**TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY UNDER AKP RULE: MAKING SENSE OF THE TURBULENCE**

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**Abstract**

The twists and turns of Turkish foreign policy under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) rule have been a matter of interest not only in the scholarly literature, but also in common discourse. This article traces the unfolding of this policy in Turkey’s neighbourhood and in relation to its quest for EU membership, particularly since 2006, and also discusses the milestones that have been shaping it. Drawing upon the categories of change Charles Hermann identified, this article illustrates the magnitude and direction of change in Turkish foreign policy during this period and critically evaluates its implications over this policy today.

**Keywords**

Turkish foreign policy, foreign policy change, Ahmet Davutoğlu, Justice and Development Party (AKP)

**Introduction**

The Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* – AKP) governing Turkey since November 2002 pursued a pro-European policy aiming to bring Turkey closer to the European Union (EU) membership in its first three years in power. The weight of the EU-oriented objectives began to diminish after the start of the membership negotiations between Turkey and EU in October 2005, and Turkey started to give a particular place to the Middle East in its foreign policy. It could be said that the Hamas leader Khaled Mashal’s visit to Turkey in 2006 constituted a symbolic milestone in Turkish foreign policy in terms of playing a more autonomous and ambitious role in the Middle East affairs. The AKP’s second term in power (between 2007 and 2011) was a period during which Turkey was very active in the Middle Eastern politics in line with the ambitious vision to make Turkish foreign policy more autonomous (from the West) and to increase Turkey’s influence in the Middle East, a region seen as a historical and ‘natural’ zone of influence due to its Ottoman past and religious affinity.

Such dynamic aspects of Turkish foreign policy have received increasingly more attention during the last decade in the scholarly literature. Earlier studies have examined aspects of continuity versus change along with ‘zero-problems’ policy and in relation to so-called ‘strategic depth’ and ‘neo-Ottomanism’ (Sözen, 2010; Kardaş, 2010). Other studies also have discussed ‘shift of axis’ in Turkey in view of different policy areas (Öniş, 2011). More recent studies have focused on Turkey’s involvement in Syrian uprisings as well as its bid for a greater role in re-shaping of Middle East (Demirtaş-Bagdonas, 2014).

The previous studies notwithstanding, there exists a paucity of studies examining the milestones of the AKP’s foreign policy in such a way as to enable for a meaningful assessment of current status of Turkish foreign policy. As such, the aim of this article is two-fold. First, it elaborates the unfolding of Turkish foreign policy under the AKP rule in integrative and interrelated manner by placing it under Hermann’s (1990) model of foreign policy change. Second, by doing so, this article provides a well-rounded insight on the current predicaments of Turkish foreign policy.

Hermann’s model places foreign policy on a continuum with graduated levels to indicate the magnitude and direction of change. These are (1) minor adjustment changes that reflect the change in the level of effort; (2) program changes implying the change in the means and methods used to address a goal/problem; (3) problem/goal changes meaning the changes in the goals and objectives and (4) international orientation change referring to a fundamental change in the state’s entire orientation toward world affairs (1990, p. 5). At different times, Turkish foreign policy illustrated the first three levels of change, while whether or not the highest form of foreign policy change occurred in Turkey during the last decade is more debatable. The following sections will examine respectively, how Turkish foreign policy during the last decade moved up in the ladder of Hermann’s model with a final discussion on the impact of this on Turkish foreign policy today.

***Adjustment Changes* in Turkish foreign policy: Continuity versus Change**

The architect of the AKP’s foreign policy, Ahmet Davutoğlu, though appointed as Minister of Foreign Affairs as late as May 2009, had been the mastermind behind Turkish foreign policy since his appointment as Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan’s chief advisor on foreign policy in 2003 (Aras, 2009, p. 127). His most known foreign policy concepts before taking up the advisory post for assisting PM Erdoğan were the so-called ‘strategic depth’ and the so-called ‘zero-problem policy with neighbours’. What are the meanings and implications of these two concepts? In a nutshell, the strategic depth is a paradigm which contends that Turkey can (and should) broaden its influence over Middle Eastern countries ‘by using soft power and the historical legacy of the Ottoman Empire’ (Meral and Paris, 2010, p. 80).[[1]](#footnote-1) The zero-problem policy—considered to go hand in hand with the strategic depth—,on the other hand, offers ‘a vision of minimizing the problems in its neighboring regions (…) while avoiding involvement in international confrontations’ (Aras, 2009, p. 130). In 2009 a liberal columnist then supporting the AKP government cherished this approach with the following words: ‘[It] is a radical departure from the conventional view that Turkey is surrounded by enemy countries against which it should be prepared to defend itself’ (Dağı, 2009).

