrine as a blue-print for the JDP’s foreign policy, there is much reason to assume that Turkey’s recent engagement in the Middle East has not been an inevitable result of the post-Cold war “anarchy”, but to a large extent the outcome of its identity politics. This view does not imply that the foreign policy of the JDP would be exclusively based on ideational undertakings, or that there are more to ideational than other material and structural realities, nor does it suggest there should be a combination of both material and ideational factors, as some seem to hold. Instead, it argues that material or power

politics have first to be socially and discursively mediated. Specific policy outcomes would follow after such a renegotiation of identity. More case studies of Turkish external engagement in the region will follow and enable an empirical analysis in relation to the theoretical observations.

Couched in such a framework, it makes more sense to see a rising Turkish assertiveness such that the JDP officials can repeatedly call for reforms throughout the Islamic world, such as the unusual way in which then Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül addressed the Islamic Conference Organization (OIC) during a summit in Tehran in May 2003, when he stressed the need for Muslim countries to democratize and pay greater attention to human and women's rights. Turkey's increased standing in the OIC also surfaced in June 2004 when for the first time in the history of this organization, a Turkish academic became the Secretary General, namely Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu. The fact that İhsanoğlu was not appointed like his predecessors, but for the first time elected, presents another novelty in the OIC and adds to the significance of his mandate. This election carried a symbolic importance too, highlighting Turkey's growing self-confidence in taking on the role of trustworthy advocate of democratic practices in the Islamic world.<sup>27</sup>

This view is not shared by all. Although Robins concedes that this OIC strategy can be justified in terms of Turkish foreign policy interests, namely to maximize the opportunities at one's disposal, Turkey's activities in this religion-based organization, like in the headscarf issue, shows that the JDP is "less than entirely secular".<sup>28</sup> A vocal critic Soner Çağaptay from the Washington Institute for Near East Policy sees another Turkey emerging. He is skeptical about the JDP's strategy of orienting its foreign policy towards its Muslim neighbors, as it may have serious long-term consequences: "If the Turks think of themselves as Muslims first in the foreign-policy arena, then one day they will think of themselves as Muslims first in the domestic one".<sup>29</sup> Such assertions or fears appear exaggerated when contrasted with Gül's recurrent statements, when he claimed that "Turkey is in a position to be an intermediary that can promote universal values shared with the West, such as democracy, human rights, the supremacy of the law and a market economy in the region."<sup>30</sup> The explicit reference to common values with the Western world actually already rules out that policies will be based on Muslim bonds only. For Kirişci, Gül's speech might have been "the first occasion where Turkey has seriously and credibly attempted to live up to the frequent calls to become a model for other Muslim countries".<sup>31</sup> In addition, after İhsanoğlu's election in June 2004, the same OIC summit adopted the Turkish-sponsored Istanbul Declaration which called for a move towards greater democracy in the Islamic world. It is also possible to consider İhsanoğlu's recent post as highlighting "Turkey's growing self-confidence in taking on the role of trustworthy advocate of democratic practices in the Islamic world", which should actually add to Turkey's European aspirations rather than decreasing them. Furthermore, Turkey also connected Europe and the Islamic world by hosting a joint forum of the OIC and the EU at the level of foreign ministers in Istanbul in February 2002, titled "Civilisation and Harmony: the Political Dimension". This

forum that provided an important opportunity to express these political leaders' common rejection of the "clash of civilizations" thesis,<sup>32</sup> as the foreign ministers underlined that Islam could not be associated with terrorism, and the EU Ministers additionally expressed that the West did not oppose to Islam. These events all send signals about the idea/l that Turkey's relations with East and West should be complementary but not rival.

## Middle Eastern Involvement

### *Iraq*

After the JDP assumed power in 2002, the first foreign policy test for the new government turned out to be the Iraq crisis. Within the course of the "war on terrorism" launched by the United States as a result of the attacks of September 11, 2001, Iraq was the second country in target after Afghanistan, being considered as state sponsors of international terrorism, and Iraq was moreover suspected to possess weapons of mass destruction. As NATO allies, the US expected Turkey to support the international coalition against Saddam Hussein, in particular allowing American troops to enter Iraq from Turkish soil. For Turkey, however, involvement in a new war on Iraq awakened bad memories from the 1991 Gulf War, which had placed a heavy economic burden on Turkey and created a *de facto* Kurdish entity in Turkey's southwest. Despite these worries, the JDP government negotiated with the US and in March 2003, the new government requested the Turkish parliament's permission to invite US ground troops to base themselves in Turkey. But, the Turkish National Assembly, including nearly a hundred JDP deputies, rejected the draft resolution.

