

Rethinking Turkey's Soft Power in the Arab World: Islam, Secularism, and Democracy

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In this article I develop an analysis of the meaning, characteristics, and evolution, in terms of both aspirations and limits, of Turkey's ability to exercise "soft power" in its relationship with the Arab world. The definition of "Turkey's soft power" is still undergoing a process of clarification and transformation.¹ In the following I provide a conceptual template for and an analysis of the origins and transformative shifts that underlie this historical-political phenomenon. I also aim to cast light on the past and ongoing consequences of said shifts on the dynamics of the Middle Eastern and Mediterranean regions.

In this study I argue that Turkey's ambition in the use of its soft power is the result of a "historical evolutionary process" in which the relationship between Kemalism and Islamism creates not two separate, conflicting worlds but two symbiotic parts of contemporary Turkey.² The internal political, economic, and social transformations that began in the 1970s and 1980s, along with those brought about by the end of the Cold War, are the origins of this process. The evolution of political Islam in Turkey under the aegis of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and this party's accession to power after the 2002 elections were important developments in the growth of Turkey's soft power.³ However, the AKP's years in government have demonstrated not only the potential of Turkish soft power but also its limits and fragility; it is a power that is still very much in the process of definition, and as such it needs to be viewed from a historical perspective.

The central thesis of this study is that this perspective, and the question of what Turkish soft power can achieve, is dominated by the complex equilibrium that Turkey strikes between Islamism and republican secularism. Contemporary Turkish history reflects both the conflict between and the symbiosis of these components,

and Turkish soft power will only have a chance to succeed if it is able to reconcile the uniqueness of Turkish history with its complexity.

There are a number of props that would support the credibility of Turkish soft power and would be achievable through the constant cultivation of a balance between secularism, Islam, and democracy. Such props include economic, technological, and industrial growth as the basis of modernization; an impulse toward reform and constant internal democratization, along with respect for human rights and minority interests; renewed reflection on compatibility between Islam and democracy, and openness to pluralistic ideology; a cooperative foreign policy that enables the country to mediate at regional and international levels; and a bureaucratic, administrative, and statutory framework able to express the plurality of a modern civil society.

The article traces Turkey's path toward the projection of soft power during the ten-plus years since the AKP came to power. It highlights both the AKP's potential, particularly as signaled during the first mandate, and the party's limits and contradictions, which emerged during the subsequent two mandates. These latter were characterized by an excessive concentration of political, economic, bureaucratic, and statutory power, which in turn fractured the intricate secularist-Islamist compact and upset both domestic and foreign policy.

The article is divided into four parts. The first part traces the origins of the concept of soft power in the literature and the historical process that enabled Turkey to project that power toward the Arab world. The aim here is to reconstruct the evolution of Turkish society and politics from the 1970s to the 1990s, a period that coincided with the international repercussions of the end of the Cold War and witnessed substantial changes in Turkish foreign policy.

The second part depicts the characteristics and peculiarities of Turkish soft power as instanced during the AKP's first mandate. Three features dominate this period: the relationship between Islam and democracy, Turkey's relations with the EU and its parallel reform process, and the influence of new Turkish foreign policy.

The third part describes the developments that made Turkey "attractive" to the Arab world. Economic developments included the growth in human mobility, the creation of free-trade areas, and the liberalization of visa policy to increase economic activity and regional integration. The visibility of Turkish media in the Arab world, especially Turkish TV series and films, and the country's increasing investment in education and religion were also attractive. Within this framework I examine the existing relationship between the projection of Turkish soft power and the birth of the so-called Arab Spring.

The last part considers the effects the events emanating from the Arab Spring had on Turkish soft power. Of particular note are the limits and contradictions, in both domestic and foreign policy, that have diluted Turkey's credibility as a wielder of soft power.

The Origins of Turkey's Soft Power in the Arab World

The term "soft power" was coined by Joseph Nye in his 1990 seminal book *Bound to Lead* and subsequently developed in various publications.⁴ The term originated in reference to the United States and identified an alternative dimension of power to that known as "hard power" (military force). Nye's key point is that, in an increasingly interdependent world, "hard power" resources, including military and economic assets, were less effective in international politics than they had been in previous eras.⁵ In the modern era soft power, the ability of a nation to create and exert charisma, attraction, and persuasion, is of increasing importance. A country may obtain desired political outcomes because other countries—admiring its values, emulating its example, and aspiring to its level of prosperity—want to follow it.⁶

