

Soft Politics and Hard Choices

An Assessment
of Turkey's New Regional
Diplomacy

Rebecca Bryant
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PREFACE

At the time that this report is going to press, Turkey is erupting in protest against the policies and oratory of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, whom many youth, especially, perceive as micro-managing their lives while giving them little voice in the decisions being made. The eruption began with a small and peaceful protest over the destruction of a park in central Istanbul, which police attempted to quash with excessive force. Although the main television stations failed to report on this brutal suppression, it was broadcast through social media, and within a short time thousands of citizens flooded the streets of Istanbul and other cities in condemnation of the violence. In the nationwide mobilization that has resulted, peaceful protests continue in Taksim Square, the site of the original demonstration, while other parts of Istanbul, as well as cities such as Ankara, Izmir, Adana, Antakya, Eskisehir and Tunceli have experienced riots and serious violence. The results of this period of unrest will clearly have implications for Turkey's foreign policy, including damage to the "Turkish model" rhetoric discussed here.

The research and writing of this report took place some months before these demonstrations began, and so this report cannot take account of them. However, the analysis offered here, as well as concerns voiced by some participants in the PRIO-TESEV workshops, may offer the reader some tools for thinking about the effects of the ongoing demonstrations, and the government's response to them, in the neighborhood. Many of the protestors complain of the current conduct of Turkish politics and the rhetoric used; similarly, much of our analysis focuses on the importance of rhetoric and perception in Turkey's foreign politics. As a result, we believe that this report may shed some light on the foreign policy dimensions of the current crisis.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the past decade, Turkey has experienced unprecedented economic growth, accompanied by a new foreign policy strategy aimed at using the country's regional position to transform it into a global player. The new Turkish foreign policy has developed novel strategies for dealing with conflicts in the Western Balkans, Southeastern Europe, the South Caucasus, and the Middle East, and the country has become a figure of hope for many people in these regions. However, while Turkey has used its historical ties to develop these relations, the reception of Turkish aid, intervention, mediation, and soft power has been less than fully positive. The PRIO-TESEV project of which this report is a result aimed to examine regional perceptions of the new Turkish foreign policy through a series of workshops with regional experts. We were especially interested in perceptions of Turkey's new foreign policy in countries that have historical ties to Turkey because of the historically loaded rhetoric and strategies that shape the country's soft power politics in these areas. We asked experts to consider Turkey's new role in their own countries, how this role is tied to Turkey's domestic and regional interests, and how this role has altered local perceptions of Turkey. The report summarizes the discussions of these workshops and provides an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of Turkey's new policy for the region.

I. REPORT BACKGROUND

In a little more than a decade, the Republic of Turkey has gone from an introverted, divided country crippled by financial crisis to having one of the fastest-growing economies in the world and aspirations of global leadership. Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) has provided stability and vision, though in recent years the AKP's use of the judiciary has brought questions about the extent of Turkey's democratization. Today, Turkey is often touted as a model of democracy for the Muslim world, despite internal ups and downs in its own implementation of democracy most recently seen in the jailing of hundreds of journalists, academics, and students on charges of sedition.¹ The explosive growth of its economy, the improvement of infrastructure and institutions of governance, and the combination of secular governance and a religiously conservative governing party have all been enough to make the "Turkish model" so familiar to international relations that it now merits its own Wikipedia entry.² Following the Arab Spring, enthusiasm for the "Turkish model" was so great that it led the *Economist* to remark, 'From North Africa to the Gulf, the region seems to be going through a Turkish moment.'³

That "Turkish moment," if there was such a thing, seems to have passed, as heady hope in Arab countries has given way to the hard realities of building democracy. But then Turkish foreign policy over the past decade has hardly been on a steady, rising curve. Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's well-known policy of "zero problems" with Turkey's neighbors has been an adaptive one, but also one shaken by unexpected regional developments. Iran remains a nuclear

¹ The Organization for Security and Regional Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Representative on Freedom of the Media recently issued a report describing the OSCE's concerns regarding arrested journalists in Turkey. These included the length of prison sentences, potential double life sentences, long pre-trial detentions, solitary confinement, and the fact that they are often incarcerated in high security prisons, where they serve their time with dangerous criminals. It is also not uncommon to punish journalists with solitary confinement for extended time periods (see <http://www.osce.org/fom/89371>). According to the Turkish daily, *Hurriyet*, in August 2012, 2,824 students were being held in Turkish prisons, after having been arrested since 31 January 2012 on charges of "being a member of an armed terrorist organization" (<http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/number-of-students-in-jail-hits-2824.aspx?pageID=238&nid=27286>).

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turkish_model; however, Meliha Altunışık also points out that a "Turkish model" rhetoric has been in some fashion present since the beginning of the Turkish Republic, when 'unlike the other countries of the region, Turkey was born out of a determination not to accept the post-WWI settlement that was imposed on it by the winners of the war'. Moreover, its modernization efforts became models for countries such as Iran and Tunisia. See Meliha Altunışık, "The Possibilities and Limits of Turkey's Soft Power in the Middle East," *Insight Turkey* 10(2), 2008, p. 42.

³ <http://www.economist.com/node/21525408>

threat, relations with Armenia are still tense, Syria is embroiled in civil war, and relations with Israel are improved but remain shaky. Turkey has developed an active foreign policy, especially in countries with which it has historical links, but also in parts of subsaharan Africa.⁴ This has included a flurry of trade agreements, and in the late 2000s, before the start of the Arab Spring, the lifting of visa restrictions throughout the neighboring region. New markets have opened, spurring Turkey's economic growth, but Turkish aid investment has also increased, particularly in the Turkic countries of Central Asia and the Muslim countries of north and subsaharan Africa.⁵ The 2011 budget of the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA), which handles Turkish development aid, was 1.73 billion dollars, a not insignificant figure when we consider that the European Development Fund of the European Union has an average of 3.78 billion euros (5 billion dollars) available annually for its work in non-EU or non-neighborhood development.⁶

Turkey's new policy has sometimes been called "neo-Ottomanism," a reference to Turkey's particular concern with those countries of the former Ottoman sphere with which it believes itself to have historical and cultural ties, as well as to its historical role as a leader of the Muslim world. While Foreign Minister Davutoğlu rejects the neo-Ottoman label, there seems little doubt that the AKP leadership considers Turkey to be a "natural" leader of the region, a position that entails setting an example, chastising when necessary, and aiding the weak. Prime Minister Erdoğan's 2011 visit to Libya, where he prayed in a Tripoli mosque with the leader of the National Transitional Council, was one example of this, as has been Turkey's unprecedented aid to Somalia. One Somalian analyst who gushingly described Turkish efforts to rebuild the country and mediate between its warring factions attributed Turkey's attitude to a combination of moral authority, business opportunity, and geo-strategic vision.⁷ The discourse of common Islamic values underpins Turkey's engagement in Africa, emphasizing its normative foundation.

While there is no doubt that Turkey's new foreign policy has fuelled economic growth and is based on a vision of Turkey as regional leader, cynics may balk at the invocation of moral authority. However, it is clear that the AKP leadership sees itself as having both the power and the responsibility to act, even in cases that may not please Turkey's long-time supporter, the U.S., or the European Union to which Turkey aspires. For instance, Erdoğan's chastisement of Shimon Peres at Davos, or Turkey's condemnation of the Israeli response to the Mavi Marmara flotilla intending to breach the Gaza barricade, have been both the principled responses of a country that sees itself as a Muslim leader and a way of cementing that new role in the Arab world.

⁴ The number of Turkish embassies in Africa has grown from 12 to 34 in recent years.

⁵ The current map of the activities of the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı, or TİKA) shows that of the 30 countries that have TİKA coordination offices, only five are in countries without significant Muslim populations (Macedonia, Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia, and Kenya).

⁶ [http://eu2012.dk/en/EU-and-the-Presidency/About EU/Politikomraader/FAC/Udviklingspolitik](http://eu2012.dk/en/EU-and-the-Presidency/About%20EU/Politikomraader/FAC/Udviklingspolitik)

⁷ "Turkey's Role in Somalia: A New Ally?," Abdulhakim Aynte, CESRAN International, 10 April 2012, http://cesran.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1418%3Aturkeys-role-in-somalia-a-new-ally&catid=216%3Aanalyses-on-turkey-and-neighbourhood&Itemid=336&lang=en

However, critics complain that Turkey today has a self-confidence bordering on arrogance. Moreover, the new or increased Turkish presence in the Balkans, South Caucasus, and Middle East has led to a new admiration for Turkey but also to the revival of historically rooted fears.⁸ For instance, a television series that portrays the Ottoman Empire during the reign of Suleyman the Magnificent—at some would argue the height of the empire’s power—is watched by 150 million viewers worldwide, but in some of the countries of the Balkans and South Caucasus where the series is especially popular, Islamophobia and Turcophobia are also on the rise. Indeed, in some of the countries where Turkey does the most business and engages in aid and development projects, opinions of Turkey seem to have the widest range.