Despite the fact that this vote led to confusion and unpredictability in Turkish foreign policy, many observers actually lauded Turkey's refusal to cooperate with its long-time ally USA as a courageous move, paving way for a more consolidated democracy. It is to be stressed that with their voting behavior, the parliamentarians proved a high responsiveness to Turkish public opinion, which was overwhelmingly against the war on Iraq and especially against bandwagoning. The effect of the parliament's decision for the collective soul-searching was such that the Turkish people were then able to feel proud about their country after humiliating reports by the international media: "Turkey proved with this voting that it is not a 'banana republic' and deserves respect as any respectful member of the world community".<sup>33</sup> As Robins had to admit, "even in a super elite-oriented country like Turkey, public opinion can count for something, even in the arena of foreign policy-making",<sup>34</sup> which is commonly considered as an area requiring quick decisions carried out by the executive. The JDP government had initially been hesitant to support the Iraq invasion, with Erdoğan telling *the Associated Press* in November 2002 that his party was against the war.<sup>35</sup> The JDP did always rally the flag around the motto that "Muslims would not approve a war against Muslims, which actually

is a direct command by the Holy Quran".<sup>36</sup> When the JDP leadership however had to break with its former ideology by surrendering to American pressure and introducing the troops deployment motion in the parliament, large swaths of the Turkish public protested. Among them, Islamist demonstrators were especially vocal in their criticism of the JDP, their slogans included "Don't fear the USA, fear Allah", "Muslims are brothers", "collaborationist JDP", "Don't bargain on our brothers' blood" to "Muslims don't submit to injustice".<sup>37</sup> In an interview appeared in *Turkish Daily News (TDN)*, former secular diplomat Yüksel Söylemez seemed to have missed the relevance of such protests in foreign policy making when he complained that such people were still believing in the "archaic" Islamic dictum of "*Dar-al sulh*" (The House of Reconciliation) as opposed to "*Dar-al harb*" (The House of War), implying in his view, a fixed division of Muslims against the rest, he had this to say: "To a secular mind, those people who still adhere to this doctrine are way behind the times". Söylemez then clarified that by rejecting the deployment motion, Turkey appeared to be in this religious division by accident rather than by design.<sup>38</sup> One should also note that with its critical attitude towards the Iraq invasion, Turkey sided not only with Muslim countries but to a great extent also with Europe. The governments and peoples of Europe largely disapproved of the American operations, most prominently in France and Germany. Therefore, Turkey's attitude could equally be taken as a proof of Turkey's Europeanization in the sense that it matched the collective European opinion. Accordingly, this event also shattered the suspicions of those European leaders that feared from Turkey, as an EU member, would be a "Trojan horse" for the United States and American interests, especially with regard to an evolving European security and defense policy that aspired to emancipate from NATO, as Idiz put "Well, that is a pretty funny Trojan horse if it lets down its master in the most critical moment". To paraphrase US Defence Minister Rumsfeld's famous words on the split within the European Union's governments as regards the Iraq invasion, Turkey showed to be part of rather the "old" than of the "new" Europe.<sup>39</sup>

## **Syria**

Syria is another interesting topic of Turkish foreign policy. The former has been frequently cited as the "key example" of Turkey's improved relations and active engagement with the Middle East. In 1998 Turkey had almost gone to war with Syria over Damascus' active patronage of the PKK and sheltering of its leader Abdullah Öcalan. After the latter was expelled from Syria and later imprisoned in Istanbul, Turkish-Syrian relations have started to improve tremendously, as manifested in the conclusion of the Adana agreement in 1998. Robins comes up with a plausible explanation for such behavior: "Having worked so hard to transform relations with Syria, Turkey is clearly loathed to jeopardize the relationship: the Kemalist state for reasons of security; the post Islamist AKP [JDP] for more complex, constructivist reasons of identity dynamics."<sup>40</sup> Hence, there appears to be a distinction between

ideational motivations of the JDP and rationalist reasons of the secular governments, the latter actually having initiated the Turkish-Syrian rapprochement before the JDP came to power. This helps to understand the frequently heard statement made by observers of Turkish foreign policy, that it has not only been Erdoğan's new party that desired "zero problems with the neighbors".<sup>41</sup>

This bilateral deepening of ties, through high level visits and increasing commercial exchanges, was relatively uncontroversial until the assassination of the former Lebanese Prime Minister, Rafik Hariri, in February 2005. This tragic incident was widely assumed, especially in Western circles, to be of Syrian responsibility. Turkey remained cautious and distanced itself from the simmering tension between the United States and Syria as well as Iran in the aftermath of the mysterious attack and the American calls for a withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon. However, when the ongoing recent crisis in Syria broke out in the context of the Arab Spring, the JDP government rose to the leadership position to criticize Assad in his handling of the anti-government protests.