On what is a country's soft power based? Nye argues that the basis consists of three fundamental resources: the country's culture, in places where the given culture is attractive to others; its political values, when it lives up to them at home and abroad; and its foreign policies, when others see them as legitimate and as having moral authority. But these are not the only resources that produce soft power; there are also economic resources that can predispose behavior to soft as well as hard power.⁷ As Nye underlines, soft power is a descriptive, rather than a normative, concept. Like any form of power, it can be wielded for good and bad purposes. The success of soft power depends on the ability to create credibility, trust, and attraction. In the literature three features are considered to be central for a state to create attraction: benignity, competence, and charisma. "Benignity" is an aspect of how one relates to others. Being perceived as benign tends to generate sympathy, trust, and credibility. "Competence" refers to how an agent does things, and it produces admiration, respect, and emulation. Finally, "charisma" is an aspect of an agent's relation to ideals, values, and vision, and it tends to produce inspiration and adherence. These qualities are crucial for converting resources (such as culture, values, and policies) into power behavior.⁸

Born in reference to the United States, the concept of soft power was extended to descriptions of other players—primarily the European Union. The post-Cold War international order and the emergence of new global actors in international relations and their changing parameters for multilateral interaction are just some

of the aspects that generate new formulations and emphases in the concept of soft power. In recent years the concept has been extended to new players. In the process it has assumed declinations that differ from the concept's original form. Turkey's so-called soft power is one instance of such a declination.

Turkish soft power may be a relatively recent addition to the discussion on soft-power models, but its process of formation has been long and deeply intertwined with the political history of contemporary Turkey. As a part of the "diagnosis" of Turkey's idiosyncratic soft power, it is reasonable to ask whether Turkey has traditionally and historically been attractive to the Arab world. The answer is no. Turkey's image in the Arab world, negative throughout much of the twentieth century, was very far from the ideas of attraction and persuasion. In Arab debate about Turkey, the stereotype of "the terrible Turk," of the Ottoman state as the violent suppresser of Arab nationalism, persisted for a long time. Arab Nationalists and political Islamists in the Arab world have for a long time perceived Turkey as a binary opposition between a "small secular elite" and "populous but powerless Islamic masses."⁹ This was particularly so after the end of the Second World War when Turkey became a member of NATO and thus strongly anchored itself to the Western Bloc during the Cold War.¹⁰ Turkey had limited economic and foreign policy relations with the Muslim world during that period, partially because the Kemalist elite assumed that increasing relations with other Muslim countries would be detrimental to the secularist nature of the Turkish republic.¹¹ The Cold War thrust a spotlight on Turkey's security needs, and Turkey's recognition of Israel in 1949 created an additional rift with the Islamic world. There were two dominant issues at that time: how to defend the country against both the Soviet Union and Islamic assertiveness and how to become a developed nation. Turkey distanced itself from the region for the most part and identified itself with the West. The country's Kemalist legacy, the role of the military officers in the foundation of the republic, the geography of Turkey, and the developments in the surrounding area are all considered to be factors that made Turkey a hard power and the country's securitized foreign policy a likely outcome.¹² Since the foundation of the republic in 1923, Turkey's main concern has always been to secure the existence of the state. Gradually, however, some factors—both internal and external—began to create the necessary conditions to accelerate the process of desecuritization and to increase Turkey's credibility in the eyes of Middle Eastern countries.¹³

In the 1970s, mainly in response to the increase in oil prices, Turkey and her trade partners placed some emphasis on developing stronger economic ties, but political involvement remained limited.¹⁴ However, as the more recently

available documentation on the 1970s shows, subtle changes were in fact already emerging at this time: the development of new alignments in the Middle East, the destabilization caused by the energy crisis, and the decrease in Soviet aggression predisposed Turkey and the region to the conspicuous changes that characterized the 1980s.

Simultaneously, Turkish society and politics began a profound transformation whereby Islam played an increasingly important part in citizens' lives. By the 1980s Kemalism had submitted to the influence of a form of puritanical Islamism, and this process created a "Western-Turkish-Islamic" synthesis that characterizes Turkey to this day. The origins of this synthesis are definitely to be found in the 1970s.

After the military coup of September 1980, the first civilian government, under Turgut Özal, sowed the seeds for the pluralization of Turkish politics and the changing framework of Turkish foreign policy.¹⁵ During the second half of the 1980s and throughout the 1990s, gradual changes emerged in Turkey's political and social structures and in its foreign policy. These changes were led by a new social class that sought and gained positions in administration, industry, academia, the media, and politics. Hakan Yavuz correctly underlines that the neoliberal economic reforms of Turgut Özal and the related EU-led political reforms entailed an ideological transformation that led to the emergence of a Muslim bourgeoisie, to the expansion of the public sphere, and to new attitudes regarding human rights.¹⁶ Yavuz argues that the years from 1983 to 1999 were dominated by the introduction of a new political language about privatization, human rights, and civil society. It was after the liberalization of the Turkish market and the shift toward an export-oriented economy that Turkey began to see the massive expansion of its middle class. The liberal spaces created by Turgut Özal's reforms paved the way for the emergence of market-based Turkish Islam, which is still lacking in the Arab world. Neoliberal economic policies were fostered, and a new Anatolian bourgeoisie emerged.¹⁷ The conservative capitalists—the Anatolian tigers—who found an opportunity to expand economically through Özal's liberalization program later formed the social and economic foundations of the AKP. Currently it is this new class of conservative businessmen—the Anatolian bourgeoisie—that takes the AKP's economic and political openings to the Middle East.¹⁸ As a result of Turkey's export-oriented economic growth strategies, Turkish Islamist businessmen have gradually become market seekers, and this has significantly contributed to Turkey's rapid economic success. This Anatolian middle class inevitably resorted to new markets in the Middle East, Africa, and Central Asia, areas that are predominantly Muslim.¹⁹