The PRIO-TESEV project of which this report is a result aimed to examine these contradictory results of the new Turkish foreign policy through a series of workshops with regional experts. We were especially interested in perceptions of Turkey’s new foreign policy in countries that have historical ties to Turkey because of the historically loaded—some would say “neo-Ottoman”—rhetoric and strategies that shape the country’s soft power politics in these areas. Clearly, the new Turkish foreign policy is aimed at using this regional, historically based politics as a springboard to a global position. We asked these experts to consider Turkey’s new role in their own countries, how this role is tied to Turkey’s domestic and regional interests, and how this role has altered local perceptions of Turkey. How do neighboring countries view Turkey today? Is Turkey perceived as the “big brother” it wants to be? What are local and regional fears regarding Turkey’s new role?

While opinions were obviously diverse and differed based on historical relations, as well as religious and ethnic affiliation, there were also commonalities that we summarize here. In particular, we ask what it means that Turkey sees itself as a *model*, and what might change in its regional relations if it adopted a different view of its role. Indeed, one participant from Egypt remarked, “We see Turkey less as a model than as an aspiration.” We analyze here some of the views of Turkey in light of the “Turkish model” concept and argue that the view of Turkey as *aspiration* would potentially lead to friendlier, less paternalistic, and therefore less contradictory, relations with countries of the region. Seeing Turkey as aspiration, however, would also require a unifying ideal or goal for Turkish foreign policy, something that we argue is currently lacking.

⁸ One scholar remarks that ‘trying to convince people in the Balkans that, as the Turkish Foreign Minister once claimed, “the Ottoman centuries in the Balkans were a success story” will remain problematic.’ The reason, he observes, is that ‘Several national and state identities in the region were formed on the basis of resistance to Ottoman rule and resentments persist that Turkish occupation stifled economic development especially in the late 19th and early 20th centuries’ (Janusz Bugajski, *Turkey’s Impact in the Western Balkans* [Washington, D. C.: Atlantic Council], pp. 2-3). Bülent Aras, director of the Strategic Research Center in Ankara, the think-tank of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, appears to concur when he notes that for many people of the Balkans ‘the past century represents war, destruction, ethnic cleansing, and ethnic enmity in this region.’ However, he observes that Turkey’s new strategy is ‘to initiate a psychological breakthrough in the Balkans to undo the negative memories of the past’ (Bülent Aras, *Turkey and the Balkans: New Policy in a Changing Regional Environment* [Washington, D.C.: German Marshall Fund], p. 1).

II. THE CONTRADICTIONS OF THE “TURKISH MODEL”

About a decade ago, Turkey suddenly emerged from a period of economic and political introversion and rejection of important parts of its history, especially its relations with what may broadly be called “the East.” When the AKP came to power, it embraced what so many members of the Turkish elite had for so long rejected: Turkey’s identity as both a “Western” and an “Eastern” country, one governed by a secular constitution but socially conservative. For the AKP, there was no contradiction in a strong Muslim country at Europe’s border wishing to join the EU, especially when the state was a NATO member. Moreover, the AKP came to power in the immediate post-9/11 period, with its leaders calling themselves “conservative democrats” even as many Western countries searched for moderate political allies in the Muslim world.⁹

And whereas previously Turkey’s relations with Israel had been close, those with Arab countries had been more distant. Relations with the Arab world improved somewhat in the post-1980 period, but these primarily aimed at showing Turkey’s capacity to broker between the Middle East and Europe. The AKP under Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, however, has shown its affinity for the cultures and causes of the Arab states through collaboration and cooperation, as well as through its willingness to stand up to Israel. Whereas identity politics in Turkey had for so long been homogenizing and apologetic, an attempt to “prove” Turkey’s Europeaness, the AKP abandoned apology and made nods to ethnic heterogeneity, though one based largely in a unifying Muslim identity.

The AKP also recognized that Turkey’s heterogeneity could be one of its biggest economic assets. Indeed, in a speech that he made in Sarajevo in 2009, Davutoğlu remarked that insofar as he was neo-Ottoman, it was because he saw the Ottoman Empire’s heterogeneity as a source of strength, and argued that in order to create a Balkan revival, the Balkans must ‘create a new multicultural co-existence through establishing a new economic zone.’¹⁰ Even as Davutoğlu’s

⁹ ‘In the post 9-11 world, Turkey was in a unique position. The Bush II presidency commended Turkey for the combination of its secular democracy with its Islamic identity. The idea of the “model” was born’ (Pinar Tank, “Dressing for the Occasion: Reconstructing Turkey’s Identity,” *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 6(4), 2006, pp.463-478.

¹⁰ Quoted in Gerald Knaus, “Multikulti and the Future of Turkish Balkan Policy,” 4 December 2010, *Rumeli Observer*, <http://www.esiweb.org/rumeliobserver/2010/12/04/multikulti-and-the-future-of-turkish-balkan-policy/>

“zero problems” policy was based on developing economic ties,¹¹ in Turkey itself those ties were made considerably easier by ethnic entrepreneurs who shared language and culture with ethnic “brethren” on the other side of what had been, after all, arbitrarily drawn borders. By the late 2000s, Turkish citizens of Arab origin could be seen marketing their wares in Syria and Lebanon, while those of Georgian and Laz origin began constructing hotels and casinos in the Ajaria region of Georgia.¹² Although the Turkish border with Armenia remains closed, thousands of trucks ply the roads through Georgia every day taking goods into Armenia. Almost all of the drivers of these trucks are from the Hemşin region of the Turkish Black Sea and speak a dialect of the Armenian language.¹³ Soon one could find Turkish textiles and televisions in Sarajevo, Turkish beer and buses in Damascus, and Turkish contractors in the forefront of a construction boom that is reshaping even the most remote parts of Georgia.¹⁴

At the same time, Turkey has been reshaping its image and recreating itself as a desirable destination for work and play. Turkey’s 2003 win in the Eurovision song contest presented a first opportunity to host Europe in the following year. Since that time, the AKP leadership has projected Turkey as a meeting point of civilizations, an appropriate place for conferences and sports contests. Considerable investment was put into the Turkish national airline in order to expand its routes and make Istanbul a new hub for travel between Europe and Africa or Asia.

¹¹ Although this seems somewhat obvious in retrospect, there has in fact been a lively debate about the sources of the new Turkish foreign policy. There are those who view it primarily as a result of the EU integration process (e.g., Burak Akçapar, *Turkey’s New European Era: Foreign Policy on the Road to EU Membership* [Lanham: Rowman & Little, 2007]; Mustafa Aydın and Sinem Açıkmeşe, “Europeanization through EU Conditionality: Understanding the New Era in Turkish Foreign Policy,” *Journal of Southeastern European and Black Sea Studies* 9(3), 2007, pp. 263-74; Fuat Keyman and Senem Aydın, “European Integration and the Transformation of Turkish Democracy,” *CEPS, EU-Turkey Working Papers*, no. 2, 2004; Meltem Müftüleri-Baç, “Turkey’s Political Reforms and the Impact of the European Union,” *South European Society and Politics* 10(1), 2005, pp. 17-31; and Ziya Öniş, “Turkey and the Middle East after September 11: The Importance of the EU Dimension,” *Turkish Policy Quarterly* 2(4), 2003, pp. 84-95). On the other hand, there are those who see the change primarily as a result of domestic politics, either the AK Party’s rise to power or new definitions of Turkish security (see, e.g., Bülent Aras and Rabia Karakaya Polat, “From Conflict to Cooperation: Desecuritization of Turkey’s Relations with Iran and Syria,” *Security Dialogue* 39(5), 2008, pp. 495-505; Hasret Dikici Bilgin, “Foreign Policy Orientation of Turkey’s Pro-Islamist Parties: A Comparative Study of the AKP and Refah,” *Turkish Studies* 9(3), 2008, pp. 407-21; Pinar Bilgin, “Turkey’s Changing Security Discourse: The Challenges of Globalization,” *European Journal of Political Research* 4(1), 2005, pp. 175-201; Ümit Cizre, “Demystologizing the National Security Concept: The Case of Turkey,” *Middle East Journal* 57(2), 2003; Burhanettin Duran, “JDP and Foreign Policy as an Agent of Transformation,” in *The Emergence of a New Turkey: Democracy and the AK Parti*, ed. H. Yavuz [Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2006], pp. 281-305; Alper Kaliber, “Securing the Ground Through Securitized ‘Foreign Policy’: The Cyprus Case,” *Security Dialogue* 36(6), 2005, pp. 297-316). Here we concur with Kemal Kirişçi’s analysis of Turkey as a “trading state” whose new foreign policy follows from economic interests (Kemal Kirişçi, “The transformation of Turkish foreign policy: The rise of the trading state,” *New Perspectives of Turkey* 40, 2009, pp. 29-57).

¹² Observing one instance of this, the opening of economic relations with Georgia, political analysts at the US Embassy in Ankara wrote in 2009, “Turkish Georgians retain strong ties to Batumi, viewing the eastern Black Sea region and Ajara as an integrated whole. Turkish Georgians have invested greatly in Batumi and welcome GOT efforts to promote regional economic integration with Georgia.” The report was released by Wikileaks in 2011 and may be accessed at <http://www.circassianworld.com/new/headlines/1589>.

