The ‘Ankara Moment’: the politics of Turkey’s regional power in the Middle East, 2007-11

André Bank a & Roy Karadag b

a Andre Bank is at the German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Neuer Jungfernstieg 21, D-20354, Hamburg, Germany
b Institute for Intercultural and International Studies, Mary-Somerville-Strasse 7, D-28359, Bremen, Germany

Published online: 23 Apr 2013.

To cite this article: André Bank & Roy Karadag (2013): The ‘Ankara Moment’: the politics of Turkey's regional power in the Middle East, 2007-11, Third World Quarterly, 34:2, 287-304

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2013.775786
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ANDRÉ BANK & ROY KARADAG

ABSTRACT Around 2007 Turkey became a regional power in the Middle East, a status it has maintained at least until the outset of the Arab Revolt in 2011. To understand why Turkey only became a regional power under the Muslim AKP government and why this happened at the specific point in time that it did, this article highlights the self-reinforcing dynamics between Turkey’s domestic political-economic transformation in the first decade of this century and the advantageous regional developments in the Middle East at the same time. It holds that this specific linkage—the ‘Ankara Moment’—and its regional resonance in the neighbouring Middle East carries more transformative potential than the ‘Washington Consensus’ or the ‘Beijing Consensus’ so prominently discussed in current global South politics.

The early 21st century has been marked by the rise of new players who are increasingly demonstrating their independent capacity to affect politics around the globe, thereby furthering the debate about the importance of regions and regional powers in and beyond the global South. Not only Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa – the (in)famous BRICS—but also Turkey and Indonesia, among others, have become formidable growth zones that have attracted the attention of Western decision makers and experts in future security and economic issues, most prominently in the context of the G20. This represents both a materialist and an ideological–symbolic challenge for Western capitalist democracies. On the one hand, the latter’s attempts to influence and structure regional affairs will be ever more contested. On the other, the ideological toolkits Western countries recommend and stipulate to late-developing countries in the global South have lost their momentum in recent years, while new success stories are often framed according to principles that diverge from Western experiences.
These processes can be traced back to the end of the Cold War. The resulting US dominance, in economic and military terms, was buttressed by the discursive expansion of the ‘Washington Consensus’, that is, the propagation of neoliberal value systems calling for privatisation, austerity and unrestrained financial markets. This model lost its appeal and legitimacy outside the West with the outbreak of financial crises in Latin America, East and Southeast Asia, Russia and Turkey in the late 1990s, before it came under heavy attack in the USA and Europe in the context of the global financial crisis post-2007 and the state fiscal crisis post-2009. While the ‘Post-Washington Consensus’ has been an attempt by the World Bank to save neoliberal policy prescriptions by adding elements of state regulation and a role for institutions to promote development and welfare, the newly emerging ‘Beijing Consensus’ tells a different story altogether: it is one of an authoritarian type of state capitalism that succeeds in capturing export markets and foreign direct investment and that undoes the link between capitalism and democracy to secure the benefits of the former. China’s rise has captured the minds of security and business experts, stirring fear and admiration, and its developmentalism is, in fact, globally inspiring. However, it does not have the potential to be emulated abroad, nor do Chinese elites promote a certain set of policies to expand their ‘model’.

Standing in between these models, Turkey has complied with most IMF and World Bank policy recommendations to reorganise its economy, which strengthened the country’s image in the eyes of Western and non-Western audiences. Nevertheless, this process was accompanied by the propagation of discursive frames that emphasise the positive linkage between specific Muslim values and liberalism. On the other hand, open markets have not worked as a tool of deepening democratisation. Political liberalisation did take place, but the ruling elites of the Muslim-conservative Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi—AKP) have, once their domestic position was consolidated, acted to take over the political field by also relying on the despotic power of the state apparatus.

Furthermore, unlike China, Turkey has the capacity to act as a model open to emulation by expanding a developmental success narrative that captures the imaginations of non-Turkish social groups, albeit only on a regional scale. Thus Turkey has entered the Middle Eastern security field, in which Western states have been confronted with a new plurality of claims that have undermined collective foreign policy making, be it in the violent conflict in Syria or the Iranian nuclear issue. Taken together, as we show in this article, these AKP economic and security policies in Turkey have contributed to the emergence of a kind of ‘Ankara Moment’ in the Middle East from the mid-2000s onwards. Differently from the ‘Washington’ and ‘Beijing’ consensuses, the Ankara Moment does not describe a set of economic and other regulatory policies that may be propagated abroad. Rather, it grasps the spatially and temporally structured conjuncture, albeit limited to the post-2007 Middle East, of interrelated domestic and regional processes. Yet it is precisely this context-bound nature of Turkish regional power under the AKP, we hold, that has much deeper implications for its Middle Eastern neighbourhood.
Where does the Ankara Moment in the Middle East come from? And why did Turkey only become a regional power around 2007 and not in earlier times? This article attempts to explain the key sources and timing of AKP Turkey’s regional power status in the Middle East. Considering the history of modern Turkey’s position in its southern neighbouring region and its relations with the post-Ottoman Arab world, its prominent and almost dominant position since circa 2007 and at least until the beginning of the ‘Arab Revolt’ 2011 calls for a proper, historically grounded and political economy-inspired reflection on regional power dynamics. We argue that the Ankara Moment emerged as a result of self-reinforcing dynamics between domestic political-economy factors and regional developments. The AKP has been able utilise new regional policies as tools of domestic legitimation, while its domestic successes against the Kemalist Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) have been regionally validated as clear proof that Muslim identity, and economic and political liberalisation can co-evolve (‘outside-in’ and ‘inside-out’). In other words, we suggest that with the AKP’s domestic consolidation have come its gradual foreign policy shifts and increased regional activism in the Middle East. The latter developments have then served as tools for domestic legitimation, which could neither be accomplished by former Turkish elites nor by any of the other Middle Eastern regional players, whose foreign policy frameworks are seriously limited by their geopolitical positions. In addition, the new trade patterns link Turkey’s Middle East policy back to the new political and economic elite groups who grant the state the capacity to be actively involved in that region in the first place. At the same time in the Middle East, and thus largely beyond the AKP’s control, regional dynamics have changed substantially in the 2000s (the wars in Iraq, Lebanon and Gaza), allowing Turkey to position itself between the rather one-sided pro-Western and anti-Western camps. It is this domestic–regional linkage in particular that has only emerged under the AKP and especially in its second term post-2007.