As Kemal Kirişci has argued, foreign policy saw a gradual shift from policies derived from a repertoire based on the military, political, and territorial system to policies associated with a “trading state.”²⁰ Turkey’s economic success during the AKP years and the emerging conservative Islamic business elite enabled the first step of Turkish soft power in the Arab world. The source of Turkey’s soft power can accordingly be traced to the country’s profound social, political, and economic transformation; this in turn was based on an effective combination of the state’s political strategies, which sharpened policy focus on the individual, on corporations, and on civil society organizations. The transformation included a redefinition of Turkish political language, a new role for business organizations and NGOs, and a reanalysis of the relationship between Islam and democracy.

Obviously, alongside economic and social change in the domestic sphere there were also important changes in the international scene: the end of the Cold War led to the end of the bipolar system and opened new possibilities in the Middle East. For Turkey the end of the Cold War brought new objectives, in particular the Europeanization of Turkey within the framework of Turkey’s EU accession bid. Moreover, the globalization process demanded greater openness to the “outside” in terms of both foreign and commercial policy.

Turkey’s Soft Power: Expectations Produced by the Early AKP Years

The evolution of political Islam in Turkey, as embodied by the AKP and its accession to power after the 2002 elections, was an important development for Turkey’s soft power.²¹ The country’s quest for credibility and the elevation of the AKP to power had a positive effect on regional perceptions of Turkey. As already stated, any definition of Turkish soft power will necessarily center around the issue of what made Turkey attractive to the Arab world. Kemal Kirişci developed the concept of a “demonstrative effect” and argued that it is this “effect” that made the Turkish model appealing to the Middle East. He says that this effect is a function of three developments: the rise of the “trading state,” which made Turkey visible through commerce, investment, and trade; the projection of Turkey’s democratization experience as a “work in progress”; and Turkey’s new foreign policy, which encourages free movement of people between Turkey and the Middle East.²²

To this list of appealing developments, we should add:

1. substantial, sustained economic growth accompanied by progress in social modernization and internal economic and political stability;
2. Turkey’s relations with the EU and its parallel reform process;

3. renewed cultural growth, both internally (through the creation of new universities, museums, and cultural centers) and externally (through the broadcasting of television series, soap operas, etc., which have enjoyed great success in the Arab world);
4. a new combination of religious and educational trends, as expressed by the proliferation of overseas Turkish Muslim schools (n.b. the growing influence of the Gülen movement); and
5. a growth in migration flows and the creation of free economic areas to increase regional integration and economic activity—developments facilitated by the liberalization of visa policies.

In the initial phase of its mandate, the AKP placed particular emphasis on three issues: the relationship between Islam and democracy, Turkey's relations with the EU and the parallel reform process, and the influence of new Turkish foreign policy. With regard to the first issue, the AKP's accession to power demonstrated both how the Islamist movement had evolved and how the crucial question of reconciling democracy with Islam might evolve. The initial phase of the AKP's mandate was indeed characterized by grand design, by idealistic and theoretic impulse. The first AKP government, led by Prime Minister Erdoğan and the then (from 2003 to 2007) foreign minister Abdullah Gül, placed great emphasis on the need for political reform in the Muslim world. The idealistic impact of their initial speeches—on the compatibility of Islam and democracy, the importance of political transparency and accountability, the drive toward regional harmony, and the crucial theme of respect for human rights—impacted forcefully on the Arab community and reopened region-wide debate regarding the evolution of Islamic political parties and the relationship between Islam and democracy.²³ This latter aspect is one of the main issues in the democratization debate in the Arab world.²⁴ The evolution of Turkey's Islamist movement and the establishment of the AKP were perceived as evidence that the Islamist movement can learn to accept the principles of democracy. This perception has grown beyond the immediate confines of Turkish interest and has become relevant to all pertinent debate in the Middle East.