Davutoğlu, as an academic, views the secular nation-state project of Kemalism (the founding ideology of the Republic of Turkey which replaced the Ottoman Empire in 1923) as an alienation to the Islamic civilization in which Turks lived with other Muslim nations of the Middle East for centuries. He therefore associates the conflicts the secular Turkish-nation state had with its neighbours throughout the 20th Century with the Kemalist “deviation”. In Özkan’s words ‘Davutoğlu idealizes and seeks to emulate the Islamism of the era of [the Ottoman Sultan] Abdülhamid II’ (Özkan, 2014). Viewing Islamism as ‘the only ideology that will make Turkey a leader in the Middle East’, Davutoğlu opposes to the foreign policy of the Republican era by claiming that ‘if Turkey insists on remaining on the level of a nation-state (…) in its foreign policy, it will be erased from history’: For Turkey the Middle East is nothing but a “Lebensraum” that has to be dominated (*ibid.*).

What, then, were the initial implications of the zero-sum policy coupled with strategic depth for Turkish foreign policy? Earlier analyses (Kut 2010; Öniş and Yılmaz, 2009) on the AKP’s foreign policy, in particular regarding its first term (2002—2007) and initial years of its second term, have focused on the aspects of continuity and change in Turkish foreign policy. Scholars on both ends have discussed extendedly to show either that this policy was old wine in a new bottle or that it is one that is genuine.

On the one hand, it could be argued that the *change* dimension of the AKP’s foreign policy was prevailing over the *continuity* aspect. According to this view, it could be pointed out that with the AKP, Turkey strengthened its ties with most of the Middle Eastern countries, including those it had turbulent relations in the 1990s. Having examined Turkey’s immersion in the Middle East politics in the 1980s and 1990s, Altunışık and Martin argue that ‘Turkey’s involvement in the Middle East has become more comprehensive, multi-facetted, and deeper under the [AKP]’ (Altunışık and Martin, 2011, pp. 570-571). In accordance with this, Turkey began to be less aligned with the US and the EU in the Middle Eastern issues, compared with the past (to be more specific, compared with the second half of twentieth century and the first few years of the 2000s).[[2]](#footnote-2) As Kardaş (2010) points out, during this period Turkish foreign policy proved to be more autonomous from the effects of Turkey’s Western linkage and that ‘while formulating its regional policies, Turkey has emerged as more self-confident and autonomous, and, most important, has deviated occasionally from the transatlantic political agenda (p. 115)’.

Turkey’s positions with respect to her problems with Armenia and Cyprus—at least initially—also illustrate the changing aspect of Turkish foreign policy as examples of the zero-problems policy. Turkey and Armenia, after long years of no talk and mutual hostility have signed two protocols on October 2009 for the normalization of bilateral relations. At the time of their signature, the protocols were seen as crucial to resolve the enduring problems with a neighbour and thus an important aspect of the zero-problem policy—though both protocols were later shelved by both countries. As for the problems with Cyprus, aware of the urgency for a solution on the verge of the EU’s enlargement, Turkey actively supported the Annan Plan in 2004 and lobbied for a yes vote in Northern Cyprus. However, what would have been the solution to the decades long problem in the island, was shelved following the no vote of the Greek Cypriots.

The failure of the Annan Plan also had adverse effects over Turkey’s relations with the EU. The end of the AKP’s first term in office were also the years when Turkey’s accession process to the EU started losing pace.[[3]](#footnote-3) The first years of the AKP rule witnessed strong commitment of the AKP to Turkey’s EU bid. Between February 2002 and July 2004, eight ‘Harmonisation Packages’ have amended 218 articles of fifty-three laws, covering a wide range of political reforms. These reforms, together with the AKP’s active lobbying, resulted in the opening of accession negotiations with the EU on October 2005. Following this, in 2006 a final Harmonisation Package was passed by the Parliament, amending nine laws. Soon after this, though, accession negotiations lost its momentum. While the EU shoulders part of the responsibility for compromising the credibility and consistency of its conditionality in the eyes of both public and officials in Turkey, this outcome, no doubt, is also a result of the AKP’s aforementioned policies.