¹³ Sevan Nişanyan, “Kimlik Çakışması,” available at <http://www.nisanyan.com/?s=kimlik-cakismasi>.

¹⁴ On the importance of the international construction sector to the Turkish economy, see “Turkey’s International Building Boom,” CNN Business, 1 November 2012, available at <http://business.blogs.cnn.com/2012/11/01/turkeys-international-building-boom>.

Tourism has boomed with the construction of new five-star resorts in the country's south and the opening of new tourist markets, especially in the former Soviet states. This has attracted foreign investment, as well as workers from neighboring countries. Russian-speaking tourists have been followed by Russian-speaking workers from Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan.¹⁵ Most recently, the popular television series about Suleyman the Magnificent mentioned above has produced a boom in heritage tourism, as visitors from Eastern Europe and Japan desire to see where the sultans used to live.

Turkey, then, has learned to capitalize on its position as what Turks are now fond of calling "the crossroads of civilizations." Whereas in the past the Turkish leadership had often seen this crossroad position as a point at which two roads parted, today's Turkey seems content to dwell at this meeting-point. This has made it a much stronger and much more attractive power, and it has formed the basis for the idea of a "Turkish model." It has also formed the basis for what Lerna Yanik refers to as "Turkish exceptionalism," which emphasizes Turkey's geographical and historical hybridity.¹⁶ While the emphasis on multiculturalism and hybridity is not entirely new in Turkish politics, it has now become simultaneously a way of "branding" Turkey in the world market and a tool of foreign policy.¹⁷

We would like to note, however, that while the "branding" of Turkey has so far been economically successful and savvily follows world trends of marketing "culture,"¹⁸ hybridity and exceptionalism have created confusion regarding Turkey's foreign politics. One clue to why this might be lies in Yanik's observation that Turkish exceptionalism differs from that of other states claiming exceptionality (e.g., that of the U.S.A. or Australia) in that it is simultaneously liminal. In other words, Turkish exceptionalism is also an exception, in that it is defined by Turkey's position in between—between East and West, between the EU and the Middle East, between Christianity and Islam, between European visions of democracy and their realization elsewhere, between regional power and global actor. Taking Yanik's analysis a step further, however, we would note that liminality is not simply a form of "betweenness"; liminality is a period of transition from one state to another. In other words, not all hybridity should be seen as liminal, although all liminality may be hybrid. Liminality assumes a trajectory from one state or position to another, even if one may get stuck in the liminal state for reasons beyond one's control. So, is Turkey a

¹⁵ One recent report puts the number of illegal migrant workers at around 200,000, mostly from Georgia, with Azerbaijan, Russian and Turkmenistan following close behind ("200,000 yabancı kaçak işçi var," CNN Türk, 26 June 2012, <https://www.cnnturk.com/2012/ekonomi/genel/06/25/200.bin.yabanci.kacak.isci.var/666330.0/index.html>).

¹⁶ Lerna K. Yanik, "Constructing Turkish 'exceptionalism': Discourses of liminality and hybridity in post-Cold War Turkish foreign policy," *Political Geography* 30 (2011): 80-89.

¹⁷ Efe Sevin, "Bridge No More? Turkish Public Diplomacy and Branding Under the AKP Government," <http://www.e-ir.info/2012/10/05/bridge-no-more-turkish-public-diplomacy-and-branding-under-the-akp-government/> April 2, 2013

¹⁸ See esp. John L. and Jean Comaroff, *Ethnicity, Inc.*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.

cultural bridge between East and West, or is Turkey a regional power that underwent a painful internal Westernization with the ultimate goal of joining Europe, only to be rejected by the EU and to re-embrace its Eastern roots? If Turkey is a regional power with global ambitions, what is Turkey's vision of the global?

In other words, while Turkey's portrayal of its cultural hybridity may be an effective marketing tool, the liminal elements of that exceptionality today create confusion about Turkey's trajectory.¹⁹ One of the themes uniting all the workshops was a question throughout the neighboring regions about where Turkey is heading and what the ultimate goals of Turkish foreign policy might be. This liminality, then, results in what we will argue are three weaknesses of the "Turkish model": (A) an unclear foreign policy trajectory accompanied by what we will call a "special operations" approach to foreign politics; (B) growing soft power that does not appear to have a consistent goal or aim; and (C) unregulated economic expansion with short-term vision that does not assess the social consequences. At the same time, Turkey is one of a handful of powers not only to have survived but to have thrived during the ongoing global economic crisis. While Europe is in upheaval, Turkey is prospering. As a result, there is considerable admiration for Turkey's recent economic and political development, though this is tempered by caution deriving from the undefined nature of Turkey's ambitions.

A) A "special operations" approach to foreign policy

A recent report from the Center for a New American Security refers to Turkey—along with Brazil, India, and Indonesia—as a "swing state" that should be courted by the U.S. and the EU and molded into an important regional broker in the new international order. That new international order is one in which the polarities of power are no longer clear and in which a U.S. exhausted by security wars and an EU struggling with financial crisis now have to consider the ambitions not only of superpowers Russia and China but also of other "middle powers" who have regional influence of wide scope. The authors of that report call Turkey a "swing state" to indicate that its alliances have still not been determined: 'Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has called for a "new global order" based on solidarity and trust rather than conflict. In practice, however, Turkey has yet to settle on any definitive vision for that new order beyond expanded representation in key forums.'²⁰ The authors here refer to Turkey's repeated call for a redefinition of the role of the UN, and especially of the UN Security Council, which has been one of the key planks in Turkey's attempts to leverage itself into a global role.

¹⁹ Indeed, one particularly skeptical commentator remarks, 'Priorities may always have to be re-directed under changing junctures, but AKP does not seem to have priorities. . . . AKP is merely trying to score points in foreign policy through populism' (Nuri Bilge Criss, *Parameters of Turkish Foreign Policy Under the AKP Governments*, Madrid: UNISCI Discussion Papers No. 23, 2010, p. 10).

²⁰ Daniel M. Kliman and Richard Fontaine, *Global Swing States: Brazil, India, Indonesia, Turkey and the Future of International Order* (Washington, D. C.: Center for a New American Security, 2012).

While from an international relations perspective Turkey's lack of "definitive vision" may be seen as presenting an opportunity for reshaping traditional alliances, the AKP government has also taken a more independent stance, especially as U.S. influence in the region has faltered and the EU has entered deep crisis. In this regard, one Balkan commentator remarked, 'the faltering influence of the Union now adds to Turkish confidence and prestige, bolstering a go-it-alone approach.'²¹ That go-it-alone approach has been characterized by speedy responses to crisis, in contrast to the more cumbersome responses of multi-national bodies such as the UN. Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoğlu has characterized this rough-and-ready approach to foreign politics as the necessary response to a world that now lacks clear centers of power. In various writings and lectures he has suggested that flexible policies and the capacity to respond quickly are necessary for diplomatic success in the current world order.²²

This "special operations" approach to foreign policy, however, is characterized by reaction and often appears to show little overall cohesiveness. As a result, while it is clear that Turkey has the ambitions of a rising star, it is not clear what the content of those ambitions are. Moreover, unlike those "superpowers" which are permanent members of the Security Council, Turkey's potential global role would be based on its regional role, and this positioning is something that Turkey's diplomats often emphasize. In other words, in relation to the Balkans, Middle East, and South Caucasus, Turkey is positioning itself to say, "If you want to deal with them, you have to deal with us."

It is this regional positioning that is often called "neo-Ottoman." Many persons who make reference to a presumed "neo-Ottoman" policy cite Ahmet Davutoğlu's 2009 speech in Sarajevo, when he remarked,

Like in the 16th century, which saw the rise of the Ottoman Balkans as the center of world politics, we will make the Balkans, the Caucasus and the Middle East, together with Turkey, the center of world politics in the future. This is the objective of Turkish foreign policy, and we will achieve this. We will reintegrate the Balkan region, the Middle East and the Caucasus, based on the principle of regional and global peace, for the future, not only for all of us but for all of humanity.²³

Davutoğlu proposed this rather ambitious program before the Arab Spring, at a time when the prospect of democracy in one of the regions he mentions, the Middle East, seemed quite remote. Georgia had experienced a conflict with Russia the previous year, and ongoing low-level or frozen conflicts throughout the Caucasus, Balkans, and Southeast Europe made this goal seem rather unrealistic to many observers.

²¹ Dimitar Bechev, "Turkey in the Balkans: Taking a Broader View," *Insight Turkey* 14(1), 2012, p. 138.

²² Davutoğlu has characterized this strategy as 'not running behind history but within it' (Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Teoriden Pratiğe: Türk Dış Politikası Üzerine Konuşmalar* [Istanbul: Küre Yayınları], 2011, p. 9).

²³ See Knaus, "Multikulti and the Future of Balkan Policy."