The link between soft power and democratization in Turkey is deep and complex, and it is still evolving. It was precisely Turkey's observation that its internal democratization process was not complete that brought the country closer to those states in the Arab world whose democracies were incompletely democratic. As Kirişçi himself writes, this hindered the establishment of the kind of "hierarchical relationship" that inevitably forms between well-established democracies and countries that are receiving assistance on their path toward democracy. Turkish

governmental officials were not slow to realize the advantages of proclaiming a “work in progress” democracy, and they have noted how this made communication with their counterparts much easier.²⁵

The AKP's insistence during its first mandate on the Islam-democracy relationship proved to be attractive not only to the West but also to part of the Arab world. As we shall see, the reforming instinct and attention to the process of internal democratization in Turkey lost impetus in subsequent years, which cost Turkey dearly in terms of the country's ability to present itself as a winning example in the discovery of compatibility between Islam and democracy.

The second issue relates to the role played by the EU, directly and indirectly, in the creation of Turkey's soft power. It is central to understanding how Turkey is perceived in the Arab world. During the most critical period, between 1999 and 2006, the EU exercised great influence in Turkey—especially from 2002 to 2005. This latter period was coined “the golden age of reform.” After the 1999 European Council meeting in Helsinki, which recognized Turkey as a candidate for admission to the EU, Turkey enacted a series of reforms that would have been inconceivable without compelling incentives and pressure from the EU. This virtuous circle produced two results: it led to the EU's decision to initiate negotiations, in October 2005, for Turkey's full membership in the EU, and it contributed to the impression of trust, charisma, and attraction that had already begun to draw the interest of the Arab world.²⁶ The benefits of “Europeanization” were historically presented in terms of strong economic performance, major steps toward democratic consolidation, and positive effects in foreign policy.²⁷

Turkey's reform process and the parallel progress in relations between Turkey and the EU have had an important impact on the Arab world's perception of Turkey. The need for Turkey's EU anchor is important because the Arab world wants to see strong EU-Turkish relations. In light of Turkey's EU accession process, the country's image among its Arab neighbors could be seen as an “instrument” for improving relations between Europe and the Middle East. Many Arab countries see Turkey's accession to Europe as bringing to the entire region a degree of stability that variously manifests as prospects for economic and democratic growth, a constant push toward the elaboration of the relationship between Islam and democracy, and the guarantee of a multilateral and cooperative approach in Turkish foreign policy.

These developments, however, were manifest above all during the AKP's first mandate. Thereafter, reforms in Turkey and negotiations with the EU slowed down appreciably. By December 2006, eight of the thirty-five chapters of the EU *acquis*,

specified in Turkey's Negotiation Framework document, had been suspended.²⁸ The setbacks affecting Turkey's accession to the EU occurred mainly during the AKP's second mandate (that is, from 2007 onward) and most certainly reduced the influence of Turkish soft power.

In the area of foreign policy—the third issue emphasized throughout the AKP's first mandate and at the beginning of its second—the party ensured gains in soft power by virtue of its multilateral, cooperative, win-win approach, otherwise known as the “strategic depth doctrine” of Turkish foreign policy.²⁹ During the first years of AKP government, Turkey—and especially Ahmet Davutoğlu, a foreign affairs advisor who became foreign minister in 2009 and is credited with having conceived the new Turkish foreign policy—generated the theoretical bases for foreign affairs in the future. The so-called “policies of zero problems with neighbors” and “the doctrine of strategic depth” became the guidelines for the new Turkish policy toward the Middle East; their aim was to reduce conflict with neighboring countries and to relaunch regional planning at all levels. By common consent it was Davutoğlu who changed the rhetoric and practice of Turkish foreign policy and brought to it a dynamic, multidimensional orientation. Davutoğlu's foreign policy vision had Turkey's domestic transformation in the background—specifically the consolidation of political and economic stability in the country.³⁰

The foreign minister's approach originated from a geopolitical standpoint: In terms of its area of influence Turkey is a Middle Eastern, Balkan, Caucasian, Central Asian, Caspian, Mediterranean, Gulf, and Black Sea country. Given this picture, Turkey should make its role of a peripheral country part of its past and appropriate a new position: one of providing security and stability not only for itself, but also for its neighboring regions. Turkey should guarantee its own security and stability by taking a more active, constructive role to provide order, stability and security in its environs.³¹

In a 2007 essay Davutoğlu identified the five then-current tenets of Turkey's foreign policy-making process: balancing security with democracy, enacting a zero-problem policy toward Turkey's neighbors, developing relations with the neighboring regions and beyond, adhering to a multidimensional foreign policy (Turkey's relations with other global actors aim to be complementary, not competitive), and pursuing “rhythmic diplomacy”—that is, pushing for sustained proactivism in the field of diplomacy and trying to achieve a more active role in international organizations, as well as opening up to new areas where Turkish contacts had been limited in the past.³² Davutoğlu put it this way:

Turkey's success is not only the result of state policies, but also the activities of civil society, business organizations, and numerous other organizations. . . . [In this way] the state's macro strategy is in conformity with the micro strategies of individual people, corporations, and civil society organizations. . . . Turkish civil society organizations form an integral part of the bigger picture defined as foreign policy. All of these elements have become part of Turkey's new international vision.³³