On the other hand, the *continuity* aspect of the Turkish foreign policy was not less evident than the changes the AKP brought about. Whatever Erdoğan’s and other AKP officials’ rhetoric about ‘change’, in many aspects, the AKP government has sought to pursue the same foreign policy goals with the secularist governments which were in power before November 2002. Following the end of Cold War, Turkey adjusted its foreign policy so as to contribute to the integration of the former socialist countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus into the global political and economic system, or to the imperialist system to say more straightforwardly. A similar goal was pursued for the Middle East too. Starting from the end of the 1990s, Turkey began to ameliorate its once fragile relations with Syria. In that case the objective was not solely based on ‘security’ issues (the PKK issue)[[4]](#footnote-4), in other words Turkish governments sought to integrate Syria into the imperialist system too by taking it away from Iran’s influence. Another region evoking Turkish politicians’ appetite was the Balkans, hence Turkey aimed to increase its influence in that region which had a long Ottoman past, in line with the post-Cold War US foreign policy and to the detriment of the Russian influence. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, Turkey always sided with the ‘West’ and took part in NATO’s expansion towards the Balkans.

The general panorama outlined above comprises the Turkish foreign policy’s strong feature of *continuity* before and during the AKP rule. The ‘greater use of cultural factors and Turkey’s multi-civilizational identity, along with reconciliation with the Middle East’ was not an original invention by the AKP or Davutoğlu, but it was initiated before the start of the AKP reign by the former Minister of Foreign Affairs İsmail Cem who was in office between 1997 and 2002 (*ibid*., p. 122). Aiming to ‘make greater use of cooperative-security instruments’ in Turkey’s relations with the Middle-Eastern countries, Cem instigated a dialogue with Syria, Iraq, and Iraq’s neighbours (*ibid*.). Advancing on the same path, the AKP government signed free customs agreements with a number of Middle Eastern countries including Syria, Jordan and Lebanon (Meral and Paris, 2010, p. 81). Relations with Syria became more than warm especially during the second term of the AKP. In 2009 and 2010 both countries organized joint military manoeuvres, signed military cooperation agreement concerning technical matters, cancelled visas, hold joint cabinet meetings under the newly established body called High Level Strategic Cooperation Council, and signed several agreements regarding cooperation in many areas ranging from the oil industry to the agriculture (Arı and Pirinççi, 2010, p. 11).

In a speech delivered in Bosnia in 2009, Davutoğlu implied that Turkey’s objective was to integrate countries in the *periphery* to the *centre*, a goal the AKP governments inherited from their predecessors in fact: ‘We will integrate the Balkan region, Middle East and Caucasus … together with Turkey as the center of world politics in the future’ (Cornell, 2012, p. 18).

Leaving the rhetoric aside, the so-called Davutoğlu effect over Turkish foreign policy during this period is fairly limited. In Kardaş’s words; ‘the elements of Turkey’s recent foreign policy doctrine such as pursuing economic integration, spearheading regional organizations, and asserting Turkey’s regional power position were present even before the rise of the new foreign-policy elite’ (2010, p. 119). Pertaining to the element of *change* in Turkish foreign policy under the AKP rule, the novelty of the AKP foreign policy is not the invention of a new strategic doctrine (Altunışık and Martin, 2011, pp. 570-571), but rather what Hermann, in his classification of foreign policy changes named as *adjustment changes*. Accordingly, the steps taken by the AKP during this period brought changes in the level of effort, while keeping the goal and the method through which to attain that goal intact (1990, p. 5).

***Program Change* in Turkish Foreign Policy: Rising Profile in the Middle East and High Tension with Israel**

The AKP’s second term in office went beyond the aforediscussed adjustment changes and brought along what Hermann named as ‘program change’ in Turkish foreign policy. A program change, according to Hermann meant changes in the methods or means to attain the goal addressed. In other words, there is a change in what is done and how it is done (ibid.). Accordingly, the AKP sought new ways to achieve its goal of establishing closer ties with Middle East along with a more autonomous foreign policy from the West.