The article proceeds as follows: based on a brief discussion of the current political-economy research on Turkey and the country’s relations with the Middle East, we illustrate the interplay between changes in Turkey’s domestic political economy since the 1980s and the diverse failed attempts to gain regional power status, in the Middle East and beyond. We then outline the gradual domestic consolidation of the AKP government under Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in the face of the pressures from the Kemalist establishment, and the foreign policy shifts it has initiated, mostly as a result of the pragmatist ideology and agency of Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu. In the main analytical section of the article, our aim is to highlight the connections and, even more so, the self-reinforcing dynamics between the domestic political-economic changes after 2002 and the advantageous regional developments since the middle of the decade. We conclude by summing up the main findings concerning Turkey’s rise as a regional power in the Middle East—the ‘Ankara Moment’—and by relating them to the current situation of the ‘Arab Revolt’ in the Middle East since early 2011.
Beyond contemporary explanations: addressing domestic and regional dynamics

Since the AKP came to power following the 2002 parliamentary elections that dramatically altered the prevailing power structure within Turkish state and society, scholars of Turkish politics, international relations and Middle Eastern politics have investigated the way the new elites have reframed the country’s foreign policy agenda and the fundamental changes they have initiated. These changes became all too obvious over the decade in question. Key moments were the Turkish parliament’s 2003 decision not to support the US-led war against Iraq, the temporary freezing of EU accession talks over the Cyprus issue in 2006, and the estrangement with the state of Israel after the Gaza war of 2008–09. Most recently Turkey’s controversial regional role has been discussed in the context of the Arab Revolt since early 2011.

To understand the substantive change in Turkey’s position within the Middle East, scholars have proposed a variety of explanatory factors and mechanisms. One prominent argument deals with Turkey’s politico-geographical identity and claims that its so-called ‘Middle Easternisation’ is the result of European states’ opposition to Turkey’s EU accession bid, which induced Turkish leaders to take a more cautious approach to dealing with the EU. Tarik Oğuzlu and Mustafa Kibaroğlu blame not only Europeans but also the US plans for a post-Saddam Hussein regional order that would clash with long-established Turkish interests. Both the erosion of EU support and a growing anti-American sentiment reflect a new Turkish sense of belonging ‘both to European and Islamic civilisations’, with the AKP assuming ‘that Turkey’s growing security, and cultural and economic links with the Middle East will increase the prospects of that country’s accession to the EU’.

Geopolitical explanations refer to changes in Turkey’s strategic interests, either for systemic reasons or for internal ones. According to the former perspective, the end of the Cold War provided new opportunities for Turkey to engage more independently from the EU and the USA with its neighbourhood. According to the latter, Turkey’s new policies are the outcome of de-securitisation processes relating to formerly contentious issues and security threats. Thus it is argued that the decisive factor has not been the ideational framework of Ahmet Davutoğlu but rather the demilitarisation of domestic politics in general and the ensuing empowerment of new civilian elites. In this process further aspects of civilian politics have come into play, as Turkey’s liberalisation has been paralleled by the new inclusion of civil society organisations and business associations in influencing the foreign policy agenda.

Most prominent, however, is the liberal political-economic explanation, according to which Turkey’s ‘zero problem’ policies reflect the dramatic expansion of trade linkages, rendering Turkey a new ‘trading state’ that, similar to the old liberalist ‘doux commerce’ assumption, is forced to maintain peaceful relations with its partners, replacing conflict with cooperation.

Despite the explanatory capacity of these works, they suffer from a serious flaw in that they merely account for the changes taking place in Turkish foreign policy making. What they cannot explain is why Turkey has been so successful
in becoming a new regional power in the Middle East. To do so, it is insufficient to deal with domestic transformations and de-securitisation processes alone, as they demonstrate only one side of the Turkish trajectory. We need to go beyond this and emphasise the linkage between the domestic dimension, which Turkish elites can influence, and the regional setting, which they cannot influence and where Turkey’s power is acknowledged, admired and feared. In other words, the Ankara Moment may tell us less about Turkey and more about regional dynamics in the Middle East itself. Given the relationality of regional power, any explanation omitting this linkage remains simplistic, if not insufficient.