Despite the existence of non-ideological patterns in Turkish foreign policy, the importance of personal relations of JDP members with the Middle Eastern states should not be overlooked. Turkey's increased attraction in the Middle East has also to do with "Davutoğlu's coherent vision" as regards Turkish Middle East policy, which is missing in other domestic political parties. Although Soli Özel emphasizes the governmental continuity and the structural reasons for Turkey to turn to the Middle East, he likewise concedes that with its pursuit of a vision in the Middle East, the JDP added the impact of agency to the continuities.<sup>42</sup> This would be so, in Keyman's words, because of the JDP's tendency to think of foreign policy identity in "culturalist" terms as they appear to focus more, sometimes exclusively, on Turkey's identity as an alternative to the clash of civilizations.<sup>43</sup> Keyman draws attention to culture as a very important ingredient of Turkey's soft power. So, while he also urges not to obliterate more rationalist factors such as economy, geopolitics or security, he finds that the Turkish example of a coexistence of Islam and modernity as well as secularism is very important, for, it manifests in Turkey's ability to be able to speak at the same time to different regional and global actors, as such Turkey appears as the only country that can play "this double role", that is, having a double identity being both European and Middle Eastern.<sup>44</sup> It has to be noted, though that Keyman's classification of Turkey's foreign policy as "culturalist" does not necessarily signify "Islamism" and therefore not implying an exclusively Eastern, but rather a unique identity of Turkey belonging to both East and West. This perspective challenges the clear-cut classifications of Huntington. In any case, both Keyman's culturalist approach as well as others' argument of a Turkish yearning for recognition are both somewhat sociological and therefore also constructivist explanations, which have in common that Turkey depends on an interaction with other states and forms its role in the world accordingly.

There is a general notion that since 2002, the JDP has been looking for opportunities to get involved in the Middle East, according to a new notion in Ankara that Turkey can be an “honest broker” in the region. However, Turkish official Zeynep Damla Gürel, a former Republican People's Party (RPP, *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP) parliamentarian and now an advisor to JDP's President Gül, dismisses such a notion that Turkey became a mediator because of its own insistence: “It's not easy to be a mediator between Israel and Syria [...] Actually they convinced us to do that and we waited until the last moment to feel their sincerity. Only then we accepted this role”. Like Keyman, she “cannot see any other country for the time being that might be a better mediator than Turkey”, as it understands both cultures.<sup>45</sup> This concrete case of Turkish mediation was the indirect talks between the Syrians and Israelis proceeding in Istanbul since April 2008. As for the expectations of those involved, Syria mainly hoped for restoration of the Golan Heights which had been occupied by Israel since 1967 and general rapprochement with the Western world. The Israelis desired a peace agreement with Syria, because they realized that this would be more than just a deal on property, but change the whole balance of power in the entire Middle East, positively affecting Israel's conflict with Hamas, Hizbullah, and Iran. Concerning the stakes for mediator Turkey, Syrian publisher Sami Moubayed's explanation sounds like the talk of a Turkish wish for diplomatic prestige: “If the talks succeeded, Turkey would forever be remembered and hailed as the nation to bring peace to the Syrian-Israeli front”.<sup>46</sup>

### *Israel*

According to Robins, “relations with Israel have been a barometer of the Islamist-Kemalist power balance in Turkey”.<sup>47</sup> Due to this ideological scale that is tied to the Arab-Israeli conflict as expressed by Robin's metaphor of a “barometer”, it seems crucial to assess relevant developments. Most significantly, in 1997, Islamist Prime Minister Erbakan from now defunct Welfare Party was forced by the Kemalist establishment, namely by the Turkish Armed Forces, to sign important agreements with Israel in the sector of military cooperation despite the fact that it was him and his followers who had harshly criticized Israel before. Earlier in the 2000s, Turkish-Israeli relations, while still maintained at an elite level, somewhat cooled in general terms. Contrary to Erbakan's earlier position, then Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül stated that the JDP does not just want to use Turkey's good relations with both parties to promote a settlement, but that any solution must additionally do justice to the Palestinians' rights. On different occasions, JDP officials have also been openly critical of Israeli policy in the West Bank and Gaza, such as Prime Minister Erdoğan who in January 2004 called the disproportionate use of violence by Israeli soldiers against Palestinians as “state terror”.