The goal of pursuing a more autonomous foreign policy than those of the past Turkish governments became evident following the AKP’s second electoral victory (2007) and it became dominant following the failure of Turkey’s conciliatory role between Syria and Israel, and the latter’s brutal crackdown on the Gaza Strip in December 2008. It is in this context that Turkey instrumentalized a number of new policies to achieve its goals. The first of these concerned the relations with Israel. A series of events which began with PM Erdoğan’s storming off the stage in a World Economic Forum session in January 2009 following a heated debate with the Israeli President Simon Peres and the moderator of the session, and which reached its peak following the massacre committed by Israeli commandos who landed on the *Mavi Marmara* ship carrying unarmed protestors seeking to draw world’s attention to Israel’s inhumane blockade of Gaza (May 2010) caused the worst deterioration of Turkish-Israeli relations ever (Meral and Paris, 2010, pp. 82-83; Arı and Pirinççi, 2010, p. 5; Özpek and Demirağ, 2012, pp. 122-123). Meanwhile the AKP government took initiatives for developing Turkey’s relations with a number of Middle Eastern countries—some of these initiatives were unimaginable in the 1990s—and therefore Turkey’s popularity increased in the ‘Arab streets’.

The other initiatives taken by the AKP government comprised many steps bringing about a measureless warming of the Turkish-Syrian relations (Arı and Pirinççi, 2010, p. 11), greeting Iranian President Ahmedinejad’s electoral victory in 2009—which was a rigged victory in the eyes of many Westerners— (Cornell, 2012, p. 19), the Turkish-Brazilian plan to solve the nuclear issue between Iran and the West (Özpek and Demirağ, 2012, p. 123), the ‘no’ vote casted by Turkey during the UN Security Council session dealing with the proposal to impose sanctions on Iran (*ibid*.), and the developing relations with the Hamas administration in Gaza (Aras, 2009, p. 135; Özpek and Demirağ, p. 122; Cornell, p. 15.). Amongst the ‘brave initiatives’ being mentioned were highly controversial moves too, such as Erdoğan’s contention that Sudanese President Omar al Bashir did not commit genocide in the Darfur region on the ground that ‘a Muslim cannot commit genocide’ (Cornell, 2012, p. 17).

In some of the initiatives, the US and the EU foreign policies diverged from that of Turkey. For instance, in the Turkish-Israeli friction (later crisis) the US has always tried to reconcile parties but at the same time made it clear that it would side with Israel when necessary.[[5]](#footnote-5) In addition, the US and the EU showed their distance to the AKP policies regarding Hamas, Iranian nuclear issue, and Syria many times (Meral and Paris, 2010, p. 81; Özpek and Demirağ, 2012, p. 124; Aras, 2009, p. 135.). This aspired autonomy of Turkish foreign policy entailed Western governments to cast doubts about Turkey’s foreign policy orientation in some instances. The question that whether there was a ‘shift of axis’ in Turkey’s traditional pro-Western foreign policy was frequently asked by a number of Western politicians and scholars, and this issue was widely debated until the mid-2011,[[6]](#footnote-6) a juncture where the AKP realigned Turkish foreign policy with the Western interests as a result of the kick-off of the so-called Arab Spring. The Turkish foreign policy got closer to the policies pursued by the US and the EU, but this did not completely restore Western governments’ confidence towards PM Erdoğan, his Foreign Minister Davutoğlu, and the AKP.

One of the most important new components of the AKP’s foreign policy activism in this period that brought about a program change in Turkish foreign policy was its mediation efforts. The Turkish government was actively involved in the mediation efforts between various third parties such as Hamas and international actors, Hamas and Fatah, Hamas and Israel (Aras, 2009, p. 136), Iraq’s Sunni opposition leaders and the US (ibid., pp. 138-139), between different Lebanese groups (Arı and Pirinççi, 2010, p. 4), between Syria and Israel (Altunışık and Martin, 2011, p. 573). The West praised most of these mediation efforts. For instance, EU’s 2010 Turkey Progress Report applauded President Gül’s visit to Iraq and the warming of the relations between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government as developments that ‘contributed to the positive atmosphere in solving the Iraqi problem’ (Özpek and Demirağ, 2012, p. 121). The UN special rapporteur on Palestine, Richard Falk, praised Turkey’s dialogue with Hamas ‘with a specific reference to the Hamas invitation in 2006’ (Aras, 2009, p. 136). Similarly, after having participated to the meeting between high-level Syrian and EU officials including Bashar Asad, Nicolas Sarkozy and Javier Solana, Foreign Minister Davutoğlu was praised by the French President Sarkozy for his ‘active contribution to the solution of the problem’ (International media ‘joined Sarkozy in this exclusive acknowledgement of Davutoğlu’s role with a further notice of his role in the truce between Hamas and Israel’) (*ibid*.).

