

# POLICY NOTE

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## The Middle East at breaking point: Turkey's neighbourhood policy and the need for enhanced 'Soft' Power

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*AKP's neighbourhood policy in the Middle East is in tatters. The regional order that the AKP leadership once tried to establish by employing 'soft' power underpinned by a problem-solving approach, trade agreements and cultural exchanges, and public diplomacy has failed to come to fruition and Turkey is now at loggerheads with a number of regional actors. At the same time, the Middle East has become more anarchical and fragmented than before. The questions that naturally arise are whether Turkey's failure is because the dynamics that have developed in the Middle East in the aftermath of the Arab Spring transcend Turkey's foreign policy capacity or is it because of the underperformance of Turkish foreign policy? This policy note argues that Turkey's 'soft' power falls short in influencing developments on the ground against the backdrop of the new political landscape in the Middle East. Counter-intuitively, the suggestion is not for Turkey to consider the use of 'hard' power but to deepen and enhance its 'soft' power by addressing neglected aspects of its domestic politics.*

Turkish Prime Minister's, Ahmet Davutoglu's, proclaimed Turkey's neighbourhood policy of greater engagement with the problems of the region on the basis of promoting solutions and regional integration is in tatters.<sup>1</sup> Dr. Kardaş in his presentation at the MERI Forum 2014 argued that "Turkey was trying to build a regional order" through Davutoglu's neighbourhood policy.<sup>2</sup> Turkey, a

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<sup>1</sup> More in Ahmet Davutoğlu, "Turkey's Foreign Policy Vision: An Assessment of 2007", *Insight Turkey*, 10(1), 77-96, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Şaban Kardaş, "Turkey in the Neighbourhood", MERI Forum 2014, 5 November 2014, available at <http://goo.gl/HMXecV>, accessed 15 December 2014.

multiregional power with a growing economy,<sup>3</sup> a would-be energy hub<sup>4</sup> and the world's 15<sup>th</sup> largest military spender<sup>5</sup> has not been able to critically influence the transformation that the post-Arab Spring Middle East is undergoing. Its stance is more reactive, rather than proactive, to the policies and activities of international and regional stakeholders. More importantly, Turkey is at loggerheads with a number of Middle Eastern countries, such as Abdul Fattah Al-Sisi's Egypt and Israel; it is competing with Iran for regional influence and its relations with the Kurdish population of the Middle East can best be described as patchy. Simultaneously, its image in the Middle East is deteriorating, as TESEV's public opinion survey reveals.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, the question is if Turkey has been keen to develop a regional order in the Middle East, then why has it failed so spectacularly? Is it because the dynamics that have developed in the Middle East in the aftermath of the Arab Spring transcend Turkey's capacity to influence developments on the ground or is it because of the underperformance of Turkish foreign policy?

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*What its 'soft' power lacks is its domestic aspect; that is, projecting an exemplary model of democratic governance and inclusionary politics*

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The argument falls somewhere in between. The anarchical, rapid and patchy transformation of the Middle East has created a new political environment in which the use of conventional means of influence, such as coercion through military intervention will precipitate further fragmentation and insecurity in the region. If building a regional order is Turkey's goal, military intervention has to go hand-in-hand not simply with 'soft' power but an enhanced form of its 'soft'

power. So far, the country has based its 'soft' power on external underpinnings, such as its solving-problem approach to bilateral relations, economic agreements and cultural exchanges with regional countries, and public diplomacy.

What its 'soft' power lacks is its domestic aspect, that is, projecting an exemplary model of democratic governance and inclusionary politics. It is only then that Turkey will be able to communicate its project of regional cooperation and integration to political elites and public opinion in the Middle East. Sectarian

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<sup>3</sup> IMF Country Report No.14/329, "Turkey: 2014 Article IV Consultation-Staff Report; Press Release; And Statement by the Executive Director for Turkey", 5 December 2014, available at <http://goo.gl/kjVW7s>, accessed 16 December 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Eşref Yalınkılıçlı, "A tale of becoming an energy hub in Eurasia: Russia-Turkish Cooperation on the South Stream", 7 December 2014, available at <http://goo.gl/vrKcUU>, accessed 16 December 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Nurhan Yentürk, Measuring Turkish Military Expenditure, SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security, No.2014/1, March 2014, available at <http://goo.gl/qYptOz>, accessed 16 December 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Mensür Akgün, Sabiha Senyücel Gündoğar, "Ortadoğu'da Türkiye Algısı 2013" [Turkey's Perception in the Middle East in 2013], TESEV Dış Politika Programı, November 2013, available at <http://goo.gl/CEkiRg>, accessed 23 December 2014.

politics are threatening the very survival of Middle Eastern countries, such as Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya with a danger of a spill over effect in other countries, such as Lebanon. Against this backdrop, Turkey cannot influence the region only through economic means. It needs to project a successful model of political co-existence between different ethnic and religious communities drawing on its own experience.