**Before the AKP, before regional power: Turkey in the 1980s and 1990s**

Since 1980, which saw parliament’s adoption of the IMF structural adjustment programme on 24 January and the last military coup d’état on 12 September that year, Turkey has been involved in a new project of combining democratic politics and capitalist development. While the former was initially heavily constrained by military–Kemalist tutelage, the latter process has consisted of the disembedding of the market and its proper institutionalisation in Turkish society, something which had always been precarious at best.¹⁵

The disembedding of the market was accomplished in several steps. First came the dismantling of the tightly regulated trade regime through the lifting of import controls and quotas. At the same time new financial support schemes for export businesses were set up to cushion the impact of global competition. These direct subsidies, which targeted the upper rank of Turkish capitalists, the family business groups who maintained their position as national champions in the new developmental regime, were maintained until Turkey’s accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the EU Customs Union in 1995.¹⁶ While Turkey’s open access to global commodity and service markets was realised rapidly, in the field of privatisation governments faced serious opposition within parliament, trade unions and the judiciary until the 1990s, with the effect that income from the sale of state-owned enterprises remained low from a comparative perspective.¹⁷

However, for two decades Turkey had not been able to achieve sound macroeconomic indicators. In fact, the full liberalisation of Turkey’s capital account in 1989 introduced a new source of economic instability and rendered the country unprotected from speculative attacks against the Turkish lira, as financial liberalisation was introduced before macroeconomic imbalances were overcome. Further, any attempts to increase regulatory quality in economic policy making in the 1990s were impaired by the previous return of former party elites to the political stage in 1987, which led to excessive patronage politics that drew heavily on public and private banks.¹⁸ The financial dependence of private businesses in general and of individual political elites in particular eventually led to the outbreak of two financial crises, in 1994 and 2000–01. These crises had the side-effect of delegitimising established incumbents and legitimising religious counter-elites. When the AKP credibly broke with more radical Islamist thought...
and provided an alternative to everyday corruption, it succeeded in taking over the centre-right camp and shaking up the political system.

Thus, until 2002 there was no success story that could be transmitted into the Middle Eastern neighbourhood. With the end of the Cold War in 1989–90 Turkey struggled hard to find its own role in world politics and in different regional arenas. One goal was to invigorate political, cultural and economic ties with post-Soviet Turkic republics in the Caucasus and Central Asia in order to recreate a kind of ‘Turkic commonwealth’ stretching from Turkey to the borders of China. However, that attempt came to naught. Although Western leaders labelled Turkey a model case for democracy and a market economy that could be emulated by the Central Asian republics, in practical terms cooperation did not go beyond the—albeit quite impressive—capturing of new markets for Turkish exporters, especially in textiles and clothing, and construction companies.19

In the Middle East proper Turkey was also unable to function as a role model to be discursively appropriated by either Arab governments or opposition movements, as it was itself directly involved in conflict with, for example, its neighbours Syria and Iraq, who were making claims against its water dam projects in the southeast (the so-called GAP). In addition, the ongoing war against the rebellious Kurdish Workers’ Party (Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan—PKK) gave Turkey the identity of a direct contender in Middle Eastern relations rather than a neutral power broker. Finally, the country’s military cooperation with Israel—directed against Syria, which harbourered PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan—was not welcomed by either regimes or social groups in the Arab Middle East.20

More generally, however, what limited Turkey’s regional policy reach was the fact that, since the establishment of the Third Republic in 1982, security and foreign policy issues had been the domain of the TAF, which set both the ideological boundaries of the regime in order to reinvigorate a Kemalist–secularist state order and the practical limitations through its control of the National Security Council (NSC).21 This does not mean that political leaders could not or did not use foreign and regional policy as a legitimising tool to expand the capacities of civil against military power domestically. One example was Turgut Özal, who succeeded in securing Turkey’s participation in the US-led Gulf war against Iraq in 1990–91 against the will of the NSC. Afterwards he furthered Turkey’s interests as a direct conflict party, especially in the violent Iraqi–Kurdish affairs of the mid-1990s. His sudden death from a heart attack in 1993 prevents any estimation of the extent to which Özal, the father of Turkish neoliberalism and the grandmaster of Turkish politics since 1980, might have presented new regional policy initiatives.

A more direct challenge to the neo-Kemalist order emerged in 1996, when the Islamist Welfare (Refah) Party under Necmettin Erbakan presided over a coalition government and took the opportunity to initiate important symbolic and practical changes. However, Erbakan’s approach did not prove successful. On the one hand, the TAF maintained and deepened security arrangements with the state of Israel, including collective military manoeuvres, which proved to be an effective obstacle to linking foreign politics and domestic legitimation—for example, through the politicisation of the unresolved Israeli–Palestinian conflict.
On the other hand, symbolic steps like Turkish state visits to Egypt and Libya also did not bear fruit, as Colonel Gaddafi brought the Kurdish issue and the war against the PKK to the fore and charged the Turkish government with an undemocratic approach in that matter. The Refah episode ended with the taf’s soft coup in the aftermath of 28 February 1997, when the NSC issued a memorandum identifying the Islamist party as a threat to Kemalism and obliging the government to implement reforms to counter this claim. This led to Erbakan’s resignation and to the banning of the Welfare Party in 1998.

**Domestic and regional power: Turkey from 2000 to 2010**

Gradual consolidation

If Turkey faced substantial dilemmas in economic policy making in the 1990s, its massive economic growth in the first decade of this century was all the more astonishing. Not only did GDP growth resume at a high level, comparable only to the growth rates of BRICS, but it was also accompanied by relatively low inflation rates, fiscal austerity and unforeseen levels of privatisation and foreign direct investment.