Before ending this section, a few words on the role of powerful domestic actors other than the AKP government in the area of foreign policy are worth mentioning. During the first and second terms of the AKP, the government officials were not alone in determining the road map of the Turkish foreign policy indeed. The military and the Gülen Movement (a large network comprising tens of thousands of businessmen, politicians, bureaucrats and intellectuals named after Fethullah Gülen, an influential religious leader) had some influences over the AKP government in the making of the foreign policy. However it would not be wrong to contend that in its third term in power (i.e. since 2011) the AKP succeeded in staying alone in determining how the foreign policy must be.

Although the extent of interference and the characteristics of relations with civilian politicians varied in different eras, the Turkish military had always a strong tradition of meddling to politics since 1960 due to its self-ordained role of guardianship of the secular regime (Hale, 1994; Cizre, 2008, pp. 301-320). The AKP’s accession to power in November 2002 generated a suspicion in the military because of the former’s cadres’ Islamist background. During its first term in power, the AKP faced resistance from and had frictions with a significant segment of the military both in domestic and foreign affairs (especially concerning the Cyprus question for the latter). However the Erdoğan government legislated a series of EU harmonization packages until 2006 with the full support of the EU and therefore the military lost most of the instruments it used to benefit from for meddling to politics (Cizre, 2008, pp. 320-325). Tackling with the challenge coming from the secular nationalist hardliners of the military, the AKP government also received support from the ‘reformers in the military establishment’ (Phillips, 2004, p. 86). In fact, although the components of the ‘Kemalist state’ (the then Republic President Ahmet Necdet Sezer, some segments of the judiciary, and the military) were sceptical towards the “real agenda” of the AKP, they were generally in harmony with the Erdoğan government in foreign policy issues (Robins, 2007). In its second term in power, the self-confident AKP government which received more than 46 percent of the votes in the July 2007 elections, undertook large purges in the military thanks to the allegedly anti-coup prosecutions known as Ergenekon and Sledgehammer trials. Hence the military came under total civilian control.

The Gülen Movement was a strong ally of the AKP government throughout the process of establishing a Putin-style competitive authoritarian regime in Turkey. However, along with their postponed conflicts, there were different attitudes between the Gülen movement and the AKP in the area of foreign affairs too during the latter’s second term in power. The most obvious divergence broke out after the *Mavi Marmara* incident. The leader of the movement, Fethullah Gülen criticized the Gaza aid flotilla for acting without Israeli government’s consent (Lauria, 2010). The flotilla was led and supported by the AKP government; therefore the address of the criticism was clear. Gülen’s comments caused a tension between his movement and the AKP government (Karpazlı, 2013). The tacit conflicts between the AKP and Gülenists eventually rose to an open confrontation in early 2012, and this intensified in late 2013. By mid-2014, most of the Gülenists appear to be purged from the bureaucracy.

***Goal Change* in Turkish foreign policy: Turning of the Tide**

The AKP cadres considered the successive uprisings in Middle East and North Africa and in particular the most recent one in Syria as a ‘policy window’ (Kingdon, 1984, p. 174) to further increase Turkey’s profile in the region. In contrast to rationalistic accounts of policy changes that expect smooth adjustments to altered environmental circumstances, a ‘policy window’ suggests a moment of opportunity to introduce sudden changes or reforms.

Yet, aspiring to play a leadership role is not the same thing as establishing closer ties with Middle Eastern countries nor seeking a more autonomous foreign policy in the region. In consideration of Hermann’s continuum, Turkey was now on the third stage of foreign policy change: problem/goal changes, meaning that the initial goal the policy addresses is now replaced.

In accordance with this new goal, the AKP’s decision-makers decided to support ‘moderate Islamist’ currents, try to be a model for them, and form a solidarity network with them—a network that would be led by Turkey. A policy that could be termed ‘Muslim Brotherhood Internationalism’ has been put into action, and the Muslim Brotherhood’s electoral victories in the post-Mubarak Egypt gave many observers the impression that the AKP’s pro-Islamist standpoint would make Turkey the leader of the region indeed.