### **The current resources of Turkey's 'soft' power in a nutshell**

In the 1990s, Joseph Nye stipulated the different forms that power can take, i.e. 'hard' and 'soft' as well as the resources they entail. Specifically, he argued that "power is the ability to influence the behaviour of others to get the outcomes one wants. But there are several ways to affect the behaviour of others. You can coerce them with threats; you can induce them with payments; or you can attract and co-opt them to want what you want".<sup>7</sup> 'Hard' power draws on threats and payments while 'soft' power on the ability of a state to persuade its counterparts. Nye described force, sanctions, payments and bribes as the most likely resources of hard power and institutions, and values, culture, policies as the most likely resources of 'soft' power.<sup>8</sup> He finally observed that "the effectiveness of any power resource depends on the context".<sup>9</sup> These are pertinent theoretical and conceptual observations that can help us comprehend how Turkey underperforms in its Middle Eastern neighbourhood policy and what it needs to be doing if it wants to influence certain developments on the ground, such as regime change on the first level and building a regional order on the second.

What characterises the Middle East in the post-colonial era is anarchy and fragmentation. Anarchy exists because there is no multi-polar or uni-polar regional order advocating a hegemonic narrative for the region. Different countries, such as Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Israel compete for influence on the basis of their parochial interests. The result of it is deep political and economic fragmentation in the region.

The AKP governments aspired under the theoretical and conceptual guidance of Ahmet Davutoglu to move beyond the 'minefield' of fragmentation, especially after 2005. In order to achieve that, Turkey tried to boost its 'soft' power, namely its ability to convince, on the basis of a problem-solving approach to bilateral relations, trade agreements and cultural exchanges, and public diplomacy. By and large, these are the three underpinnings of Turkey's 'soft' power. All three formulate the external aspect of Turkey's 'soft' power. As it is analysed further below, their effectiveness can be questioned depending on the actual outcomes.

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<sup>7</sup> Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The means to success in World Politics*, New York: Public Affairs, 2004.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

The problem-solving approach is best summarised in Davutoglu's principle of 'zero problems with neighbours.' The idea was not necessarily to achieve a quick fix to bilateral relations. It was mostly an attempt to break the ice and prepare the ground for engaging with neighbouring countries on different levels, including trade and cultural exchanges. In the case of the Middle East, Davutoglu cited Turkish-Syrian relations as a blueprint for bilateral relations in the region.<sup>10</sup> He argued that the Turkish-Syrian relations developed significantly compared to the last five to ten years. Economic integration and security cooperation, including the mutual support to a united Iraq and the containment of PKK constituted the basis of this relationship at the time. In that way, Turkey's principled foreign policy became one of the underpinnings of its 'soft' power in terms of engaging Middle Eastern countries in dialogue for gradually building the norms of behaviour against fragmentation that would also serve Turkey's national interests.

Simultaneously, the 'zero problems with neighbours' policy was combined with intra-regional trade and cultural exchanges, the main resource of its 'soft' power. In this context, Turkey promoted the establishment of a 'Quadripartite High Level Cooperation Council' (HLCC) among Turkey, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon in order to "create a zone of free movement of goods and persons among our countries."<sup>11</sup> It furthermore established High Level Strategic Councils with Iraq, Syria and Egypt on a bilateral basis and developed strategic partnership with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).<sup>12</sup> Greater economic interdependence, beneficial for Middle Eastern partners, could potentially boost Turkey's image as a benign actor in the region. TESEV's survey confirms the importance of Turkey's economy for its 'soft' power in the Middle East. In short, the economy features as the primary issue-area followed by 'democratic credentials' as the reason of why Turkey can be a model for the Middle East (2013: 34%).<sup>13</sup>

The third underpinning of AKP's 'soft' power - although with the most uncertain and ambiguous results on the diplomatic front - is their public diplomacy, meaning their attempt to gain the hearts and minds of the public opinion in different Middle Eastern countries. So far, the AKP government has tried over time to enhance their appeal to the 'Arab Street' by employing an acrimonious language against Israeli policies vis-à-vis the Palestinians, while simultaneously embracing Hamas. Subsequently, the AKP tried to tap the dynamism of the 'Arab

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<sup>10</sup> Davutoğlu, *Turkey's Foreign Policy Vision: An Assessment of 2007*, p. 80.