But it was the suggestion that Turkey is the center and leader of this cluster of regions that appeared to imply an appeal to the Ottoman past. However, as we will discuss below, Turkey's appeal to the past is also characterized by what anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss called *bricolage*, meaning the pragmatic use of whatever symbolic materials are at hand.²⁴ The "special ops" approach uses whatever ethnic, religious, or historico-geographic elements seem appropriate to the moment. While in the Balkans Turkey emphasizes shared history and geography, in the Middle East it emphasizes religious ties. But this may also change, as in some instances Turkey has emphasized ethnic ties with Turcomen in Syria and religious ties with Muslims in the Balkans. As in the branding of Turkey as a hybrid country, the AKP both lays claim to a pre-nationalist, heterogeneous past and sees how that past may be diplomatically "marketed" or "sold." And indeed, Turkey's foreign policy has employed an eclectic and situational blend of ethnic, religious, historical, and geographical references that may often appear to be in contradiction.

But an apparent lack of consistency with regard to identity should not be surprising given what we have called Turkey's new "special operations" approach to foreign policy. A "special operations" approach, of course, refers to the speed of response. If we take the metaphor further, we could say that a "special ops" approach to foreign policy would also be characterized by elements of aggressiveness and surprise that do not necessarily conform to the expectations of conventional diplomacy. While Davutoğlu may be correct in his assessment that such an approach is necessary in a multi-polar, global world, such nonconventional diplomacy is also practiced in neighborhoods where Turkey has a long history. We wish to suggest, then, that it is precisely Turkey's situational, contextual, and flexible foreign policy that appears to raise the specter of "neo-Ottomanism" and fears amongst certain groups in the region that Turkey is pursuing an expansionist policy.

We have noted that Turkey's new approach to foreign policy is situational, emphasizing flexibility and speed of response. One of the most important elements of this policy is the bricolage of historical and cultural symbols that Turkey uses to legitimate its intervention in regional conflicts and role as regional leader. The use of these symbols is also partly reactive: as Turkey positions itself to be a necessary interlocutor for the region, it also finds itself in competition with other regional leaders, especially Russia, Iran, Egypt, and the EU, each of whom has its own historical and cultural claims. As a result, while the AKP clearly sees Turkey as a "natural" leader of these regions, the nature of "the natural" differs for each region, indeed each country or situation.

²⁴ One observer from the Western Balkans remarked that this approach offers 'a "buffet" cooperation with Turkey – there is something for everyone' (Zarko Petrovic, "Turkey in the Western Balkans: The Goals and Means of the New Foreign Policy," Belgrade: International Security and Affairs Centre, 2011, p. 10).

For instance, in the Black Sea, Caucasus, and Central Asia, Turkey is in a relationship of "competitive cooperation" with Russia, with whom it has strong trade and other relations but with whom it competes for influence in large segments of the post-Soviet sphere.²⁵ Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkey has attempted to increase its influence over a Central Asia that it interprets as "Turkic." In the Caucasus, Turkey has long pursued a similar "ethnic" policy with regard to Azerbaijan ("one people, two states"), and has only recently moved beyond that ethnic policy to improve relations with neighbors Georgia and Armenia.²⁶

In the South Caucasus, which remains embroiled in regional conflicts, there are three main fears about Turkey's identity as a nation and how that affects foreign policy: (1) that Turkey will support Muslim minorities with whom it also has ethnic ties, even to the point of supporting their separatist claims; (2) that Turkey's foreign policy will be influenced by Caucasian diasporas within Turkey; and (3) that closer Turkish alliance with Russia and lack of a consistent policy for the region would mean the lack of a countervailing influence in the South Caucasus.

The first of these fears is especially seen in regard to Georgia's autonomous Ajaria region, the area populated by Ajars, who until 1926 were simply called Georgian Muslims. Although the Ottomans never had much control in the South Caucasus, today in Georgia there are again suspicions regarding Turkey's relations with the Georgian Muslims of the Ajaria region.²⁷ This is also a region that has at various points made secessionist claims and that today is flooded by Georgian and Lazian Muslims from Turkey with familial and ethnic ties, who are currently marrying and investing in the region. Moreover, in recent years, an agreement between Georgia and Turkey allowed Georgia to restore Georgian Orthodox churches in northeastern Turkey and Turkey to build and restore mosques in Ajaria. The difference, however, is that there are no Georgian Christians remaining in Turkey, while the Muslim population of Ajaria will use the renovated or newly built mosques. As a result, as one Georgian participant in our workshops remarked, there is a fear amongst especially nationalist Georgian elements that 'the government wants to sell out Ajaria to the Turks,' while even many Georgian intellectuals associate neo-Ottomanism with 'the Turks wanting Ajaria back.'

The perception of Turkey as a supporter of Muslims in the South Caucasus is given further impetus by Turkey's special relationship with Azerbaijan and past support for Azerbaijan's claims

²⁵ On new dimensions of that relationship, see, e.g., Sergey Markedonov and Natalya Ulchenko, "Turkey and Russia: An Evolving Relationship," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 19 August 2011, available at <http://carnegieendowment.org/2011/08/19/turkey-and-russia-evolving-relationship/8kld>.

²⁶ On the difficulties that Turkey has encountered in moving beyond this special relationship, see Aybars Görgülü and Omnik Krikorian, *Turkey's South Caucasus Agenda: The Role of State and Non-State Actors* (Istanbul: TESEV, 2012).

²⁷ These fears were especially prevalent during the recent Georgian presidential election, when anti-Turkish rhetoric was mobilized against former President Shakashvili. See Molly Corso, "Georgia: Anti-Turkish Sentiment Grows as Election Date Nears," *Eurasianet.org*, 19 September 2012 (<http://www.eurasianet.org/node/65933>); "Anti-Turkish Xenophobia Rears Its Ugly Head in Georgia," *Internet Centre Anti-Racism Europe*, 17 August 2012 (<http://www.icare.to/article.php?id=40582&lang=en>); "Tolerance Center against Anti-Turkish Rhetoric," *Media.ge*, 16 August 2012 (<http://www.media.ge/en/stories/tolerancecenteragainstan>).

in Nagorno-Karabakh. Because of this, despite Turkey's recent efforts to forge alliances with the government of Armenia, and despite the fact that for Armenians Turkey has slowly become a place for work and tourism,²⁸ relations between the two countries remain constrained by unresolved historical issues and Azerbaijan's interference.²⁹ Azerbaijan, on the other hand, showed during the recent Turkey-Armenia rapprochement that the "one people, two states" rhetoric was not only one about which they remained ambivalent but was also one that would not trump state interests.³⁰

The second fear, of diaspora influence, is far from groundless. Indeed, Ahmet Davutoğlu had recognized the possibility for diaspora politics within Turkey to affect its policies when he remarked:

There are more Bosnians in Turkey than in Bosnia-Herzegovina, more Albanians than in Kosovo, more Chechens than in Chechnya, more Abkhazians than in the Abkhaz region in Georgia, and a significant number of Azeris and Georgians, in addition to considerable other ethnicities from neighboring regions. Thus, these conflicts and the effect they have on their populations have a direct impact on domestic politics in Turkey. Because of this fact, Turkey experiences regional tensions at home and faces public demands to pursue an active foreign-policy to secure the peace and security of those communities. In this sense, Turkish foreign policy is also shaped by its own democracy, reflecting the priorities and concerns of its citizens.³¹

Especially in the war-torn states of the South Caucasus, the knowledge of the influence of these large diaspora populations within Turkey, as well as the continuing hold of the "one nation, two states" rhetoric with regard to Azerbaijan, leads to suspicion that Turkey can ever be a disinterested mediator.

²⁸ Recent government estimates put the number of illegal Armenian migrants working in Turkey at 20-25,000. See Marianna Grigoryan and Anahit Hayrapetyan, "Turkey: Armenian Illegal Migrants Put National Grievances Aside for Work," *Eurasianet.org*, 2 September 2011, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/64116>.

²⁹ While the continuing freeze in Turkey-Armenia relations is often attributed to the Nagorno-Karabakh problem, some analysts continue to attribute Armenia's stance to 'deep underlying threat perceptions rooted in a collective narrative' (Alla Mirzoyan, *Armenia, the Regional Powers, and the West: Between History and Geopolitics* [New York: Palgrave, 2010], p. 54). However, other analysts assess that the changing geopolitical conjuncture and economic and energy interests have led to a decrease in the hold of such collective narratives over strategic interests. See Richard Giragosian, "Changing Armenia-Turkish Relations" policy paper of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Tbilisi, February 2009.

³⁰ See Sinan Ülgen, *A Place in the Sun or Fifteen Minutes of Fame: Understanding Turkey's New Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Papers, 2010) and Şaban Kardaş, "Turkey and Azerbaijan: 'One Nation-Two States?'" *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 6 (193): http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=35630&cHash=560416055f

³¹ Ahmet Davutoğlu, "Turkey's Zero-Problems Foreign Policy," *Foreign Policy*, 20 May 2010. It should be noted, however, that Ankara has usually resisted pressures from the diaspora, for instance to recognize Abkhazia or Kosovo, when strategic interests are at stake. See Zarko Petrovic and Dusan Reljic, "Turkish Interests and Involvement in the Western Balkans: A Score Card," *Insight Turkey* 13(3), 2011, pp. 159-172.