Ever since December 2008, Turkey's mediation efforts have been overshadowed by the sudden Israeli military operations in Gaza that led to over a thousand deaths, among them many civilians. The Israeli raids, which intended

to force Hamas militants to stop firing rockets at southern Israeli towns, started only four days after Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's visited Ankara. During Olmert's visit to Turkey both Erdoğan and President Abdullah Gül had urged him to lift the blockade imposed on the Gaza Strip. They also made progress on the Israeli-Syrian peace talks. But the sudden attack on Gaza led Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan to express his deep disappointment over the Israeli operations, which he called the crimes against humanity. Erdoğan further revealed that he had planned to call Olmert concerning the negotiations with Syria but decided against doing so: "I will not call because it is also disrespectful to us. [...] While we have been exerting these efforts, in Palestine, this act against the populace in Gaza, who have already been in a type of open-air prison, is a blow to peace". The same article cites former Foreign Minister Ali Babacan who announced that Turkey cancelled the telephone diplomacy between Syria and Israel because "during this process, while there is war on one side, there cannot be peace talks on the other side on a different line".<sup>48</sup> The *Jerusalem Post* also recognized the uneasiness Israel caused for the Turkish government by putting it dramatically in the following terms: "Israel launched its operation mere hours after Olmert's departure, Erdoğan was accused by members of his Islamist coalition of 'conspiring with the Zionists to betray the Palestinians'".<sup>49</sup>

More recently, Turkish relations to Israel worsened even more when in October 2009, Israel was told by Ankara that it is no longer invited to a NATO joint military exercise scheduled for that month. When asked about the issue, foreign minister Ahmet Davutoğlu told CNN television: "We hope the situation in Gaza will be improved, that the situation will be back to the diplomatic track. [...] But in the existing situation, of course, we are criticizing this approach, [the] Israeli approach."<sup>50</sup> His position confirmed assumptions that this decision was indeed political, which an earlier statement of the Turkish Foreign Ministry had denied. *Today's Zaman* even titled that "Turkey sets 'Gaza condition' for military ties with Israel".<sup>51</sup> In this article, Davutoğlu was cited as claiming that Turkey has never intended to get involved in unnecessary tension with any other country, but "while passing through such a sensitive period of time along which there is no effort for peace in the region, Turkey takes pains not to be involved in such a military spectacle. Nobody can expect us to do so while the tragedy in Gaza keeps going on".<sup>52</sup> Prime Minister Erdoğan was reported to have told the Al-Arabiya television that his government acted as a "spokesman for the conscience of the people" since the Turkish populace did not want Israel to participate in the exercise.<sup>53</sup> What makes the Turkish move against Israel especially noteworthy is that this time even the Turkish military apparently agreed to withdraw the invitation. They did so even though it was the security establishment who once initiated the training agreement with Israel, partly in order to contain the influence of political Islam in Turkey. It had been widely assumed that the armed forces would be too pragmatic to let quotidian politics influence the strategic alliance to Israel. But already in the immediate aftermath of Davos, there were actually statements of military officials in both countries suggesting that the dispute also shifted to the level of the security establishments. This also shows that the seemingly eternal dichotomy

of the Kemalists versus the Islamists in Turkey is being weakened and in this sense, also Robins' metaphor of the barometer with regard to Turkish-Israeli relations seems to lose its expressiveness.

A strong feeling of personal betrayal is also widely assumed to explain Erdoğan's emotional reaction during a Middle East debate at the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos at the end of January 2009. Erdoğan got infuriated by Israel's President Shimon Peres' behavior on stage, the latter defending his country's assault on Gaza and, with a raised voice and pointed finger, questioned what the Turkish prime minister would do if rockets were fired at Istanbul every night. Erdoğan fired back, addressing Peres with the following statement "when it comes to killing you know very well how to kill. I know very well how you killed children on the beaches", a reference to targeted assassinations that had taken place in Gaza in 2006.<sup>54</sup> Erdoğan further claimed that two former Israeli prime ministers had told they felt happy to enter Palestine in tanks and that he condemns such people who applaud cruelty. Interestingly, Erdoğan also made a direct linkage to Judaism, blaming the Israelis to have acted against the Torah's 6<sup>th</sup> Commandment which says "Thou Shalt Not Kill". When the WEF moderator would not let Erdoğan finish his speech, Turkish prime minister stormed off the stage, threatening that he might never return to Davos.<sup>55</sup> While Erdoğan's supporters tend to explain his behavior as a reaction to the Israeli "backstab" on Turkey as a mediator, more critical voices claimed that he also did this for domestic populist reasons. Populist domestically, as this behavior increased his votes from the general Turkish public regardless of their political affiliation. Similarly, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert explained Erdoğan's attitude at the WEF with the upcoming elections, but added the notion of Turkey's religious identity on a somewhat conciliatory sounding note: "Turkey also has its domestic political considerations-it's a Muslim country on the eve of elections".<sup>56</sup>

