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**Research Report**

## Turkey in MENA, MENA in Turkey: Reasons for popularity, limits of influence

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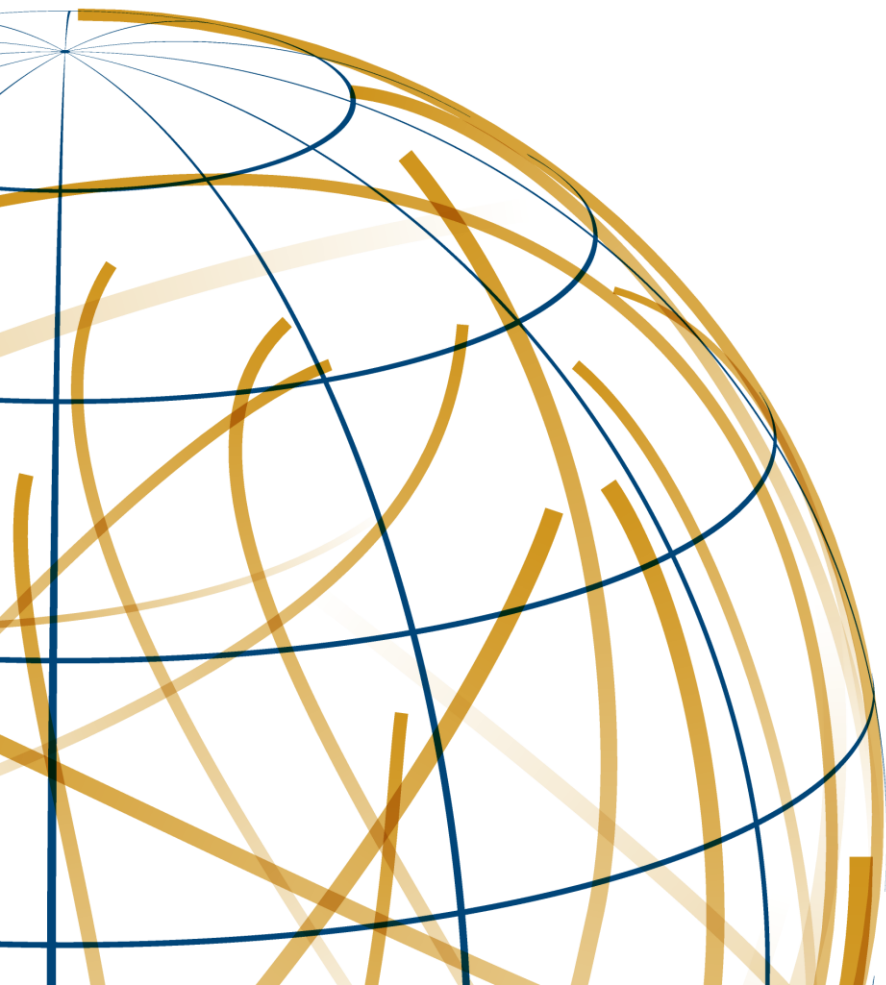
**SWP Research Paper**

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*Sinem Adar*

# Turkey in MENA, MENA in Turkey

Reasons for Popularity,  
Limits to Influence



Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik  
German Institute for  
International and Security Affairs

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March 2024, Berlin

- Turkey's popularity in the MENA region has increased since the AKP's rise to power in 2002.
- People-to-people contacts, economic progress, and a perceived European lifestyle have contributed to Turkey's popularity in the MENA region.
- Turkey's seemingly competitive political system and strong participation in elections are sources of appreciation. However, the meanings attributed to the Turkish political system have changed over time.
- Ankara's confrontational rhetoric on the perceived double standards of Western states and its calls for reform of the international system are welcomed.
- Turkey's increased popularity does not easily translate into broad regional influence.
- Ankara's credibility has deteriorated in the eyes of the region's elites. Its support of Sunni Islamists in the of the Arab uprisings antagonised the region's autocratic elites, ushering in a period of isolation between 2013 and 2020.
- Turkey's recent efforts to reintegrate in the region have thawed relations with Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, but incurred reputational costs vis-à-vis Sunni Islamists.
- Authoritarian practices and rising xenophobia against Syrian refugees and other Arab citizens also constrain Turkey's influence in the region.

**SWP Research Paper**

*Sinem Adar*

# Turkey in MENA, MENA in Turkey

Reasons for Popularity, Limits to Influence

**Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik**  
**German Institute for**  
**International and Security Affairs**

Centre for Applied Turkey Studies **CATS**

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### Turkey in MENA, MENA in Turkey: Reasons for Popularity, Limits to Influence

Turkey's relations with its Western allies have become increasingly fraught since the early 2010s. In stark contrast to initial optimism that a Turkey ruled by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) would be better integrated into Western institutions, now policy and security elites (and the European public) agree that Turkey has to a great extent turned away from the West. This process has been driven by the combined effect of three developments.