And all participants recognized what has been called a "cooperative competition" between Turkey and Russia in the South Caucasus. Russia is now one of Turkey's largest trading partners and a necessary element in regional energy politics. And while Turkey has an interest in maintaining stability in the South Caucasus as a buffer against Russia, diaspora populations, foreign policy concerns, and energy strategy all pull Turkey in different policy directions. And as one of the workshop participants commented, 'Because of Turkey's delicate approach to the South Caucasus, Russia is emboldened.' Or as another participant remarked, 'Turkey has an important role in the region but often curbs itself in order not to step on Russia's toes.' Many participants feared, then, that the various directions in which Turkey's interests are pulled in the South Caucasus region made it both an unreliable partner and an ineffective counterbalance to Russian influence.

Turkey's attempts to claim a role as a "natural" leader in the South Caucasus and parts of Central Asia, however, calls into question Turkey's role as a "natural" leader in the Middle East. Certainly, Egypt has long considered itself the natural leader of the Arab world, although it today struggles with a domestic agenda that limits its leadership potential. Also, arguably Egypt today has a competitor in Qatar, whose Al Jazeera media empire and natural gas wealth have made it an influential voice. The fact that Erdoğan's first visit following the Arab Spring was to Egypt signalled recognition of the country's leadership position. However, the AKP has also attempted to assert a leadership position in the region through appeal to Muslim identity and support for the Palestinian cause.

In the Arab states there are two main concerns regarding today's Turkey, and these contrast with those in both the South Caucasus and the Balkans: (1) as a result of its recent history, Turkey is often perceived as "not Muslim enough," and hence as not an adequate model for Arab states;³² while (2) there is concern amongst some elements that the current Turkish government will form alliances with Islamists in their own countries.

While several workshop participants mentioned the personal popularity of Erdoğan in the region, it was clear that the historical memory of Turkish secularization, the strong currents of Sufism in Turkish Islam, as well as the lack of ethnic or linguistic ties made Turkey a weak model for Arab states. The historical memory of Turkey's Westernizing secularization is strong in Arab states, which had followed their own separate trajectory of Arab nationalism and socialism

³² According to a 2011 TESEV poll, 23% of respondents said that Turkey could not be a model for Arab countries because it is not Muslim enough, while another 23% said that it could be a model because of its Muslim background. The difference, however, is that while amongst those who thought that Turkey could be a model its Muslim background came in third as a reason, for those who thought Turkey could *not* be a model, "not Muslim enough" was the most cited reason, followed by "close relations with the West (16%)" and "secular political system (13%)" (Mensur Akgün and Sabiha Senyücel Gündoğar, *The Perception of Turkey in the Middle East 2011* [Istanbul: TESEV, 2011], p. 21). According to the same poll conducted in 2012, Turkey as a Muslim state had dropped to fourth in the list of reasons why the country may be a model, with 18% (Mensun Akgün and Sabiha Senyücel Gündoğar, *Ortadoğu'da Türkiye Algısı 2012* [Istanbul: TESEV, 2012], p. 21).

based in part on a post-colonial rejection of European political models. Moreover, Turkish Islam itself is often perceived as largely heterodox, with important Sufi schools, such as the movement of charismatic cleric, Fethullah Gülen, having a strong hold on Turkish politics and social life. And although Arab nationalism declined as ideology following the 1967 Six Day War, there remains an important folk current of Arab unity throughout the region that also excludes Turkey.

In contrast to this common perception of Turkish society and its historical trajectory, some participants warned of fears that the current Turkish government may aid Islamists at the expense of democratization. Whereas in the Balkans and South Caucasus Turkey's role as "protector" of Muslim minorities often appears to be in conflict with its foreign policy interests, in the post-Arab Spring Middle East some groups concerned to establish secular governments in their own countries worry that Turkey's role as a stabilizing force may be undermined by the current government's Islamist leanings and ties.

All of this means that while Turkey's young and vibrant population and economic growth appear to put it in a position of competition with Egypt for the position of Middle East leader, this was not a role accepted by Arab participants. Several participants noted that Prime Minister Erdoğan is currently more popular in the region than Turkey as such, implying that while the rhetoric is appealing, there is less willingness to accept Turkey's role as regional leader. As one member of the Muslim Brotherhood who participated in the workshops remarked, 'People will accept Turkey playing a role in the Middle East, but taking the lead is debatable.' Overall, workshop participants expressed the strong desire to see Turkey as a partner and an important player in the region, especially to counterbalance Iranian influence.³³

In the Balkans, Turkish (read, Muslim and "Eastern") influence is often placed in contrast to the (Christian, "Western") influence of the EU. In addition, Turkey's mixed signals regarding identity and alliances play on three major fears: (1) that Turkey will support Muslim populations, even at the expense of its foreign policy interests; (2) that Turkey's influence will counterbalance that of the EU; and (3) that the influence of Turkey will recall the suppressed "Ottoman" or "Eastern" elements of their own identities. The first of these concerns is especially strong in majority-Christian countries, such as Bulgaria, where Turkey has both traditional ties with ethnoreligious minorities and increasing investments.

The first fear arises because of the support that Turkey has, indeed, given to Muslim populations in the Balkans, beginning with its intervention in Bosnia and support for ethnic Turkish minorities in Greece and Bulgaria. Muslims of the region have generally accepted Turkey's historical "big brother" role and often appeal to Turkey for aid, including aid in restoring

³³ For an assessment of Turkish influence and competition with Iran in regard to the Syria crisis, see Doğan Ertuğrul, *A Test for Turkey's Foreign Policy: The Syria Crisis* (Istanbul: TESEV, 2012).

mosques and Ottoman cultural heritage. While for some Muslim groups, especially in the conflict-affected Balkans, Turkey's new role may seem comforting, for other groups it creates mistrust.³⁴ According to Hajrudin Somun, former ambassador of Bosnia-Herzegovina to Turkey:

The claims of neo-Ottomanism belong mostly to the Balkans' Christians who, although not openly expressing it, look to contemporary Turks as successors of the Ottoman invaders and occupiers. Others, mostly Muslims, look to them as a means of support and as protectors. Some Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) even call Turkey their motherland.³⁵

Indeed, numerous Muslim minority groups throughout the Balkans and Eastern Europe appear to expect that Turkey will aid and intervene, in some cases providing religious leaders, mosques, and education, in other cases standing up for their rights.³⁶ This role as protector of the region's Muslim minorities is one that Turkey played before the rise of the AKP, but the AKP has not attempted to change that role, as it sees it as a moral and historical duty to protect Muslims and Muslim heritage in the former Ottoman domains. However, this role conflicts with the one outlined by Davutoğlu in his Sarajevo speech and leads to the assumption that Turkey will "take sides" with Muslims. For instance, in the past several years trade with Bosnia-Herzegovina has declined because of the country's business climate, while Serbia's more favorable business climate has led to an increase in trade.³⁷ Yet Serbian nationalist leaders still use Turcophobic rhetoric that implies that Turkey will always "take sides" with Bosnian Muslims against the ambitions of Serbia.³⁸

The second fear, that Turkey will counter-balance EU influence, arises because of the appeal that Turkey's presence indeed has for certain elements of the Balkan populations. In order to emphasize its "natural" role in the region, Turkey invokes the historical and geographical ties of the Ottoman Empire, as well as the large numbers of persons of Balkan origin living in Turkey.

³⁴ One commentator notes that 'Turkey tries to benefit from the region's Muslim populations as anchors for its engagement' even as 'in much of the region there is a perception of growing Islamization in Turkey itself, which is viewed negatively in the religiously moderate and secular Balkan societies' (Bugajski, *Turkey's Impact in the Western Balkans*, p. 3).

³⁵ Hajrudin Somun, "Turkey's Return to the Balkans, Again," *Today's Zaman*, 19 December 2012.

³⁶ One commentator compares Turkey's influence with Muslim populations in the region to Russia's hold over the region's Orthodox populations (Adam Balcer, "Turkey and the Western Balkans: A View from Poland," Lecture at the Institute for European Studies in Belgrade, 23 June 2011).

³⁷ Indeed, some observers see Turkey's links with Serbia as a potentially stabilizing influence in the Western Balkans. See especially Athina Tesfa-Yohannes, "The Contribution of Turkish-Serbian Relations towards Improving Security in the Western Balkans," *Proceedings of the International Balkan Congress*, ed. H. Çomak and C. Sancaktar (Kocaeli, 2011), pp. 74-84. See also Inan Ruma, "Turkish Foreign Policy Towards the Balkans: New Activism, Neo-Ottomanism or/so What?" *Turkish Policy Quarterly* 9(4), 2012, pp. 134-140, and Erhan Türbedar, "Turkey's New Activism in the Western Balkans: Ambitions and Obstacles," *Insight Turkey* 13(3), 2011, pp. 139-158. For a balanced account that situates Turkey's new Balkan policy, and especially relations with Serbia, in the context of a changed post-Soviet international order, see Bechev, "Turkey in the Balkans."