While President Peres was quoted to regret their dispute in Davos, Erdoğan stood by his remarks, but mitigated the religious dimension of the dispute which he had actually introduced himself by citing the Torah, clarifying that Turkey is not anti-semitist, but simply critical of Israeli policy. Erdoğan also once again emphasized the peace rhetoric by quoting Atatürk and pointing to Turkey's constructive efforts: "Our fundamental slogan is Peace at home, Peace in the world. This is why we mediated between Israel-Syria and Israel-Palestine; we played an active role in the solution of Lebanon conflict".<sup>57</sup> Erdoğan's words also seem to be a response to allegations that the JDP has been on the side of Israeli's aggressors, as claimed by the former diplomat Onur Öymen, who believed that Erdoğan "should have spoken in the name of the entire Palestinian people, not of Hamas. [...] Turkey has accepted Hamas as a terrorist organization also. This is a contradiction".<sup>58</sup> Critics also claimed that Turkey sided with the hardliners such as the Syria-Iran-Hamas camp and not with the moderates such as the Saudi-Jordan camp. As Meliha Altunışık stressed, Erdoğan's supporters disregard that "there are some Arab countries who disapprove of Hamas and are in a tacit alliance with Israel; relations with this so-called moderate camp are therefore also affected negatively by the Davos incident".<sup>59</sup> It is sometimes noted

that the widespread popularity of Erdoğan worries some Middle Eastern regimes as their population starts to condemn these governments for their pacifism in the face of the Gaza tragedy: “The Arab streets are referring to the Turkish prime minister either as the ‘Grandson of Abdülhamid II’ or a second ‘Gamal Abdel Naser,’ a new ‘Arab hero’. [...] Erdoğan is certainly winning the hearts of the Arab streets, but is Turkey losing the Arab capitals?”<sup>60</sup> The current developments in Northern Africa and neighboring regions, known as the “Arab Spring”, actually show that Arab capitals already got under pressure by their own populace, so there is no point in further asking whether Turkey is losing Cairo or Tunis.

Americans and Israelis had a strong tendency to assume automatically that all Europeans as “Westerners” must share their opinion in distancing themselves from the JDP. This tendency appears to be somewhat distorted. One of European politicians, Pierre Lellouche, a French parliamentarian of Sarkozy’s conservative party certainly not known for its transatlantic distance or its sympathy for Turkey, who stated: “There is no need to dramatize the situation. I’m sure Turkey will continue playing its EU cards”. He further described Turkey’s changing foreign policy—in line with our constructivist reasoning—notably by saying that “Turkey is becoming just itself, nothing else; it is a bridge between Europe and the Middle East”.<sup>61</sup> This reasoning resonates with Wendt’s following statement that appears to fit well with the Turkish situation as the heir of a Middle Eastern Empire and a self-proclaimed European republic at the same time: “The evolution of identities is a dialectic process of actual and possible selves, and there are no guarantees that the weight of the past will be overcome.”<sup>62</sup> By preconditioning that Turkey actually has a “self”, which it is recuperating by its ongoing rapprochement to the Middle East, Lellouche apparently shared the constructivist conviction that a state is a social actor and that its identity matters. So did the headlines of the day by extending the human features of Turkey and reiterating the identity in conflict: “Turkey’s heart is with Gaza but its mind looks westward”.<sup>63</sup>

### **Conclusion: Beyond ‘Shift of Axis’**

There have recently been various explanations of Turkey’s new posture in world politics, many of which share the common criticism that under Davutoğlu, Turkey is increasingly tilting towards the Eastern front, thus supposedly leaving aside the much revered Western foreign policy preferences and denominations<sup>64</sup>. The reasons for such interpretations differ according to the critic’s analysis, theoretical choice, ideological antagonism, or open acrimony. As Kardaş and Balcı stress, many pro-Israeli right-wing commentators interpret such a ‘drift’ as part of a creepy agenda of the JDP to Islamize Turkish society and the region,<sup>65</sup> others argue that such a drift was ‘inevitable’ thanks mainly to the shifts in the policies of great powers which resulted in a recalculation of Turkey’s security interests.<sup>66</sup> As this article hopes to have shown, rather than viewing such changes as part of a ‘break with the West’, it is more helpful to take into account ideational as well as contextual factors at play.