<sup>11</sup> Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Joint Political Declaration on the Establishment of the High Level Cooperation Council among Turkey, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon", available at <http://goo.gl/VksS42>, accessed 20 December 2014.

<sup>12</sup> Ali Öztürk, Turkey has strategic cooperation councils with 13 countries, Anadolu Agency, 24 December 2012, available on <http://goo.gl/VIsUUu>, accessed 20 December 2014.

<sup>13</sup> Mensür Akgün, Sabiha Senyücel Gündoğar, "Ortadoğu'da Türkiye Algısı 2013" [Turkey's Perception in the Middle East in 2013], TESEV Dış Politika Programı, November 2013, available at <http://goo.gl/CEkiRg>, accessed 23 December 2014.

Spring' after Tunisia became a strong case for successful regime change. Accordingly, Turkey became vocal in the case of Egypt and Syria; less so in the case of Libya because Turkey had strong economic ties with Qaddafi's regime.<sup>14</sup> In Egypt, Turkey already had close relations with the Muslim Brotherhood before they came into power. After Mubarak fell, Turkey advised the political wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), on the ensuing elections.<sup>15</sup> Following that, Turkey pledged financial assistance of US\$ 2 billion.<sup>16</sup> When Morsi was ousted by the Egyptian army, the Prime Minister of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, aired publicly his support for the Muslim Brotherhood and became the most vocal critic of the Egyptian army.<sup>17</sup> In Syria, after failed consultations with the regime, Turkey supported the protestors demanding change in the status-quo. From initial strong relations with the Assad regime, Turkey now embraced the protestors, disregarded Assad and advocated regime change. Turkey's aim in terms of public support to change was to project the image of a champion of democratisation in the Middle East. This would strengthen its image among the 'Arab Spring' supporters and in that way, Turkey was preparing the ground to play a central role in the formation of new regimes.

However, assessing what Turkey has achieved so far based on the actual results of its policies, one can argue that Turkey's 'soft' power does not seem capable of preventing further fragmentation from taking place in the Middle East; on the contrary, this time Turkey has, in essence, contributed to it to some extent due to its public diplomacy. Public diplomacy, instead of being a means to an end, is an end in itself, entrapping Turkey's high-level diplomacy in acrimonious debates with neighbouring countries' political elites with no positive results. This can already be observed in the AKP's severe clash with Al-Sisi's Egypt, with Assad's Syria and also with Israel.

Alternatively, one could argue that Turkey's neighbourhood policy should be seen through the lenses of a long term investment to create regional order through its appeal to the public opinion in the Middle East that focuses on narratives and deeds. If this hypothesis is valid, is Turkey's foreign policy actually aligning with the expectations of the public opinion in the Middle East and how does the public opinion perceives Turkey's activity in the region so far?

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<sup>14</sup> Meliha Benli Altunışık, "Turkey after the Arab Uprisings: Difficulties of Hanging on in there", ISPI, 223, p.5, 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p.4.

<sup>17</sup> Tulin Daloglu, "Exiled Brotherhood officials may find home in Turkey", Al Monitor, 17 September 2014, available at <http://goo.gl/ZiKg8x> , accessed 22 December 2014.

## The Decline of Turkey's appeal to the Public Opinion of the Middle East

Evaluating the results of the latest public opinion survey that TESEV conducted in sixteen different countries in the Middle East under the title "Turkey's Perception in the Middle East 2013" one can make some pertinent observations about how Turkey is perceived by the public opinion given its neighbourhood policy.<sup>18</sup>

In a nutshell, the survey suggests that by and large Turkey's popularity experiences a downward trend between 2011 and 2013 across countries. Less people in the Middle East view Turkey as a regional model for other countries. Overall, Turkey does not stand out in any of the areas of regional power, such as politics, economy, culture and military. The country's economic performance features as the most important factor for its regional

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appeal, but there are other countries competing in that area as well, such as Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries. At the same time, its democratic credentials lack behind its economy as a reason of "why Turkey could become a model" while an increasing percentage of the public opinion in the Middle East seems to value "political events/issues."