³⁸ Hajrudin Somun, "Turkish Foreign Policy in the Balkans and 'Neo-Ottomanism': A Personal Account," *Insight Turkey* 13(3), 2011, pp. 33-41.

As one commentator noted, 'Turkey's Balkan foreign policy mobilizes emotions and stretches the sense of kinfolk beyond the borders of the Turkish state.'³⁹ However, there is continuing Turcophobia and Islamophobia in many Balkan states—something that is only aggravated by Turkey's increasingly close ties to Arab countries. As one commentator recently noted,

Turkey's recently increasing interest in the Arab world has created an image and perception in the 10 Balkan countries, where 88 percent of the people are Christian, that suggests that Turkey has been seeking to form an alliance with the Islamic world. Moreover, this attempted rapprochement is attributed to ideological considerations rather than Turkish national interests.⁴⁰

In addition, Turkey's perceived "Eastern-leaning" foreign policy is often interpreted in the region as making Turkey an alternative center of gravity to the EU. This concern is particularly prevalent in countries such as Bosnia-Herzegovina and Albania, where Turkey's influence has been used to counterbalance the Wahabbi influence coming from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf but which, especially to non-Muslim communities, appears to represent a countervailing tug.

And the final concern, that Turkey's presence will recall the Ottoman or "Eastern" elements of local identities, is common to many EU-aspirant countries in the Balkans and Southeastern Europe that had been part of the Ottoman domain. Some participants commented that they fear that this alliance will recall for Western Europeans their own questionable, potentially non-European history and identity. In other words, they fear being perceived by Western Europe as not European enough.

In summary, then, while the report cited above recommends that the U.S. encourage but also shape Turkey's global aspirations because of Turkey's significance as a node of power at the meeting point of the Middle East, the Caucasus, and Europe, at the regional level the capacity of Turkey to achieve those aspirations is also hampered by what such global aspirations recall. Former ambassador Hajrudin Somun noted,

Turkey was previously active [in the Balkans] as well, but today it is pro-active. Its earlier policies were conducted mostly in accordance to and harmony with the dictates of its Western allies, but today Turkey appears on the international and regional stage independently, relying on its own geopolitical and economic power. Turkey's newfound autonomy is, in fact, the main feature of Turkey's foreign policy and the main reason that it has been met with mixed reactions and suspicions about alleged neo-imperial and neo-Ottoman ambitions.⁴¹

³⁹ Zarko Petrovic and Dusan Reljic, "Turkish Interests and Involvements in the Western Balkans: A Score-Card," *Insight Turkey* 13(3), 2011, p. 163.

⁴⁰ Erhan Türbedar, "How is Turkish Foreign Policy Perceived in the Balkans?" *Today's Zaman*, 30 April 2012, http://www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail_getNewsById.action?newsId=279073.

⁴¹ Hajrudin Somun, "Turkey's Balkan Policy, Its Perception and Interpretation," *Today's Zaman*, 3 December 2010.

When Turkey appeared in the past to be a client state of the U.S., or during the period of Turkey's warmest relations with the EU, Turkey was an introverted country that maintained regional balance without presenting a regional threat. But its new independence and ambition make it admired in the region, even as regional actors approach the new Turkey with caution because of the fears of regional competition for leadership and suspicions arising from historical memory.

Finally, it is also worth noting that not only do references to global ambitions appear to recall Ottoman expansionism, and not only is Turkey's historical role as "protector" of Muslim minorities in the region often in contradiction with its current policies, but the rhetoric of the AKP has often taken a paternalistic tone that in turn recalls the imperial era. The AKP's self-ascribed role of "big brother" and "model" to many of the newly democratizing and developing states of the region is one that emerges both from its new self-confidence and from its historical role. However, the paternalistic tone that Turkish leaders and diplomats favor also suggests the attitude of an imperial ruler that "knows best."

Moreover, this paternalistic tone often seems unwarranted and misplaced when Turkey's rhetoric of democracy contrasts with failures of democracy at home. While in many ways Turkey has successfully branded itself as a hybrid country, a meeting-place of cultures, the AKP leadership has been much less successful at protecting or encouraging hybridity at home. In the mid-2000s various "openings"—an Armenian "opening," a Kurdish "opening"—appeared to provide hope that Turkey recognized the need to resolve its own historical and ethnic troubles as a basis for its "zero problems" policy. However, both religious identity and nationalism represent strong currents within the party, and the AKP's leaders, especially Erdoğan, have variously played the religious or ethnic card. So while the AKP has paid lip service to human rights ideals such as gender equality and ethnic and religious tolerance, the jailing of journalists, censorship of the press, and continuing failures in gender equality and human rights reform appear to fan the fears mentioned above, including those of a neo-Ottoman agenda, and undermine the capacity of Turkey to serve as "model" or act as "big brother" in these regions.

B) The missing "mission" of Turkey's soft power

In the past decade, Turkey's opening onto surrounding regions has also increased its soft power, a form of influence that Joseph Nye has defined as 'the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments.' Nye continues by observing that soft power 'arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies.'⁴² While public diplomacy is an important part of soft power, attractiveness is usually conveyed through other cultural and social means, such as media, education, and philanthropy.

⁴² Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004, p. x).

Today, Turkey's soft power is growing through Turkish products, schools, television, and development aid. Turkish construction companies are rebuilding large parts of Georgia; Turkish big business is opening factories in Bulgaria; Turkish banks are visible in Bosnia; and Turkish brands are flooding the markets in Iraq, Egypt, and formerly Syria. Throughout the Balkans, South Caucasus, and Middle East, people watch Turkish movies and media, and Turkish soap operas are popular throughout the Middle East, where they spread a vision of a Turkish way of life that is modern but Muslim.⁴³ Turkish universities are opening branches abroad, while Fethullah Gülen's schools are mushrooming in the Balkans, Central Asia, and South Caucasus. The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency, a government development agency established after the collapse of the Soviet Union to provide assistance to Central Asian states, now operates offices in thirty countries and has sponsored projects in more than a hundred. The Yunus Emre Turkish Cultural Centers now operate in 25 countries, organizing language courses and cultural events. At the same time, Turkish aid organizations, primarily of a religious character, have spread their activities throughout the Middle East, the Balkans, and Africa, even as Turkish civil society organizations have grown and developed partnerships with other NGOs in these regions.

As Turkey's soft power has grown, so has the international relations literature that seeks to explain it. This literature explores the influence of Turkish soap operas and schools, business ventures and civil society organizations, for the most part viewing growing soft power as indicative of a significant change in Turkish foreign policy.⁴⁴ However, this literature also raises questions of consistency implicit in the definition of soft power itself. After all, Nye collapses a number of heterogeneous forces under the definition of "soft power," and despite his recent efforts to elaborate on his definition using the example of the U.S., it remains unclear how, for instance, America's movies, blue jeans, and fast food represent the country's cultural values. Similarly, while it is clear that Turkish soft power increases Turkish presence and influence in surrounding regions, it remains unclear how Turkish textiles, soap operas, and schools may advance foreign policy goals.

⁴³ In a recent TESEV poll, 78% of respondents gave a positive response to the question whether they had ever watched a Turkish television series. For more on the impact of soap operas, see Semih Idiz "Arabs Soak Up Turkish Soap Operas," *Al-Monitor*, 25 January 2013 (<http://www.almonitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/01/turkish-soap-operas-arab-audiences-noor.html>); Alexandra Bucciante, "Turkish soap operas in the Arab world: social liberation or cultural alienation?" *Arab Media and Society*, issue 10, Spring 2010 (<http://www.arabmediasociety.com/?article=735>); Oxford Business Group, "Soap power: The sweeping success of Turkish television series" (<http://www.oxfordbusinessgroup.com/news/soap-power-sweeping-success-turkish-television-series>); Menekşe Tokyay, "Turkish media expands presence into Balkans," *Southeast European Times*, http://www.setimes.com/cocoon/setimes/xhtml/en_GB/features/setimes/articles/2012/05/29/reportage-01.

⁴⁴ See, e.g., İbrahim Kalın, "Soft Power and Public Diplomacy in Turkey," *Perceptions* 16(3), pp. 5-23; Phar Kim Beng, "Turkey's Potential as a Soft Power: A Call for Conceptual Clarity," *Insight Turkey* 10(2), pp. 21-40; Meliha Benli Antunışık, "The Possibilities and Limits of Turkey's Soft Power in the Middle East," *Insight Turkey* 10(2), pp. 41-54; Hakan Altınay, "Turkey's Soft Power: An Unpolished Gem or an Elusive Mirage?" *Insight Turkey* 10(2), pp. 55-66; and Cengiz Çandar, *Turkey's "Soft Power" Strategy: A New Vision for a Multi-Polar World* (Washington, DC: SETA Policy Brief No. 38, 2009).