These aspects of Davutoğlu's theoretical elaboration, which appeared during the AKP's first phase of government, are extremely important for comprehending the relationship between internal democratization and soft power in foreign policy. Over the years, however, Davutoğlu's input seems to have lost its innovative luster and to have given birth to profound contradictions, both in Turkey's inability to maintain a multidimensional, cooperative foreign policy and in the lack of pluralistic, democratic consensus between the state's macro strategy and the micro strategies of individuals, businesses, and civil society organizations. An excessive concentration of political, economic, administrative, and regulatory power in the hands of the AKP has above all favored businesses, special interest groups, and civil servants close to the government. This concentration has created a new fracture in the complex Kemalist-Islamist equilibrium, with important repercussions in both domestic and foreign policy.

Cultural, Religious, and Economic Aspects of Turkey's Soft Power: The Shortcomings of the AKP's Second Term

The fundamental tenets of Turkish policy in the Mediterranean area are the growth of migration flows, the exchange of ideas, and the creation of free trade areas to increase economic activity and reinforce the sense of community within the region. These processes were facilitated by liberalized visa requirements—a policy pursued by the AKP government, in the interests of openness and interdependence, with particular tenacity.

As a result Turkey is attractive in cultural, economic, educational, and academic terms. A case in point is that of Syria, which had constituted a fundamental block in the creation of a larger trade area that would include Lebanon, Jordan, and subsequently Egypt. In the early years of this trade area, Syria proved to be a winning example of the new Turkish strategy. Relations between the two countries began to improve during the AKP's first mandate, continuing to strengthen during the party's second mandate, especially from the economic and commercial points of view. Relations with Syria embodied the fundamental principles upon

which Turkey's regional foreign policy was based: a combination of economic interdependence and cultural affinity within which, at least initially, no explicit promotional reference to democracy existed. Further on we shall see how the outbreak of revolts in North Africa and the Middle East radically modified the given setting and confronted Turkey with complex new challenges, some of which were profoundly problematic—none more so than the Syrian case.

In talking about Turkey's soft power, we cannot ignore the importance of religion and education. Soft power also embraces the role of religion in international relations, to the extent that such power consists of the ability of an entity that is usually (but not necessarily) a state to influence other entities through attraction and persuasion. Religious soft power is a recognized component in foreign policy, and Turkey's recourse to such power is not exceptional in international relations.

Several "lobby groups" work on Turkey's behalf in various parts of the world to promote and exploit religion as an element of persuasion. This is the case of the Gülen movement, which has attracted increasing attention, both inside and outside Turkey, as a result of its increasing activity, wealth, and influence. The Gülen movement profited from post-1980 liberalization, which freed its media, educational, and financial activities from the control of the statist secular establishment and which was accompanied by a more general "Islamization" of Turkish public life.³⁴ Inspired by the thoughts of its founder, Sufi scholar Fethullah Gülen, the movement has established hundreds of educational institutions, as well as media outlets and charities. It is an Internet-connected, informal, word-of-mouth set of overlapping networks that is more a social movement than an organization. It is well resourced, interconnected, effective, and extensive, with influence throughout society and sympathizers within the political, bureaucratic, and economic elites. From Kenya to Kazakhstan this Islamic network promotes a "moderate" Islam, one that should positively embrace science, reason, democratization, and tolerance. It has no formal structure, no visible organization, and no official membership, but the Gülen movement is linked to more than 1,000 schools in 130 countries, as well as to think tanks, newspapers, TV and radio stations, and universities. It is very active in educational activities and interfaith dialogue. Turkish businessmen are attracted by what they see as Gülen's international outlook and pragmatic approach to trade and commercial expansion. In the summer of 2008, Gülen was elected the world's leading intellectual in a poll organized jointly by the British *Prospect Magazine* and the US publication *Foreign Policy*. This award offers a penetrating insight into the mechanism of Gülen's influence and the nature of his movement.³⁵ Bill Park wrote that the Gülen movement eludes definition: deeply Turkish, it is globally engaged.

It is a work in progress, metamorphosing as it grows.³⁶ The movement is considered to be an expression of the Turkish post-Kemalist era, but the creation of such a movement with the given characteristics would probably not have been possible without the Kemalist experience.

The connections between the Gülen movement and the AKP were strong throughout the first decade of AKP government, and the movement played, and continues to play, a very important role in the creation of an economic, administrative, social, and educational network that communicates the Turkish brand of Islam to the world. However, the most recent events and the growing authoritarianism of Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan seem to have fractured relations between the Gülenists and the AKP. The effects of this fracture have yet to be assessed.