The above observations draw on five charts, pertinent to the discussion about how Turkey is perceived and the extent to which its activity aligns or not with the expectations of the public opinion in the Middle East.<sup>19</sup>

The first chart is about what the public opinion thinks about Turkey in general. The percentage of those who were very and relatively positive about Turkey dropped from 78% in 2011 to 59% in 2013 on average. The biggest drop in Turkey's positive image can be observed in countries most affected by the Arab Spring, such as Egypt (2011: 86%, 2013: 38%), Syria (2011: 44, 2013: 22%), Tunisia (2011: 91%, 2013: 74%) and Libya (2011: 93%, 2013: 79%). However, this negative trend characterises Turkey's image in other countries as well, such as Lebanon (2011: 78%, 2013: 63%), Saudi Arabia (2011: 89%, 2013: 76%) and Palestine (2011: 89%, 2013: 75%).

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<sup>18</sup> Mensür Akgün, Sabiha Senyücel Gündoğar, "Ortadoğu'da Türkiye Algısı 2013" [Turkey's Perception in the Middle East in 2013], TESEV Dış Politika Programı, November 2013, available at <http://goo.gl/CEkiRg> , accessed 23 December 2014.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

The second chart is about whether Turkey can be a model for the countries in the Middle East. The percentage of those who believed that Turkey could become a model dropped from 61% to 51% between 2011 and 2013 on average.

The third chart is about “the most important issue that concern your region.” The results indicate a growing number of participants being interested in “political events/issues” (2011: 9%, 2013: 14%), while there has been a drop in the percentage of those who answered “economic problems” as the most important issue (2011: 21%, 2013: 15%) as well as “popular movements” (2011: 15%, 2013: 7%).

The fourth chart considers “perceptions of regional power in 2013.” The areas of regional power that have been employed are politics, economy, culture and military. Turkey does not stand out in any of these four areas of regional power. It received 12% in terms of politics, 16% in terms of economy, 12% in terms of culture and 9% in terms of military. At the same time, Saudi Arabia received 12%, 29%, 11% and 12% respectively. Overall, Saudi Arabia scores higher in regional power for 2013.

The fifth chart is about “why Turkey could become a model.” For 2013, the participants cite the economy as the first reason with 34%, its democratic credentials as second with 24%, its Islamic identity as third with 20%, its secular politics as fourth with 19% and its strategic importance as fifth with 5%.

### **Democratic Governance and Inclusionary Politics as part of Turkey’s Enhanced ‘Soft’ Power**

Iraq and Syria, an amalgam of different religious and ethnic communities, are in need of democratic governance and inclusionary politics after the failure of centralised authoritarian regimes. Today, the penetration of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq is a strong reminder that the region cannot be stabilised if state building is not coupled with deep political reforms and change in political culture with respect to engaging all different components of society. Turkey could play an important role in defining a functional model drawing on its own success story with its Kurdish population as well as the Armenian, Jewish, Greek-Orthodox and Syriac communities.

So far, the country has failed from projecting the much needed exemplary model of democratic governance and inclusionary politics in the region that would enhance its appeal to political elites and public opinion. Although its democracy performs better than most of the Middle Eastern countries with the exception of Israel and Tunisia, Turkey ranks 93 among 167 countries and scores very low in

civil liberties.<sup>20</sup> Looking at the trends of its overall democratic performance, 2013 is worse than 2012, 2011 and 2010.

It is quite indicative that Turkey has not tackled the long-standing Kurdish question and the basic political and cultural rights of the Kurdish population have not been sufficiently met. This is true despite the fact that Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as Prime Minister announced a reform package in September 2013 that would allow among other things lowering the electoral threshold for parties to enter the parliament from 10% to 5% as well as the threshold for parties to qualify for public funding from 7% to 3%.<sup>21</sup> In addition, the reform package was not progressive enough to suggest the teaching of the Kurdish language not only in private but also state schools. On the other hand, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan very recently supported the idea that the younger generation should be taught Ottoman at schools but has not equally argued for the teaching of the Kurdish language.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, for the time being, Turkey's domestic politics cannot be considered as an underpinning to an enhanced form of 'soft' power that Turkey can potentially project to the Middle East.