Although relevant post-crisis institutional changes go back to the entrepreneurship of Kemal Derviş, who became minister of finance and economy under the Ecevit coalition government, the AKP has maintained the confidence of international financial institutions, big business holdings and foreign investors by strictly committing itself to the prescribed policy recommendations. One striking example is the field of banking regulation. Private banks with shares of bad loans and outstanding debts to state banks were taken over by the Savings Deposit Insurance Fund (SDIF) after 1999. The fund even went so far as to confiscate several companies of the respective holding companies in order to guarantee debt repayment. The SDIF consolidated the banks’ and companies’ balance sheets and re-privatised them. This has been a viable mechanism to underline the government’s anti-corruption stance as these measures have targeted oligarchic families like the Uzans, which have built up powerful links to finance and media, with no party willing or able to restrain their corrupt activities until then.

The AKP government has also been the first in Turkish history to credibly implement the privatisation programme. From its introduction in 1985 until 2002 privatisation had only generated US$ 9.5 billion. Since 2002 privatisation proceeds have surpassed $34 billion, with most of the sales occurring in the fields of energy, telecommunications, mining, sugar and tobacco. Related to this, foreign direct investment has also experienced a boost: while it remained below $5 billion until 2004, it surged to $20 billion in 2007. Turkey has cut subsidies in the agricultural sector, and today its economy consists mainly of private companies, the biggest of which actively engage in international markets. There has been an almost ten-fold increase in the country’s foreign direct investment since 2002. Thus, as Caner Bakir argues, the break with the conflict-ridden 1990s seems to have been completed. The AKP has managed to strengthen the new complementarities between low inflation, low interest rates and fiscal austerity, something which was impossible within the former political-economy framework. Similarly, while privatisation was previously contested by both...
political and economic groups, Ziya Önis traces the emergence of a new mass social support base for privatisation that has included both the fragmented business sphere and trade unions. While big family holdings profited enormously from the sale of large state energy companies (for example, TÜPRAS in 2005 and PETKİM in 2007) and even the military’s business group OYAK secured important deals in the steel industry (ERDEMİR 2006), the trade unions could also be included in the pro-privatisation camp as sales benefited mostly national capital, and only rarely, as in the case of TEKEL (2008), the state’s tobacco enterprise, multinationals.

Furthermore, this new phase of ordered politics has come with a new narrative on the part of domestic political elites, which at last takes up the struggle with the powers of the TAF. Having been elected into a rather precarious position in 2002, the AKP has within one decade managed to disempower the NSC and the General Staff. It initially did so via the anchor of EU negotiations, but during and after the constitutional crisis of 2007 it did so by mobilising anti-military civil society and media organisations, framing the TAF as the enemy of Turkish democracy. Thus the issuing of an e-memorandum by the General Staff in 2007 was of no avail; unlike the soft coup against the Erbakan government 10 years earlier, it instead gave credence to the AKP’s self-portrayal as the sole liberalising sociopolitical force in the country, a view that was obviously supported, given the party’s success in acquiring the Kurdish vote in the 2007 parliamentary elections. That this struggle against the TAF, which came to an end with the resignation of Chief of General Staff İlker Başbuğ in July 2011, was fought by elites with a distinct Muslim identity has provided the AKP with a powerful discursive weapon according to which there is no contradiction between Islam, on the one hand, and democracy, capitalism and modernity, on the other. It is particularly this discursive toolkit that has been appropriated within the Arab Middle East, both by regime elites and opposition movements.

This does not mean that all is well economically in Turkey, and that there are no contradictions involved in this new growth era. To name but a few, AKP elites were unable to alleviate the structural problems of trade deficits that continue to put pressure on the country’s current account. The financialisation of the economy has led to massive increases both in private and in corporate debt, which may exhaust domestic sources of growth in the future. Also, however impressive growth rates have been so far, they were not achieved alongside similar decreases in unemployment or social inequality. All in all, in these globally turbulent times, Turkey’s dependence on short-term capital flows and on still mostly European export markets may have serious repercussions in the years to come.

Nevertheless, what renders the AKP’s impact truly revolutionary is the fact that it acts both as the source driving the disembedding of the market and as the main ‘re-embedder’ of the discontented, and thus propagates pro-capitalist and social solidarity values at the same time. Various segments of its Muslim constituency are involved in new business associations (for example, MÜSİAD and TUSKON) that take an active stance in formulating domestic and regional policy initiatives, thereby further ‘civilising’ political processes, and in social solidarity organisations which provide charity and private education facilities (the
so-called dersanes), which operate as important venues for success in the fiercely contested access to the public university system. These segments, with which the AKP is organically linked, cooperate most successfully within the municipalities under AKP control. What some label public–private partnerships are in fact a demonstration of the successful mobilisation of anti-Kemalist counter-elites, who are maintaining and deepening their grassroots linkages and who represent a new vision of social harmony based upon strong notions of social embeddedness. Thus, the AKP has at its disposal vast patronage capacities which have proven to be highly successful in the electoral campaigns since 2002 and resonate well among Arab Islamist parties and movements that may similarly prove to be dominant, e.g., in Egypt and Tunisia.

**AKP Turkey’s rise in the Middle East**

The AKP’s latest success in the parliamentary elections of 12 June 2011—in which the party, under the leadership of Prime Minister Erdoğan, received 49.9% of the votes, its most successful result thus far—underscores the party’s newfound dominant position in Turkish politics. In addition to the transformations in the domestic political economy and the related decline in influence of the military and the older economic elites, it is the AKP’s foreign policy reorientation over the course of the past decade that has contributed to its strong domestic popularity. Traditionally Turkish foreign policy has been characterised by a Western orientation deeply anchored in a Kemalist nation-building process. Even though this crux of Turkish foreign policy has so far remained intact, a stronger multidimensionality and a diversification of alliances outside the West have also characterised Turkish foreign policy under the AKP.