What one may surmise from Nye's assessment is that when countries have successfully used such extensive soft power to achieve their foreign policy goals, it is because there is a consistent "mission" that appears to drive both diplomacy and the motors of soft power. For Nye's primary example, the U.S., that mission is "freedom" in all its forms—freedom to vote, freedom to speak, freedom to consume. Freedom is a unifying, driving ideology and a mission that unites most Americans across political divides. Polls consistently show that Americans of all classes and political leanings continue to believe that the U.S. remains the freest nation on earth. It appears to be the overwhelming belief of Americans in their ideology of freedom that makes American soft power effective, when it is, and gives some explanation, if not legitimacy, even to foreign policy blunders.

Another example would be the less controversial case of oil-rich Norway. In the past several decades, this small nation's mission has become peace, and the belief that Norway can, should, and does contribute to peace in the world is also widespread amongst most Norwegians. Norwegians believe in peace enough to use a large part of their oil wealth investing in it. As a result, Norwegian civil society and public diplomacy converge in the mission of facilitating peace.

In a world now swayed as much by soft power as by hard power, it is helpful for others to know what you stand for. Turkey's expansive foreign policy today depends as much on economic investment, media, education, and charity organizations as it does on diplomacy. But when we look at the new Turkish foreign policy and its vision of a multipolar world where Turkey should play a greater role, one cannot find such a unifying ideal or goal. Rather, where Turkish diplomacy and soft power converge is in showing the strength, dynamism, and historical and regional significance of Turkey. The "neo-Ottoman" label may be seen as partly indicative of the revival of Turkey's "greatness," and partly as a label that gives a unifying thread to what otherwise seems to be a primarily strategic foreign-policy vision. While Foreign Minister Davutoğlu has consistently rejected the label, what the label manages to do, for anyone observing Turkey's new foreign policy, is to turn the myth of Turkish greatness into a mission. Under this label, spreading the greatness of Turkey may make sense as a unifying ideal.

The problem, of course, is that "the greatness of Turkey" is a good ideal for unifying a fractured nation and giving it a new self-confidence, but it is a hard sell to many of Turkey's neighbors. Moreover, while the situational and strategic nature of Turkey's "special ops" diplomacy may often seem contradictory, suspicions aroused by the "greatness of Turkey" idea often make the "ground troops" that follow seem like a conventional, full-on invasion. Turkish soft power is a combination of economic and cultural penetration, as Turkish small- and medium-sized businesses hungry for markets and outsourcing potential feed on weaker neighbors with growing markets. While this economic, cultural, and philanthropic expansion is an indication of Turkey's growing wealth and influence, the contradictory nature of Turkey's approach to neighboring regions, as well as the lack of a unifying ideal, has meant that neighbors remain puzzled by the meaning of this expansion. This, in turn, creates suspicions that Turkey is pursuing a religious agenda, even as economic expansion in neighboring countries appears rampant and opportunistic.

C) Economic expansion for expansion's sake

Almost all participants in the workshops commented that one of the facets of the new Turkey that they admired the most was its strong economic growth.⁴⁵ Turkey has the world's 17th largest nominal GDP and 15th largest GDP when adjusted for purchasing power parity. Turkey was among the world's fastest growing economies in 2010 and 2011, with 9.2 and 8.5 percent growth in those years, though in 2012 growth dropped to only 1.6% because of a government-induced economic slowdown. Nevertheless, a recently published report by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) predicts that with an average growth of 2.9 percent, Turkey will top most industrialized countries in the next 50 years and will likely be the world's seventh largest economy. A country that a decade ago was dependent on an International Monetary Fund bailout now expects to pay off its IMF debt by April 2013 and afterwards to become a contributor to IMF funds.⁴⁶

There are ongoing debates within Turkey about the sustainability of this economic growth, as well as about the real effects that the neoliberal economy has had on citizens' lives. Critics argue that while average income has risen, social services formerly provided by the state have been cut, thereby eating into those gains. One less-noted effect of this economic growth, however, is its repercussions for relations with neighboring countries. For while growth may produce admiration, and while it may be part of the foreign minister's policy of developing relations through economic interdependence, it is also a growth that depends in part on investment in fragile economies where Turkish capital appears to sap resources without providing rewards to local communities.

In Bulgaria, more than 1500 Turkish firms are in operation, and Turkish investment now exceeds \$1 billion.⁴⁷ While small firms were initially established to overcome the U.S. textile quota and to benefit from cheap labor, today larger companies such as Koç Holding have made investments there, while Şişecam recently opened its fifth factory, making it the country's largest foreign investor.⁴⁸ At the other end of the Black Sea, in Georgia, Batumi and Ajaria have become favored sites for Turkish investment, much of it in the tourism industry. According to the president of the Ajaria Investment Agency, six Turkish textile factories have moved to Ajaria because of its cheaper labor, while 260 Turkish companies have made investments in the region worth \$1.5 billion.⁴⁹ These investments depend primarily on the exploitation of cheap, flexible labor and what is often called a "favorable investment environment," meaning an easing of environmental, labor, and other restrictions.

⁴⁵ In recent TESEV polls on Middle East perceptions of Turkey, Turkey's economic growth was cited as the first reason why it may be a model for countries of the Middle East. See Akgün and Gündoğar, *The Perception of Turkey in the Middle East 2011 and Ortadoğu'da Türkiye Algısı 2012*, as well as Jonathan Levack and Gökçe Perçinoğlu, *Türkiye ve Ortadoğu: Alt-Bölgeler Üzerinde bir Değerlendirme* (Istanbul: TESEV, 2012).

⁴⁶ "Turkey's debt to IMF to be cleared by April," *Turkish Daily News*, 2 October 2012.

⁴⁷ Website of the Turkish Embassy in Sofia, <http://sofya.be.mfa.gov.tr/AmbassadorsMessage.aspx>

⁴⁸ "Şişecam Bulgaristan'daki 5.nci fabrikasını açtı," *Milliyet*, 2 February 2011.

⁴⁹ Abdurrahman Yıldırım, "Burası da Karadeniz'in Laz Vegas'ı," *Haber Türk*, 15 August 2012, <http://www.haberturk.com/yazarlar/abdurrahman-yildirim/768232-burasi-da-karadenizin-laz-vegasi>

So while these investments may be praised by local trade and investment agencies, they also come at a human cost: keeping labor costs exploitatively low, and in the case of Ajaria, developing the casino industry and sex trades that invariably have a toll on local society and violate human rights norms. In the case of Batumi, this area often touted as a "Las Vegas on the Black Sea," is also often sarcastically called the Black Sea's Laz Vegas, referring to the large numbers of ethnic Laz crossing the border from the Turkish northeast to gamble and frequent brothels.

To the south, the case is similar, but with different costs. Turkey's growing economy is also energy-hungry, and Turkey was one of the first countries to invest in Iraq in the aftermath of the second Gulf War. Most foreign companies in Iraq today are Turkish, with around one hundred in the Basra province in the south and 48% of foreign companies, or 1,085 out of a total of 2,241 in the northern Kurdistan Regional Government area. A report from January 2013 notes, 'In 2011, 8,588 Turkish firms exported some \$8.3 billion worth of goods to Iraq. The export volume increased to \$10.7 billion in 2012, an increase of 29 percent on a yearly basis. The Iraqi market today is the destination of 7.1 percent of all Turkish exports.'⁵⁰ However, Turkish investments in the Kurdish region, as well as Turkish government criticism of the central government's treatment of its minorities, have led to tension between Ankara and Baghdad. And before the recent detente with the PKK, this investment also led to the irony—not lost on outside observers—of tacit Turkish support for an autonomous Kurdish province in Iraq's north even as it continued an armed conflict with its own Kurdish insurgency. A similar contradiction between economic and political interests emerged with the ongoing conflict in Syria, which until the start of that conflict had been an important trading partner and site for Turkish investment.

Moreover, the extent of Turkish investment has also entailed alliances between business and political interests that directly or indirectly affect Turkish policies, or the contexts that would define those policies. In northern Iraq, for instance, Turkey seems on track to achieve its goal of \$25 billion in trade by 2015, and even today Turkish traders provide 80% of northern Iraq's food and materials.⁵¹ With 12,000 Turkish citizens working in Iraq, mostly in the Kurdish Regional Government area, and thousands of trucks bringing goods across the border daily, many analysts are betting that Turkey will attempt to mend the current rift with Iraq's central government, caused by Prime Minister Erdoğan's accusations that his counterpart in Iraq is playing sectarian politics.⁵² Indeed, many analysts believe that this trade is laying the groundwork for peace with Kurdish groups, as reports from even two years ago indicated that the Turkish Chamber of Commerce and industry had been lobbying the government to control

⁵⁰ Abdullah Bozkurt, "Turkey and Hydrocarbons in Iraq," *Today's Zaman*, 14 January 2013.

⁵¹ Justin Vela, "Turkey's Dual Cause in Northern Iraq," <http://www.kurdiu.org/en/wtard.php?pageid=2773>.