It is true that following the 9/11, Turkish foreign policy makers have increasingly got involved in the Middle Eastern affairs. However, it is too soon to write off Turkey's new orientations as either naïve diversions from a well-traversed pattern of foreign policy or as pragmatist re/calculations. To be sure, these choices have to do with a lot of unexpected developments pertaining to the regional and national events such as the loosening ties with the US after the fallout in Iraq-War in 2003, Turkey's waning membership prospect in the EU, the frustration following the UN report on the infamous Israeli Flotilla Attack in 2010, the lack of support from the West for the Arab revolutions, the recent French attempt to criminalize the 'Armenian-genocide denial' and the rows with domestic secular and nationalist forces. However, it is also vital to see that such events also reveal a country, which is more than being simply 'shaped and shoved' by international and regional power dynamics or other soft, ideational fine-tuning politicking. This article tried to show that in line with the constructivist International Relations theory, these events can be better characterized not as simply enforcing Turkey to reposition its power toolkit in the uncharted waters of world politics but more so as enabling Turkey to reformulate its identity and then its foreign policy in accordance with the changes both at regional and global levels. It is easy to bear witness to the fact that from the rows with Israel to the most recent dramatic u-turn in relations with Syria, to the culture wars with the domestic secular state elites, Turkey is at pains to demonstrate its new identity and showcase its newfound ethical stance in both domestic and world politics.<sup>67</sup>

All in all, this article argued that understanding the new TFP necessitates understanding the identity changes Turkey's ruling elites have gone through. Beyond controversial terms such as "bridge" or "model" or other fixed role conceptions, Turkey under the JDP government has managed to acquire a vital and powerful new position in the Muslim world. It helps a great deal that the current leadership's political background relates more easily to the expectations and identities of peoples of the Middle East in that the JDP's efforts for democratization along the EU accession process contributes additionally to the increased credibility of and sympathy for Turkey's new role in the Arab world. The common perception of Arabs used to be that Turkey has not been a "real" democracy and therefore not a good model to emulate. They also found that the army has played a too dominant role in enforcing the Kemalist system, which has been marked by authoritarian secularism that lacked a fuller understanding of societies and polities in the Middle East. As this judgment seems to hold ground increasingly, the JDP officials have gained an extra ability to directly advocate democratization, rule of law, and human rights agenda in the Muslim world which differs from previous governments. Indeed, because of its religious background, the JDP government can appeal more to a pious Middle East than do Western leaders when they call for more freedoms in the Muslim world, as these leaders will always be subject to alleged cultural imperialism. In conclusion and in regard to all such dramatic changes, there is much reason to assume that Turkey's recent engagement in the Middle East is here to stay. Its engagement has not been an inevitable result of external factors, but to a large extent, the outcome of

its identity politics. In a way, Turkey is signing its identity into existence thanks in part to such unforeseen regional and national implosions.

## NOTES

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- 13 Martina Warning, *Identity and Foreign Policy: Turkey's External Relations under Culturalist Influence*, (Saarbrücken: Verlag Dr. Müller [VDM], 2011), 99.
- 14 Bülent Aras, *op. cit.*
- 15 Martina Warning, *op. cit.*, 100.
- 16 Bülent Aras, *op. cit.*, 135.
- 17 It has to be noted that Turkish-Arab relations have remained in a sorry state ever since the demise of the Ottoman Empire because of historic reasons and mutual stereotypes. The already mentioned Arab revolt was perceived as an act of treason by the Turks, leading to the general stereotype of the unreliable, intriguing Arab. On the other side, there was the image of the "terrible Turk" among Arabs, according to which the Ottoman rulers had been violent imperialists. Furthermore, the Turks have been conceived as "bad Muslims", due to the fact that they adopted Islam much later than the Arabs, and especially ever since the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, in the course of which religious elements have been banned or at least suppressed.
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- 40 Philip Robins, op. cit.
- 41 Martina Warning, op. cit., 135.
- 42 Ibid., 135.
- 43 Ibid., 137; on the political uses of 'clash of civilizations' see Ali Balcı and Nebi Miş, op. cit.
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