As a leitmotif we can cite the much quoted ‘zero problems (with neighbours)’ and ‘strategic depth’ doctrines preached by Ahmet Davutoğlu, the current foreign minister and previously Erdoğan’s chief foreign policy consultant. According to Davutoğlu, instead of adopting a cautious, reactive and from time to time suspicious approach to its regional environment, Turkey should negotiate proactively and look pragmatically for opportunities to solve conflicts and create cooperation. Located between Western Europe, the Balkans, Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, Central Asia and the Middle East, Turkey might be virtually predestined to have such a foreign policy. The Middle East is the region in which Davutoğlu’s doctrine, particularly in the AKP’s second term from 2007 to 2011, has been most comprehensively enacted. The two dominant driving forces of Turkey’s Middle East policy are, first, geo-economic and, second, the non-material generation of soft power—in other words, the creation of ideological support for Turkey within the Middle East.

The geo-economic driving forces of Turkey’s Middle East policy can be illustrated by the significantly increased volumes of capital expenditures and trade that have occurred under the AKP government, as well as by the diversity of Turkish business partners in the region. Energy cooperation and especially the availability of reliable and cheap natural gas and oil have played an important role in Turkey’s relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran. In turn, Turkish companies in Iran have been active in the areas of construction and
infrastructure. This interweaving of foreign trade policy also explains why the Turkish government, despite differing ideological orientations, welcomed the controversial June 2009 re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, and why Turkey voted against the tightening of sanctions against Iran being called for by Western nations in the UN Security Council, in which Turkey had a seat as a non-permanent member in 2009 and 2010. At the same time, Turkish–Iranian relations continue to be conflict-ridden, as the installation of the NATO radar base on Turkish soil in 2011 indicates.31 In Kurdish-dominated northern Iraq, Anatolian companies with close ties to the AKP administration are so financially active that any closing of the border by Turkey would cause substantial economic turbulence in that area, which is controlled by the Kurdistan Democratic Party under Massoud Barzani. Similar to Turkey’s economic cooperation with Iran was its cooperation with Libya under Muammar Gaddafi: Turkey imported Libyan oil, and Turkish construction, tourism, energy and retail businesses were active in Libya. In both 2008 and 2009 the volume of bilateral trade amounted to nearly $10 billion.32

The rapprochement between the AKP administration and Syria under President Bashar al-Assad was also largely economically motivated. In the light of the years-long animosity between Turkey and Syria, which nearly escalated into war in 1998, the formation of ‘brotherly relations’ between Ankara and Damascus through a diversity of collaborative projects—a high point of this being the joint cabinet meetings in 2010—was particularly remarkable. In its relations with Syria Turkey had capital expenditures and trade close to the border in its sights. However, it also aimed to develop a new transit route, which would run primarily through Jordan and Iraq and carry domestic products into the financially strong Gulf states. Another development to come out of the new economic relationship was Turkey’s 2009 lifting of visa restrictions for Syrian citizens: by the end of 2010, some 60 000 Syrians were visiting Turkey each month.33

Along with its geo-economic interests the formation of soft power in the Middle East is the other main driving force of Turkey’s regional policy. Prime Minister Erdoğan, Foreign Minister Davutoğlu and President Abdullah Gül (also from the AKP) have primarily used two tactics. First, they have continuously promoted, however subtly, a ‘Turkish model’ for the Middle East in their political speeches and statements. This model includes—with varying degrees of emphasis—elements of pluralism and party-based democracy, a successful economy, religious and cultural authenticity, and a relatively independent foreign policy, all of which amount to a positive and relatively coherent self-description of the AKP administration.

Second, the Turkish government has also developed a strong anti-Israel, pro-Palestine rhetoric since the beginning of the war in Gaza on 27 December 2008, rhetoric that has at times come over as clearly populist. The reason for such rhetoric was the visible irritation on the part of Ankara, when, despite the intensive mediations it had been conducting between Israel and Syria since May 2008, it received no advance notice from Prime Minister Ehud Olmert’s administration about the imminent war in the Gaza Strip. The Turkish government was also visibly jarred by the way Israel conducted the war, which led to the
deaths of 1300 Palestinians, almost of all of whom were civilians. At the meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos at the end of January 2009, Prime Minister Erdoğan turned openly against Israel’s president, Shimon Peres, for the first time. The worsening of Turkish–Israeli relations reached a new low with the Gaza flotilla affair at the end of May and beginning of June 2010: after Israeli commandos boarded the Turkish ship *Mavi Marmara*, an aid convoy, in the Eastern Mediterranean and ended up killing eight Turks and an American Turkish dual citizen, the conflict between Turkey and Israel escalated to a previously unprecedented level. While Israel insisted that the Gaza aid flotilla was illegal, that its forces were provoked, and that the commandos essentially acted in self-defence, Turkey demanded both a legal investigation of the Israeli military’s intervention in international waters and a comprehensive apology from Israel. Turkey’s obdurate position regarding the Gaza aid flotilla has hindered every attempt at a rapprochement between Turkey and Israel since summer 2010. All the same, this is not to suggest that there is not still less open military cooperation between Turkey and Israel, as the delivery of Israeli Heron drones to Turkey in August 2010 underlines.