Another substantial contribution to Turkish soft power derives from the country's media. The popularity of Turkish television series, from the Balkans to the Middle East, has brought Turkey to an international audience and is subtly transforming the image of the country abroad. Since 2001, sixty-five Turkish television series have been sold abroad, bringing in over \$50 million to the booming Turkish television industry. The Arab and North African broadcasters compete to buy prime-time Turkish successes like *Kurtlar vadisi* (The valley of the wolves) or *Gümüş* (Silver). This latter soap opera, which is distributed in the Arab world with the title *Nur* (Light), has an audience of at least 85 million Arabs. Turkish scholar Nurçin Yıldız, who wrote a detailed evaluation of the impact of Turkish soap operas on the Arab world, argues that their success comes from a combination of modernity combined with traditional Muslim themes: on the one hand, there is the Western lifestyle depicted in these series, but on the other hand, there are common Islamic cultural values. The broadcasting of these series shows that Arabs are open to the sort of Westernization that is found in Turkey, which in turn is a synthesis of East and West. This synthesis seems to be the root of Turkey's soft power at its strongest.

The Egyptian Radio and Television Union's recent decision to postpone the airing of several Turkish programs, however, signals meaningful opposition to Turkish soft power. The decision followed the deposition of former president Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood government and was related to the Turkish government's unwavering support for Morsi. The resulting blow to Turkey's most publicly visible presence in the Arab world is just the latest sign of the rupture between Egypt's post-coup rulers and Ankara, one of Morsi's strongest backers.

Simultaneously, the Turkish media are increasingly accused of being the lackeys of pro-government lobby groups. The fact that journalists are increasingly inhibited by censorship is evidenced by the minimal media attention granted within Turkey to

the recent mass protests and the heavy-handed intervention of police at Taksim Square.

It is informative to observe the evolution of Middle Eastern perceptions of Turkey over the past four years, as recorded by the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV). The foundation conducted public opinion surveys in 2009,³⁷ 2010,³⁸ 2011,³⁹ and 2012.⁴⁰ The first survey surprisingly revealed that Turkey's image in the Arab world, which had been negative throughout most of the twentieth century, had become positive in the first years of AKP government. TESEV's second, analogous survey confirmed this transformation. The survey in question was conducted between August and September 2010 in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iraq, and Iran and revealed a statistically significant increase in positive opinions of Turkey. Indeed, 80 percent of participants in the seven Arab states surveyed had a positive view of Turkey. The second important finding was that Turkey's mediatory role in the Middle East was welcomed. The survey also demonstrated that Turkey's economic presence was felt in the region. Finally, Turkey's impact on the region was not limited to the economic and political spheres: Turkey was beginning to be a player in the cultural domain too.⁴¹ In his analysis of the second TESEV survey's results, Paul Salem identified five reasons for the improvement of Turkey's image in the Arab world: first, the rise of the AKP not only tempered the anti-Islamic secularism and anti-Arab Westernism of the Turkish Kemalists but also rebuilt Turkey's links to its regional and Muslim past; second, a "zero-problem" regional foreign policy that opened Turkey up to the Arab and Muslim world and sought to resolve conflict with and among neighbors; third, the apparent success of the Turkish democratic experiment in an otherwise authoritarian region and the Turkish economic model of high productivity; fourth, the apparent success of the Turkish balance between religion, secularism, and public freedom in a region where religion and politics have not found a balanced formula of coexistence; and fifth, the growing familiarity with Turkish culture and society through its popular television soap operas, export products, and tourism to Turkey.⁴²

The third TESEV survey (conducted in 2011) showed that despite its decline in some countries, conspicuously Syria and Iran, the generally positive perception of Turkey in the region had not changed fundamentally, and despite a then-recent hardening in Turkey's foreign policy, support for Turkey's mediatory role persisted. Interestingly, Turkey was perceived more as an economic than a political power. In any case the 2011 survey posted the first signs of reputational difficulty, which was then confirmed by a marked decline in Turkey's popularity in the 2012 survey. Of

particular interest was the 2012 finding that the perception of Turkey's leadership potential had declined. More specifically, Turkey had lost credibility in its role as a regional mediator, as a convincing example of coherence between Islam and democracy, and as a country able to exercise influence throughout the Middle East.

During the AKP's second mandate, serious shortcomings began to emerge: the snail-like pace of Turkey's internal democratization; the country's perceptible difficulty in fulfilling the role of regional mediator; the increasingly unilateral and decreasingly cooperative nature of Turkey's foreign policy; and a bias in favor of Islamic movements in the distribution of support, together with a sectarian rather than inclusive foreign policy. Within this setting the so-called Arab Spring seriously disrupted Turkey's foreign policy. New scenarios and challenges emerged and evidenced the fragilities of Turkish soft power. The subsequent evolution of the Arab Spring and additional unsettling events in the region signaled profound complexity and instability.