Another aspect of the AKP’s ambitious policy, shaped by the so-called opportunities offered by the Arab uprisings, was the partial alignment with the Western policies (Özpek and Demirağ, 2012, p. 126). Turkey was one of the first countries which openly supported the ousting of President Mubarak in Egypt. Then, following a short hesitation with regard to the NATO’s prospective role in overthrowing Libyan leader Qaddafi, Turkish government passionately took part in the Western military operation that “liberated” Libya from Qaddafi (Cornell, 2012, p. 20). In Syrian civil war too Turkey aligned with the West, and has done everything for toppling Bashar Assad. But here should be noted that the AKP’s policy towards Syria was (and still is) in line with the US and EU only in general terms. When it comes to details, or to the manners for achieving the common objectives, there have been differences between Turkish and Western positions. These differences are/were related to the question as to whether NATO should undertake a military operation against Assad forces and which opposition groups are/were worth supporting against the Syrian regime.

However this goal change in Turkish foreign policy has had a cost for Turkish government. Warm relations with Iran and Syria deteriorated, particularly with the latter. The AKP government has given huge support to the “Syrian”[[7]](#footnote-7) rebels. Along with sheltering hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees who fled their homes due to the civil war, Turkey has also given wide logistical support to the rebel factions. For instance the headquarters of the “Free Syrian Army” was in Turkey for quite a long time. In late 2012 the AKP government went even further and began to let Al-Qaeda linked groups operate in Turkish territory and cross the border with no difficulty at all.

Diplomatic ties with Syria rapidly weakened in the second half of 2011 (*ibid*.) and by the end of that year relations broke up completely. Turkey’s ‘growing criticism of Assad led to a deterioration in Turkish-Iranian ties’ too, and the AKP government’s ‘decision in the fall of 2011 to accept the stationing of U.S. missile defense systems was very much linked to these new tensions with Tehran’ (*ibid*.). Turkey’s relations with Iraq worsened too, for two reasons: The tension with Iran has cooled down the relation with Iraq, whose government is Shia-dominated, and the rapprochement with Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government—particularly the energy deals with them—has caused a reaction in the Baghdad government which views Iraqi Kurds’ tendency to act autonomously as a threat to its sovereignty. Lebanon was another country with which Turkey’s relations worsened due to the fact or perception that the AKP government was pursuing a sectarian (pro-Sunni, anti-Shia and anti-Alawi) foreign policy. It was striking that in Lebanon, where Turkish peace-keeping forces had been warmly welcomed in 2006 (Arı and Pirinççi, 2010, p. 4), a demonstration was held in May 2013 in front of these forces’ headquarters by the relatives of the people taken hostage by the Turkey-supported fighters in Syria (Zaatari, 2013a). Consequently, as a result of the growing public anger towards Turkey, the AKP government announced in July 2013 that it would withdraw its troops from the UN peacekeeping forces situated in Lebanon within two months (Zaatari, 2013b).

Whether the final and highest form in Hermann’s foreign policy change model— international orientation change—actually occurred in Turkish foreign policy in the last decade is open to discussion. One can argue, though, that Turkey’s logistical support to Al Qaeda in its armed struggle against the Syrian regime was perceived by many in the West as a clear detachment at least from what came to be the Western alliance against terrorist groups and thereby a potential *international orientation change*. More recently, Turkey’s refusal to sign the Jeddah Declaration and its reluctant support to the coalition against The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant—ISIL may further serve as evidence to Turkey’s *international orientation change*. Furthermore, *de facto* suspension of accession negotiations for almost a decade now and Turkey’s (as well as the EU’s) half-hearted efforts to revitalize this process may reinforce the idea of a change in international orientation. However, despite recurrent bottleneck in Turkey’s relations with its Western allies with respect to various aspects of Middle Eastern politics, Turkey continues to be in the ‘Western camp’, particularly in regard to current struggle against ISIL.

The AKP government’s isolation in the Middle East proved to be obvious by the end of 2013. Turkey does not have ambassadors in Syrian, Egyptian and Israeli capitals. Turkey’s image in the Arab countries is in decline too. A survey conducted by the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV) in 16 different Middle Eastern countries demonstrated that Turkey’s average popularity in these countries first dropped from 78 percent (2011) to 69 percent (2012), then to 59 percent (2013). In 2011 in Egypt 86 percent of the participants expressed positive feeling for Turkey. The decrease two years later could be said to be shocking: 38 percent. Similarly, the corresponding figure in Syria dropped from 44 percent (2011) to 22 percent (2013) (Akgün and Gündoğar, 2013, pp. 6 and 19).