In the wider regional context of the Middle East Turkey’s openly pro-Palestine stance required that it distance itself from Egypt under Hosni Mubarak, and that it also reject his pro-West and pro-Israel attitudes regarding the Gaza Strip and the party that has been in power there since 2007, Hamas. Turkey has played a more moderate tune in relations with the governments of Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the smaller Gulf states, which are perceived as being just as pro-West; particularly with respect to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), economic considerations have once again played a central role.

The AKP’s Middle East policy has, according to opinion polls, been endorsed by wide swaths of the various Arab populations; for a majority of Arabs, Prime Minister Erdoğan even represented the most well liked politician in the world in 2010. Nevertheless, the seemingly successful Turkish regional policy under the AKP cannot hide the fundamental conflict of interest between the country’s geo-economic and non-material interests. On the one hand, Turkey’s interest in economic cooperation, trade and investment in the Middle East calls for a stable surrounding political environment and pragmatic collaboration with authoritarian regimes, whether in Iran, northern Iraq, Libya, Syria, Saudi Arabia or the UAE. On the other hand, because of the populist generation of soft power, the status quo in the Middle East—especially regarding the Israel–Palestine conflict—is being called into question. Before the ‘Arab Revolt’ of 2011 this basic contradiction had led, among other things, to the AKP administration’s discontinuation of the propagation of its ‘Turkish model’, beyond its economic components, to its important trade partners Iran, Libya and Syria. This move demonstrates the pragmatism of the AKP’s Middle East policy. The worsening of Turkish–Israeli public relations since 2009 and of Turkish–Syrian relations since 2011 shows, however, that Ankara’s policy of ‘zero problems’ with the neighbours indicates more wishful thinking on the AKP’s part than it does complex and contradictory regional political realities.
Finding the missing link: self-reinforcing domestic and regional dynamics

Following these empirical descriptions of what happened in Turkey and the Middle East’s regional constellation, our aim in this section is to establish why this ascension to regional power was possible after 2007. Contrary to the explanations presented above, we attempt to identify the self-reinforcing dynamics that support Turkey’s regional power status in the Middle East. For this, there exist two preconditions—one domestic and one regional—that together generate a lock-in effect with increasing returns, meaning that domestic AKP successes translate into regional action capacity and that regional policies and initiatives legitimise and strengthen the AKP’s domestic powers at the same time.

Domestic dynamics and their effects: inside-out

On the domestic front the tipping point for the consolidation of the AKP government was its victory over the Kemalist establishment in the 2007 constitutional crisis. The government overcame this challenge with two electoral successes: the referendum that called for the direct election of the president; and the parliamentary elections in which the AKP secured 47% of the national vote. Until then the AKP had faced a rather precarious power setting and was contained by the TAF, the judiciary and President Necdet Sezer, who was replaced in 2007 with former foreign minister and AKP politician Abdullah Gül. The AKP’s monopolisation of power was far from obvious and was unexpected at the time of its coming to power in 2002–03. This accounts for its rather pragmatic political stand until 2006, which saw it refrain from making any moves to alter the post-1982 neo-Kemalist order. In this context, the AKP profited from the implementation of the first EU harmonisation packages under the Ecevit government. The latter decided to deepen the reforms to maintain its democratic and pro-European identity. Through the EU negotiations, which were reciprocated with the formal beginning of accession talks in 2005, the AKP was able to dismantle the NSC. Even so, this dynamic of linking foreign and domestic policy lasted only until 2006, when further negotiations were halted because the question of Cypriot access to Turkish ports was not solved. In addition, the government could not address the headscarf issue with the help of European institutions, which suggests that, at that time, the EU card had been played out and the AKP could make no further domestic legitimacy gains while simultaneously getting rid of the Kemalist influence.

Thus, during and after the 2007 attempt by the Republican People’s Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi—CHP), the military and Kemalist civil society organisations to prevent Gül’s election as state president, the AKP decided to engage in a fully fledged power struggle against those groups it labelled the real enemies of Turkish democracy. Backed with a strong popular mandate, no move by the opposition—despite the party closure case in 2008, which the AKP survived—was able to endanger the party’s position. The AKP has gone on to win every electoral contest since then. Thus, without this victorious struggle against the self-ascribed defenders of Kemalism, there would be nothing through which the AKP could act as a model in foreign affairs. It is since this point that the AKP has
used foreign policy as a tool for domestic legitimisation, something which neither the opposition parties nor the TAF have been able to undermine. In addition, in order to make this self-reinforcing connection in the economic sphere, the expansion of trade relations with Middle Eastern countries has benefited Turkey enormously, as this represents the only region from which Turkey realises trade surpluses (excluding oil imports).\textsuperscript{37} At a time when the current account deficit has, again, become a chronic problem for Turkey’s economy and financial structure, this fact should not be underestimated.

\textit{Regional dynamics and their effects: outside-in}

In addition to the domestic consolidation of the AKP-dominated version of Turkey’s political economy, the dynamics of regional politics in the Middle East since the middle of the 2000s need to be understood as a second self-reinforcing mechanism to understand Turkey acquiring regional power status in the Middle East. In most instances the regional dynamics have been largely beyond the direct influence of Turkish policy, but they have nevertheless increased its potential to make inroads as a key player in the Middle East arena.