The Arab Spring and the Limits of Turkey's Soft Power

The years of AKP leadership have led to a reassessment of Turkey's role in the region and to the creation of a network of commercial, economic, cultural, educational, and religious ties that have collectively enhanced Turkey's visibility in the Arab world. These developments have also contributed to the emergence of a new Islamic middle class—one that is more modern and globalized than its predecessor. This same class has energized the impulse toward change in Muslim civil society and has played a primary role in the birth of the various Arab Spring movements. No analysis of contemporary Middle Eastern society should neglect Turkey's influence, both direct and indirect, in the creation of a new Islamic awareness in the Arab world. The various Arab Spring movements have more or less directly undergone the influence of Turkish soft power; the very same movements have subsequently disrupted said soft power by challenging it and revealing its limits and contradictions.

The AKP's third electoral victory, in June 2011, made the party's leadership even more "self-confident," not least because it further increased the concentration of political power in the AKP's hands. These now exercised tight control over the economy, the civil service, the judiciary, and the media. Meanwhile the party's interest in completing the process of internal democratization seemed to have diminished.

With regard to foreign policy, after the first revolts in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria, Turkey's immediate choice was that of nominal ubiquity and overengagement on the basis of strong national economic growth and the ability to offer the Arab world the image of plausible reconciliation between Islam and democracy. The

contradictions and limitations of Turkey's then-current model would not be long in emerging.

During the 2011 "Arab Spring Tour" in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya, Prime Minister Erdoğan presented Turkey as a winning example of coexistence between Islam, secularism, and democracy; meanwhile he tightened and reinforced economic ties. Davutoğlu defined the Arab Spring as a "normalization of history"—in other words, as events that should long since have happened—and on this basis encouraged the Arab populations' legitimate demands and expectations.

Analysts and journalists talk of the "Turkish model" and of its "exportability," but they neglect the fact that the "Turkish model" is the result of a complex and singular history that makes its application elsewhere hazardous. Every country that is in the process of constitutional, democratic, social, and political definition and elaboration must find its own identity.

By encouraging and supporting certain Islamic movements/parties that approximate the AKP model in the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern areas, and by intervening in the internal affairs of certain Arab countries, Turkey found itself drawn into the complex dynamics of internal national transition. Turkey's own internal fragilities (including an incomplete democratization of the country) prevented it from successfully managing foreign transition, and its image as a regional moderator was accordingly damaged. The AKP government expressed its support for the population of Egypt and immediately afterward became the principal supporter of the government led by Mohamed Morsi, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood. Along with Qatar, Turkey was the principal financial sponsor of the Muslim Brotherhood and as such explicitly expressed a political preference. Recent events in Egypt (which comprise a further and immense wave of popular protest), the removal of President Morsi, and military intervention have created deeply conflictive and violent circumstances in a country radically divided by the clash between Muslim Brotherhood supporters and the army. By offering direct support to the Muslim Brotherhood, Turkey weakened its own position as a regional and international mediator, which in turn has certainly diluted the country's potential for the exercise of soft power.

The main challenge to Turkey's regional policy comes from the Syrian crisis. Turkey's direct support for the anti-Assad forces has created new dilemmas in the country's foreign policy. Conflict in Syria has increasingly become a battle for regional influence between global and regional actors and internecine religious groups. Thus, the never-resolved conflict between Sunni and Shi'a has reemerged and spread throughout the region, intensifying rivalry in the process. The conflict in

Syria has transformed into full-scale civil war, which in turn has increased violence and instability throughout the Middle East. The immediate consequences of this conflict are a new humanitarian emergency in the Middle East and North Africa in the form of an immense exodus of refugees. In itself appalling, the situation is likely to be aggravated by an increase in Islamic extremism, by a strengthening of al-Qaeda's hand, and by President Assad's use of chemical weapons against Syrian civilians. The entire international community is involved in increasing contention at both the regional and international levels. Erdoğan is urging armed international intervention against Assad at all cost, even without UN approval, but the consequences of this political choice are unpredictable, and Turkey's policy for a possible post-Assad Syria is conspicuously vague.

Unfortunately Turkey's regional foreign policy problems do not end with Egypt and Syria. Relations between Israel and Turkey have progressively worsened, above all in the wake of the Mavi Marmara issue, which in turn led to Turkey's downgrading of diplomatic relations with Israel in September 2011. It is increasingly difficult to understand how the rhetoric used by Erdoğan's government against Israel can contribute to the promotion of stability and peace throughout the Middle East.⁴³

From this perspective, Davutoğlu's "zero problems with the neighborhood" scenario seems light years away. Indeed, as of the second half of the AKP's second mandate, and above all after the onset of the Arab Spring, Turkey's excessive involvement in the internal dynamics of certain Mediterranean and Middle Eastern countries has neither favored regional stability nor reinforced Turkey's soft-power capacity to enact mediation.⁴⁴

Another element that has contributed to the post-Arab Spring evolution of Turkish soft power is the renewed participation of Turkey in the process of democratization of Arab countries in transition. As Ziya Öniş has argued, Turkish foreign policy toward the region prior to the onset of the Arab Spring during the AKP era was based on the principles of mutual gain through economic interdependence and close political ties deriving from cultural affinity and Muslim fraternity. Democratic transition in Arab countries created new challenges for Turkey's emerging soft-power potential and generated the need for Turkey to update its zero-problem approach and to react in a nonunilateral way.⁴⁵ The ensuing process pinpointed important contradictions whereby Turkey's failure to implement its own process of democratization delegitimized the country as a model of Islamic-democratic compatibility.