Accordingly, Turkey's lack of enhanced 'soft' power can affect the use of its 'hard' power. A case in point is Syria. Although Turkey has offered humanitarian help to the thousands of refugees that have fled the warzone in Syria, it is reluctant to send its strong military forces to create a buffer zone without international support. One of the reasons is that none of the actors on the ground and especially the Syrian Kurds in the north are in favour of any such possibility. Turkey has not been able to sponsor a post-Assad and post-IS narrative on the basis of democratic governance and an inclusionary political order that could have been successfully implemented first in its domestic sphere and then projected to the rest of the neighbourhood.

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*Turkey can play an important role if it achieves to offer a forward-looking agenda to the region based on its own model of domestic politics*

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## **Conclusion**

Therefore, for the time being, Turkey's 'soft' power as it has been structured will play less and less of an important role in the Middle East; all the more because

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<sup>20</sup> The Economist Intelligence Unit, "Democracy Index 2013: Democracy in Limbo" (6th ed.), 2014.

<sup>21</sup> BBC, "Turkey's Erdogan announces Kurdish reforms", 30 September 2013, available at <http://goo.gl/c3XW1J>, accessed 21 December 2014.

<sup>22</sup> Radikal, "Erdoğan: Kimse Osmanlıca öğrenilmesinden korkmasın" [Erdogan: No one should be afraid of the teaching of the Ottoman language], 12 December 2014, available at <http://goo.gl/igFXRw>, accessed 23 December 2014.



fragmentation in the region and severe and persistent security dilemmas for political elites and populations are undermining the effectiveness of its economic activity in the region as an underpinning of its 'soft' power. If Turkey does not display enhanced 'soft' power based on its domestic resources, mainly good governance and inclusionary politics, the only option that will remain for it to have impact on its immediate neighbourhood in the Middle East will be the employment of 'hard' power which is costly and many times ineffective in terms of its results on the ground.

Counter-intuitively, what the region requires more than ever is not the projection of more 'hard' power, but a combination of enhanced 'soft' power with the possibility of using 'hard' power. Turkey can play an important role if it achieves to offer a forward-looking agenda to the region based on its own model of domestic politics.

## **Recommendations**

Navigating through the antagonisms and conflicts of the Middle East is like treading a tightrope; let alone trying to build regional order. During the AKP years, Turkey tried to exert its influence on the Middle East using its 'soft' power that was underpinned by a problem-solving approach, developing economic and cultural relations with other countries in the region and a dubious public diplomacy.

For the last four years, Turkey's neighbourhood policy towards the Middle East is out of tune. The Middle East is in urgent need of stability, dialogue, reconciliation and cooperation. If Turkey does not strengthen its 'soft' power in the next few years by connecting domestic policies with its foreign policy performance, events throughout the Middle East will continue to overwhelm its neighbourhood policy. Accumulating political and socio-political problems are blowing out of proportion in the region at the moment affecting countries, such as Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Egypt, Israel and Iran. It is not realistic to consider domestic and external developments as two distinct issue-areas. It is empirically sound to suggest that they both feed into each other. Turkey can break the vicious circle of conflict in the Middle East by making a bold step to present an exemplary model of domestic politics that goes beyond party lines and interests and resume its role as regional mediator.

The following recommendations are not exclusive, but may provide possible avenues for deep reforms. To that end, policy-makers in Turkey should focus on:

- resolving major domestic issues timely, such as the Kurdish issue, and putting forward a number of reforms that strengthen Turkey's democratic credentials. This initiative can entail:

- a) devolution of powers from the centre to regional/local level
  - b) lowering the threshold for entering the parliament which at the moment stands at 10% in order for it to become more representative
  - c) introducing check and balances for the executive centres of power, such as the President of the Turkish Republic and the Turkish government through the separation of powers between the President, the government, the parliament and the judiciary.
- creating a public diplomacy that goes beyond populist sloganeering, not depicting actors in the Middle East in black or white, and projecting a more consistent neighbourhood policy. This will help Turkey to avoid being considered as partisan and subsequently build rapport with governments and civil societies in different countries. To that end, Turkey should build its public diplomacy on the basis of promoting universal values, such as respect of human rights, freedom of speech and expression, the right to fair trial, the right to work and the right to healthcare.<sup>23</sup> The discourse that gives prominence to these values can then gradually permeate the domestic sphere of different countries and create the necessary pressure for stability, dialogue, reconciliation and cooperation across the Middle East.

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<sup>23</sup> UN, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, “International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights”, March 1976, available at <http://goo.gl/GIkG8g> , accessed 12 January 2015. In addition, UN, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights,” January 1976, available at <http://goo.gl/JbpvAQ> , accessed 12 January 2015.

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