**Conclusion**

Turkish foreign policy, under the auspices of its architect Davutoğlu, had set off with a goal of establishing zero-problems with neighbours somewhat a decade ago. Be zero-problems policy a continuity or a change, foreign policy under Davutoğlu soon developed a number of instruments to improve commercial, cultural and diplomatic ties with the neighbouring countries. Zero-problems policy coincided with the AKP’s desire for a more ambitious role in the Middle East affairs and also a foreign policy line more autonomous from the West.

However, achieving the goals set proved more difficult than imagined. This article traced the unfolding of Turkish foreign policy under the AKP, and in particular since 2006, and discussed the milestones shaping this policy. To better account the change during this period, Turkish foreign policy is examined under Hermann’s model places foreign policy. In line with this continuum, the authors identified how Turkish foreign policy, at different times illustrated the first three levels of change: (1) minor adjustment changes that reflect the change in the level of effort; (2) program changes implying the change in the means and methods used to address a goal/problem; (3) problem/goal changes meaning the changes in the goals and objectives.

Whether or not Turkey’s bid for regional leadership and the following policies during the last decade account to an ‘international orientation change’, in other words the highest form of foreign policy change in Hermann’s model is more debatable. However, successive mistakes in Turkish foreign policy led not only to Turkey’s isolation in its policies, but also put the goals so far away that once seemed within reached.

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1. For Davutoğlu’s conceptual and historical account on the strategic depth and his views on Turkey’s historical legacy and position in international system see Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik: Türkiye’nin Uluslararası Konumu* (İstanbul: Küre Yayınları, Mart 2008), pp. 15-93. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For a summary of the late Ottoman and Republican Turkish foreign policies from 1774 to 2000 see William Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy Since 1774* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2013). An account of Turkey’s foreign policy towards Middle East before and during the AKP’s reign can be found at Graham E. Fuller, *The New Turkish Republic: Turkey as a Pivotal State in the Muslim World* (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2008), pp. 25-129. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For the history of Turkey’s position within the European economic and political integration process see Çağrı Erhan and Tuğrul Arat, “AET’yle İlişkiler” in Baskın Oran (ed.), *Türk Dış Politikası Cilt I* (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2001), pp. 808-853. The impact of the Cyprus and Kurdish issues on Turkey’s EU membership process in the beginning of the AKP rule is discussed in Philip Robins, “Confusion at home, Confusion abroad: Turkey between Copenhagen and Iraq”, *International Affairs*, May 2003, Vol. 79, Issue 3, pp. 547-566. For the influence of Turkey’s EU membership process -which had an accelerated pace between 2002 and 2005- over the democratization in Turkey see Mario Zucconi, “The Impact of the EU Connection on Turkey’s Domestic and Foreign Policy”, *Turkish Studies*, 2009, Vol. 10, Issue 1, pp. 25-36. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. A summary of the emergence and evolution of the Kurdish question from 19th Century to 2005 can be found at Hamit Bozarslan, “Kurds and the Turkish state” in Reşat Kasaba (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Turkey Volume 4: Turkey in the Modern World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 333-356. For the history of the PKK see Aliza Marcus, *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For instance, when Turkey ‘canceled the participation of the Israeli Air Force in an October 2009 international air exercise, which Turkey hosts annually with Italy, the United States, and other NATO forces, [the US] ended up calling off the entire exercise as a result’ (Meral and Paris, p. 82). Another example is about the diverging attitudes of the US and Turkey with regard to the *Turkel Report* analyzing the *Mavi Marmara* incident. While PM Erdoğan clearly dismissed the report because of its content, the US Department of State defined the report as ‘the result of transparent, objective and credible inspection’ (Özpek and Demirağ, p. 122). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For the ‘shift of axis’ debate see Altunışık and Martin, 2011, p. 572. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The core of the armed struggle against the regime at the beginnig was the “Free Syrian Army” formed by the officers who deserted the army, but over time foreign jihadist fighters coming from different places ranging from Libya to Chechnya have got the majority. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)