⁵² Thomas Seibert, "Turkish Traders Cash in on Iraq While the Politicians Squabble," *The National*, 25 March 2013, <http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/middle-east/turkish-traders-cash-in-on-iraq-while-the-politicians-squabble>.

the military's anti-PKK incursions into Iraq's north, as it harms business.⁵³ This is a positive instance of the economic interdependence that Davutoğlu wished to use as the cornerstone for his "zero problems" policy. However, there have also been backlashes. In Georgia, for instance, the close connections between Turkish business interests and former President Saakashvili appear to have fueled anti-Turkish propaganda in the campaign that defeated the former president at election in 2012.⁵⁴

The easing of visa restrictions and the opening of neighboring countries to Turkish investment, then, has fuelled Turkish economic growth but has had social and political costs, either in the countries where these investments have been made, or in diplomacy between Turkey and those countries. While the contradictions of investment and foreign policy in Iraq, Kurdistan and Syria are apparent, the social costs of Turkish investment in other neighboring countries may take a more creeping toll, especially tarnishing Turkey's image as "model."

⁵³ Deborah Amos, "Turkey Flexes Economic, Political Muscle in Iraq," 31 December 2010, National Public Radio, <http://www.npr.org/2010/12/31/132475910/turkey-flexes-economic-political-muscle-in-iraq>.

⁵⁴ According to the US embassy communication cited in footnote 10 above, 'Tbilisi has cultivated useful ties with some Turkish Georgian groups. The oldest and principal Turkish-Georgian language newspaper in Turkey, "Chveneburi," (chveneburi.net) is decidedly pro-Saakashvili in its coverage. Acar Insaat, a large Turkish construction firm, has close connections with the Saakashvili administration, according to Celikpala. A number of other large holding groups in Turkey are run by ethnic Georgians, including the Carmikli and Ozaltin groups, and also maintain ties with Tbilisi. In the 1990s, with GOG support, Turkish and Georgian businessmen founded the Turkish-Georgian Cultural and Solidarity Foundation in an effort to balance the Abkhaz/Circassian lobby.'

III. CONCLUSION: TURKEY AS ASPIRATION

The new Turkish foreign policy has paved the way for Turkey's economic growth and for new or renewed strategic partnerships that are reshaping the region. It has been a visionary and proactive foreign policy, engaging with the parameters and opportunities of a multi-polar, post-Cold War world. However, we have argued here that despite its vision and particular successes, the new Turkish foreign policy has failed to produce a consistent aim or ideal that can unite diplomacy and soft power. In other words, neighbors continue to have difficulty understanding where Turkey is going or what it stands for. Turkey has developed a go-it-alone, "special operations" approach characterized by speed of decision and implementation. This approach, in turn, is part of Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoğlu's vision of the type of new diplomacy necessary for a world that now lacks clear centers of power. Yet despite the vision of a proactive broker fostered by Davutoğlu and the AKP, a vision in which Turkey is at the center of new regional political and economic networks, most observers seem to notice that the new Turkish foreign policy is missing a key component. In popular language, there is something about it that just doesn't jell.

In trying to find that missing something, many commentators point to a rhetoric of freedom and democracy that lacks substance at home. By most measures, Turkey of the past several years has failed in maintaining this balance. Davutoğlu's expansive vision, his desire to balance freedom and security in foreign affairs, certainly seems undermined when hundreds of journalists, academics, and students are jailed on charges of sedition. While a 2012 Freedom House report finds Turkey only "partly free," a recent Carnegie Endowment report finds that "the state of press freedom in Turkey is a stain on Ankara's democratic reputation, economic standing, and diplomatic position."⁵⁵ Moreover, it undermines his cause when Davutoğlu touts Turkey's multiculturalism abroad while ethnic and religious minorities remain less than free or autonomous at home.

But to understand what is missing, it is not necessary to go beyond or behind the rhetoric. Indeed, the rhetoric itself points to more systemic problems. It points to the lack of a "mission," a common goal or aim, that expresses what Turkey stands for. The new vision is one of a Turkey that has a critical global role to play in a multipolar world. The question is, what would Turkey

⁵⁵ Marc Pierini with Markus Mayr, *Press Freedom in Turkey* (New York: Carnegie Papers, 2013), p. 1.

do with that power? Until quite recently, the idea of a “Turkish model” seemed to obviate the problem of having a goal or ideal, because it made it seem as though Turkey’s “mission” was to bring the West to the East, democracy to Islam. But models are prescriptive, whereas soft power is about shared goals or ideals that may not be realized by everyone in the same way. Soft power is about aspiration: the U.S. and Norway still remain high on the list of countries that many people around the world admire and aspire to. Today, while many of Turkey’s neighbors aspire to achieve its economic growth, this hardly counts as an ideal that could provide a uniting thread to Turkey’s diplomacy and soft power.

Indeed, one might argue that the “model” paradigm had been invoked far too soon, before Turkey’s democracy and economic growth had been fully consolidated. However, the model paradigm may also paradoxically be a hindrance to creating a true model. After all, the prescriptive aspect of the *model* paradigm suggests that Turkey has found or is on the road to finding a particular formula for democracy, security, stability, and economic growth that can be copied by others.⁵⁶ This also puts Turkey in the position of “big brother” for smaller or weaker regional powers, but interestingly without requiring its full competence in or implementation of the “model.” One Turkish scholar has called this the “demonstrative effect,” arguing that it is precisely Turkey’s position as a “work in progress” that makes it appealing to certain countries of the region, especially Arab states, which see themselves in Turkey’s imperfections.⁵⁷ It suffices that Turkey is on the right route, doing better in meeting prescriptive criteria than others in the region. What is important is that Turkey accepts the prescriptive criteria, which it so far has realized better than others.

The concept of Turkey as *aspiration*, on the other hand, recognizes that there may be no such prescriptive formulae for combining democracy, security, and economic growth. At the same time, it recognizes that for some in the region, Turkey is a figure of hope. Many states of the region admire Turkey without wishing to imitate it. And they are not fooled by Turkish leaders’ belief in their own “Turkish model” rhetoric. Other states of the region recognize that Turkey is still walking an uneven path towards democratization, and that in the past few years may even have taken several steps backward. Indeed, many of the contradictions of the “Turkish model” outlined above would be resolved by Turkey’s resolution of its own democratic deficits. However, it seems to be the case that one reason for Turkish leaders’ lack of urgency in resolving

⁵⁶ For a history and analysis of the Turkish model concept, see Sinan Ülgen, *From Inspiration to Aspiration: Turkey in the New Middle East* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2011). The title of Ülgen’s report also makes reference to Turkey as aspiration, though the author does not refer to this idea in the report.

⁵⁷ See Kemal Kirişçi, “The ‘Demonstrative Effect’ and the Transformation of the Middle East,” *Insight Turkey* 13(2), 2011, pp. 33-55. One recent report also suggests that Turkey’s EU candidacy status gives it cache in the Arab world, and that because of this ‘the incompleteness of the Turkish model would not be a problem or a contradiction, but it could be seen as a dynamic element as Arab countries would be arguably encouraged and inspired by Turkey’s future achievements and could learn not from successes but also from its failures’ (Emiliano Alessandri and Meliha Benli Alunışık, *Unfinished Transitions: Challenges and Opportunities of the EU’s and Turkey’s Responses to the ‘Arab Spring’*, Global Turkey in Europe Working Paper No. 4, January 2013, p. 9.

these issues is precisely because they have been touted, especially in the post-9/11 world, as a model for combining Islam and democracy. This model paradigm is based, of course, on the assumption that Muslims have a problem with democracy that Turkey has somehow managed to solve.

Moreover, Turkey's public diplomacy, especially under Prime Minister Erdoğan, has been very like the proverbial elephant in the china shop, but Turkey's inflation to elephant status has also been encouraged by the "Turkish model" rhetoric. To see Turkey as aspiration is a more modest claim, and one less prone to provoke a paternalism that in turn invokes specters of imperialism. To see Turkey as aspiration is to recognize common ideals or goals without claiming that the country has found a formula for achieving them. Rather, it is to encourage reflection on the barriers to achieving those goals, and to understand that reflection as an important part of ultimately achieving them. It is to focus on the transformative potential present in hope, rather than on the prescriptive claims of models.

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In the past decade, Turkey has experienced unprecedented economic growth, accompanied by a new foreign policy strategy aimed at using the country's regional position to transform it into a global player. The new Turkish foreign policy has developed novel strategies for dealing with conflicts in the Western Balkans, Southeastern Europe, the South Caucasus, and the Middle East, and the country has become a figure of hope for many people in these regions. However, while Turkey has used its historical ties to develop these relations, the reception of Turkish aid, intervention, mediation, and soft power has been less than fully positive.

The PRIO-TESEV project of which this report is a result aimed to examine regional perceptions of the new Turkish foreign policy through a series of workshops with regional experts. We were especially interested in perceptions of Turkey's new foreign policy in countries that have historical ties to Turkey because of the historically loaded rhetoric and strategies that shape the country's soft power politics in these areas. We asked experts to consider Turkey's new role in their own countries, how this role is tied to Turkey's domestic and regional interests, and how this role has altered local perceptions of Turkey. The report summarizes the discussions of these workshops and provides an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of Turkey's new policy for the region.

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