The first basic aspect relates to the increased multiplicity of influential actors in regional politics since the middle of the previous decade. This is an indirect result of the wars that characterised the Middle East around this time. Put simply, the Iraq war has since 2003 decisively contributed to the much cited regional rise of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In the context of the Lebanon War of 2006, it was the Islamist Hizballah that gained popular plaudits region-wide for its tough \textit{muqawama} (resistance) stance against Israel. And finally, after having won the Palestinian parliamentary elections in January 2006 and having seized control of the Gaza Strip, the Islamist Hamas also became a regionally relevant player through its \textit{muqawama} posture against Israel—particularly in the context of the Gaza war of 2008–09.\textsuperscript{38} In addition to these war-related dynamics, it has been the immense loss of US influence in the Middle East, especially after the second Bush administration from 2005 to 2009, which has allowed the rise of influential regional players. Other actors have gradually filled the ‘diplomatic gap’: in addition to the ‘well known’ regionally dominant actors like the pro-Western Egypt and Saudi Arabia, less one-sided pro-Western and more flexible actors have gained influence through their role in mediating important conflicts in the region. In Lebanon it was Qatar’s decisive third-party role that allowed for the agreement on the new president Michel Sulaiman, the compromise candidate, as well as on the formation of a national unity government, both in May 2008. Around the same time Turkey hosted secret talks between Israel and Syria. These lasted for eight months until the outbreak of the Gaza war following Israeli attacks in December 2008.

The second and related aspect that has enabled Turkey’s regional rise to prominence relates to the dominant pattern of alliance building and ideological polarisation in the Middle East. Since the middle of the past decade a clear dichotomy between two regional camps, most openly expressed in the differing reactions to the wars in Lebanon in 2006 and Gaza in 2008–09, has emerged. While the traditionally influential Arab states Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan
have maintained their pro-Western position and their, at least indirectly, acquiescent stance towards Israel, the diverse actors representing the so-called *muqawama* axis—Iran, Syria, the Lebanese Hizballah, the Palestinian Hamas and sometimes also the Maliki government in Iraq—have emerged as important challengers to the conservative ‘status quo’ alliance. In this highly polarised context a new space has opened up for less directly allied and more flexible players in the Middle East. And while this increased multiplicity of influential actors in regional politics, together with the specific pattern of alliance building and ideological polarisation in the Middle East since the middle of the past decade has provided Turkey with the opportunity to seize the moment, it is the massively increased regional initiatives of the AKP government since 2008 that have truly allowed for its unprecedented rise as a source of inspiration, as already outlined in detail.

With respect to Turkey’s rise as a regional power after 2007, the following points stand out. First, compared to most, if not all, other Middle Eastern countries, Turkey had the capacity for independent action in and beyond the Middle East. Not being tied directly to any of the camps in the intra-Arab struggles, Turkey has assumed a vital brokerage position and followed an impartial and multidimensional approach, despite popular anti-European slogans that should not be interpreted too hastily as a total break with the EU option in the future. This freedom of action in the regional sphere parallels the domestic context, where the AKP has managed to break out of its initially precarious power position and to decrease the TAF’s influence over Turkish politics. This linkage between the domestic and the regional dimensions cannot be emphasised enough as it provides the government with a powerful narrative.

Second, this narrative is the basis for the emanation of the Ankara Moment. To repeat, this has less to do with Turkish domestic developments proper and more to do with the state of political, economic and cultural affairs in the Middle East and with Turkey’s relational position in the region. Turkey’s positioning can be easily contrasted with other countries’ lack of political freedom and macroeconomic imbalances, their citizens’ everyday encounters and disillusionments with corrupt and ineffective state apparatuses, and the obvious contradictions between Muslim and Arab national identities, on the one hand, and geopolitical realities, on the other. At a time when a new regional public sphere has been in the making, such grievances have been increasingly debated. This has allowed for the inclusion of the Turkish model, which addressed the social and identity conflicts attributed to the authoritarian Kemalist legacies of the country, in these discussions; hence the growing acceptance of and support for Turkey as a regional actor whose approach differs radically from that of global and other rival regional actors in their attempts to become dominant. Neither Iran nor Saudi Arabia can credibly act as defenders of the Muslim voice as the AKP has done domestically.

However, we should not overlook the fact that this regional attribution of values has occurred only in a partial and limited way. The idealist assumption that the AKP successfully manages to combine Islam, democracy and neoliberal capitalism underplays the serious political deliberalisation trend since the 2009 municipal elections. Since then the government has fundamentally strained the
notion of the rule of law by using the state’s (still-existing) despotic powers against its enemies. The Ergenekon case was originally intended to uncover and dismantle Turkey’s ‘deep state’, an illicit network of paramilitaries and ultranationalists that is held responsible for political violence during the war against the PKK in the 1990s and for the murder of, among others, Turkish Armenian journalist Hrant Dink in 2007. 39 Yet, with the opening of the Balyoz case against members of the TAF who allegedly planned to overthrow the government in 2003, and with new waves of arrests since 2009—which have included Kurdish and Turkish political activists, journalists and professors—the longstanding Turkish tradition of politicising the judiciary to silence any form of political opposition appears to have been upheld.