The recent events of Taksim Square in Istanbul and other instances of Turkish civil unrest are only the latest and most visible signs of growing dissatisfaction within

the country. The repressive behavior of the Turkish police, along with Erdoğan's growing authoritarianism, casts onerous doubts on Turkey's international and regional credibility. These behaviors likewise feed the burgeoning discontent within Turkish civil society, which seeks but has not obtained pluralism and democracy, respect for minorities, individual liberty, the preservation of public spaces, freedom of the press and of speech, and noninterference in the religious choices of citizens.

Turkey's potential for success in the exercise of soft power would appear to reside in the complex and delicate equilibrium between secularism and Islamism—in the intersection that renders contemporary Turkish history unique. This is an intersection that the AKP in its early years seemed to exploit with optimism but that now appears to have been discarded in favor of more emphatic Islamism, excessive authoritarianism in domestic policy, and over-engagement, often sectarian, in foreign policy. In brief, Turkey's soft power has progressively diminished in line with its loss of whatever equilibrium it had achieved between Islam, secularism, and democracy.

Conclusion

Turkey's aspirations to soft power have met with a mutable and complex setting that collocates a number of crucial issues: the role of Islamic movements and compatibility between Islam and democracy; the emergence and radicalization of new regional conflicts; Islamic extremism and the instability of the entire Middle Eastern region; and finally, economic and social change and the emergence of a new civil society—more demanding, globalized, and modern—in the Arab world. In this context the main instruments of Turkey's projection of soft power are the ability to create a flexible, sustainable "trading state" in close cooperation with the business community, civil society organizations, and state institutions; a strengthening of the internal democratization process, along with respect for human rights and minority interests; a cooperative foreign policy that is able to manage the demands simultaneously generated by globalization and the need for regional cooperation and mediation; and a vigorous ability to communicate its own values and culture through the media, popular culture, and civil society channels.

As already stated, these instruments can only be reinforced by a constant quest for equilibrium between Islam, secularism, and democracy. This in turn implies and requires renewed reflection on compatibility between Islam and democracy and greater openness to pluralistic ideology. This must include a bureaucratic, administrative, and statutory framework that is able to express the plurality of a modern, civil society and an authentic new policy of inclusiveness toward minority interests.

The January/February 2013 issue of *Foreign Affairs* reports an interview with Turkish President Abdullah Gül in which the President declares the following:

What matters is for a country to have its own standards raised to the highest possible point, enabling the state to provide its citizens with prosperity and happiness. And when I say standards, I mean standards such as democracy and human rights. That is the ultimate objective for Turkey. When you raise your standards, your economy becomes much more powerful and you become a real soft power. . . . Then you start being followed very carefully by other countries and you become an inspiration for them.

This objective, however, seems to have encountered various limits and obstacles: the deceleration in Turkey's internal democratization process; the stagnation of EU-Turkish relations; an increase in the polarization and radicalization of the Muslim world as a result of Arab revolts in North Africa and the Middle East; the inability to maintain a cooperative foreign policy that facilitates Turkey's role as both a regional and an international mediator; and excessive authoritarianism in Prime Minister Erdoğan's internal policy. Paradoxically, its current difficulties present Erdoğan's party with its greatest challenges and hence its greatest opportunities. The protest movement within Turkey represents an opportunity for the AKP to demonstrate its ability to listen to that part of the country that seeks more determined internal democratization, greater pluralism, and immunity from religion in individual choices: one that seeks, in short, mature and complete democracy in a Turkey that credibly allows Islam and republican secularism to coexist.

Turkish history is the result of a complex, "multifaceted" relationship between Islam and the republican state. It is within this relationship, in which Turkish politics, culture, and identity were profoundly impacted by the Kemalist experience, that the Turkish state was founded. While Islamism and Kemalism provide competing images of society and identity, they are also inextricably intertwined in the genesis of contemporary Turkey. An analysis of Turkey's soft power cannot disregard this historical-political background. It can be seen as the combined result of Mustafa Kemal's reforms, Turgut Özal's economic liberalizations, and Abdullah Gül and Ahmet Davutoğlu's multidimensional, cooperative foreign policy as pursued during the first years of the AKP's incumbency. This historical process has enabled Turkey to develop a complex, delicate mixture of Islam, secularism, and democracy. It is in this "alchemy" and its future developments that the meaning of Turkish "soft power" can be found and that Turkey's regional credibility can be established.

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