Thus the AKP itself is not living up to the expectations for a democratic Turkey that it stirred in 2007 when making concrete plans to devise a new, democratic constitution and in 2009 when announcing the Kurdish, or democratic, opening that was intended to settle the decades-long Kurdish issue. The non-fulfilment of its liberalising mandate indicates that the AKP’s independent action capacity may have been an unforeseen consequence of the short-term solution to the Kurdish problem with the capture of PKK leader Öcalan in 1999. Since the conflict was remilitarised in 2007, despite the limited cultural reforms to liberalise the public use of the Kurdish language, the AKP has been faced with the dilemma of how to solve the issue without giving in to more nationalist movements and parties such as the hyper-nationalist Milliyetci Hareket Partisi (MHP). At any rate, the political deliberalisation trend has not substantially diminished Turkey’s symbolic power in the Middle East. Such a potential decrease in emanation may represent a new challenge in the future, however, should Turkey lose its unique status as a Muslim democracy in the region and should its failure to deal with the Kurdish issue domestically constrain its foreign policy moves in the Middle East.

Conclusion: the Ankara Moment and the Arab Revolt

Debating Turkey vis-à-vis the Middle East matters, even though it takes on a different symbolic dimension from that of trying to assign meaning to the rise of China in world politics. The example of Turkey can be appropriated more properly to juxtapose it with the economic weaknesses, rigid discourses and authoritarian politics in the Arab Middle East. Turkey has been appropriated into a discursive toolkit to trigger new, aspiring debates directed against authoritarian elites, on the one hand, and at Western audiences on the other, in order to demonstrate that there need be no contradiction between Muslim value systems and political democracy. Thus, in its regional reach, this Ankara Moment has a highly transformative potential, as it captures the imagination and expectations of Turkey’s neighbouring Arab societies, which can easily express what Turkish changes mean for them. That this discursive linkage can be made has dramatic consequences and increases the symbolic power of Turkey in the Middle East. Turkey has so far stood out as the sole case of Muslim democracy in the region, something which was made possible through, and not in spite of, the influence of religious parties and movements that
maintained the political context for stable capitalist relations as the sociocultural source of regional emanation. Without the domestic transformations outlined in this article, Turkey would have had nothing to transmit its influence with and, without the conflict-ridden and authoritarian regional context in the Middle East, Turkey would have had no place into which to transmit it. This specific linkage is key to understanding why, how and when Turkey has become the new regional power in the Middle East and why this consensus is not likely to travel to other regional settings.

However, one question remains: what happens when the regional conflict structures suddenly change? Following the Arab Revolt since early 2011 Turkish elites quickly had to figure out how to deal with the various uprisings in their neighbourhood and faced new challenges to maintain their newly gained regional power status. At the beginning the Ankara Moment still worked in the Turkey’s favour, as moderate Islamists in Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco and Syria could cite the AKP as a potential point of reference for their own democratic claims and self-ascriptions. The first complications in the attempt to act as democratising force emerged in Libya and Syria, where Turkey had considerable economic interests and where the uprisings transformed into full-scale civil wars. In the former, this problem was ‘solved’ with the relatively early victory of rebel groups and the quick military support of NATO members. The latter has proven more difficult to handle. Since the beginning of the ‘Syrian Revolt’ in March 2011 Turkish–Syrian relations have changed most dramatically: by the end of 2012 the two neighbouring countries were in a state of open enmity, with skirmishes occurring along the long border and a real potential for further military escalation. Relations with Iran, the leader of the muqawama axis, and Iraq have been seriously strained as a result of Turkey’s anti-Assad stand, and the Kurdish issue has been openly exposed, yet again. This renewed, conflict-ridden entanglement of regional and domestic affairs may weaken the symbolic power of the AKP and ultimately signal the end of the Ankara Moment, but that remains to be seen.

Acknowledgements
The authors would like to thank Errol Babacan, Hans-Jürgen Bieling, Kevin Gray, Thomas Richter and Sören Scholvin, as well as two anonymous reviewers, for insightful comments and productive criticism.

Notes


13 K Kiriçi, Turkey’s “demonstrative effect” and the transformation of the Middle East’, Insight Turkey, 13(1), 2011, pp 33–55.


17 Önis, ‘Power, interests and coalitions’.


26 Önis, ‘Power, interests and coalitions’.


29 Pope, ‘Pax Ottomana?’. 

30 Altunüşk, ‘The possibilities and limits of Turkey’s soft power in the Middle East’; and Pope, ‘Pax Ottomana?’. 

31 We would like to thank one reviewer for alerting us to this point.

32 For detailed figures on Turkish-Middle Eastern trade in the 2000s, see Ö Tür, ‘Economic relations with the Middle East under the akp—trade, business community and reintegration with neighboring zones’, Turkish Studies, 12(4), 2011, pp 589–602.

33 Ibid.


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36 For example, in the ruling on Leyla Sahin against the Turkish state on 10 November 2005, the European Court of Human Rights did not interpret the headscarf ban in public universities as a violation of the freedom of religion.

37 The Middle East has not taken over Turkey’s dominant trade in absolute terms, as Europe and Russia continue to be its biggest trading partners. However, in relative terms the Middle East’s role in Turkish trade has changed dramatically in the course of the 2000s.


39 For a detailed overview of the turns this case has taken, see Gareth Jenkins’s report, at http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/docs/silkroadpapers/0908Ergenekon.pdf, accessed 5 February 2012.

Notes on contributors

André Bank is Research Fellow at the German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Hamburg. His publications include ‘Jordan and Morocco: pacification through constitutional reform?’, in M Asseburg (ed), Protest, Revolt and Regime Change in the Arab World (2012); ‘Syrian revolt fallout: end of the resistance axis?’, Middle East Policy, 19(3), 2012, pp 25–35 (with E Mohns); and Turkey and the Arab Revolt: Rise or Decline in Regional Politics? (2012).