Firstly, the country's fragile democracy has inexorably turned into a presidential autocracy. The executive holds unchecked and asymmetrical powers vis-à-vis the parliament and the judiciary. Dissidence is suppressed. The country's fragile opposition parties are consumed by their disagreements and narrow interests, especially after their defeat in the presidential and parliamentary elections in May 2023. Secondly, Islam's expansion into society and politics casts doubt on the republic's secular credentials, exacerbating the Western anxieties over Islam. The popular narrative of the 2000s, that Turkey demonstrates Islam's compatibility with democracy, has lost its credibility.

Finally, the United States and the European Union consider Turkey a difficult yet important partner. Ankara's purchase of the Russian S-400 air defence system, its dragging out of the ratification of Sweden's NATO membership, its confrontational rhetoric, and its deployment of hard power have all created tensions. In 2023, Turkey's alignment rate with the EU's stance on foreign and security policy remained low at 10 per cent. According to a survey conducted for the European Council on Foreign Relations in 2021, Turkey is the only NATO country that more Europeans see more as an adversary than a partner.

Across the MENA region, opinions are more favourable and diverse. Despite a decline in support for Turkey over the years, Arab citizens see Turkey as less of a threat than the United States, Israel, Iran, Russia and France, according to the Arab Opinion Survey in 2022. In the 2023 ASDA'A BCW Arab Youth Survey, an overwhelming majority of young Arabs named Turkey an ally, ahead of China and the United Kingdom.



Turkish domestic politics are also closely followed by Arab states and their citizens. Ahead of the 2023 elections, fifty Muslim scholars (*ulema*) from the region (and beyond) issued a statement emphasising the importance of the elections for Muslims within and outside Turkey. The *ulema* asked Muslims with voting rights to vote for Erdoğan and those without to provide financial, social and political support. Erdoğan's reelection on 28 May was met with excitement. Crowds carrying Erdoğan's photos and Turkish flags took to the streets in Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine and Qatar. The emir of Qatar, the crown prince and prime minister of Saudi Arabia, the prime minister of Kuwait, the king of Bahrain, the Hamas leadership, the National Council of Syria (a representative body of the Syrian opposition based in Istanbul), and numerous other political and religious figures congratulated Erdoğan on his victory.

What explains these favourable attitudes towards Turkey under AKP rule? Has Ankara been able to translate its popularity into regional influence? Expert interviews conducted across the region between 2020 and 2022 and a systematic review of publicly available surveys (the Arab Barometer, the Arab Opinion Survey and the Arab Youth Survey) reveal three factors underlying Turkey's mass appeal in the region:

- Since the AKP's rise to power in 2002, Turkey has cultivated economic relations and networks, engaged in humanitarian aid, deepened security and defence ties, and, to a certain extent, gained cultural influence. In the past two decades Turkey has become a popular tourist destination, attracted Arab students, and hosted refugees and political exiles from the region. Turkey has been able to raise its economic profile and, for many an Arab citizen, enjoys the appeal of a perceived European lifestyle in a predominantly Muslim country.
- Despite the increasing autocratisation of the Turkish political system, the view that Erdoğan derives his legitimacy from popular will is not rare. The high turnout in Turkish elections and the existence of (fragile) party competition underline this view. In the last two decades, the so-called Turkish model of democracy has become a source of appreciation across the region. Yet, the meanings attributed to it changed over time. Ankara's support for Sunni Islamists during the Arab uprisings was a crucial turning point.
- Turkey's posturing as the defender of the globally disenfranchised also plays a role. Ankara conveys

this through four talking points: i) Turkey as the defender of Palestine and the Palestinians, ii) Turkey as the defender against Islamophobia, iii) Turkey standing against (neo)colonialism, and iv) Turkey as a proponent of reforming the international system. Ankara is seen as one of the emerging actors of a multipolar age.

Interviews and secondary sources also manifest suspicion and criticism, particularly among the region's political elites. Firstly, Ankara is seen as a polarising actor. Its support for Arab Islamists and its power projection across the region in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings antagonised the region's autocrats, who see political Islam as a threat to their survival. Secondly, Erdoğan's popularity has been waning, even among the Islamists. Given that interests are as important as ideology in the Islamists' relations with Ankara, Turkey's efforts to improve relations with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt, and even the Syrian regime do not sit well with many Arab Islamists. Thirdly, there is also dismay over Turkey's increasing autocratisation, driven by the regime's desire to survive. Last, but not least, growing xenophobia against Syrian refugees and even Arab tourists represents a serious obstacle to Ankara's regional aspirations.

All of this suggests that Turkey's appeal under Erdoğan does not translate readily into regional influence. Ankara's marginal role to date in efforts to deescalate in Gaza is testament to that. Nevertheless, Ankara's discursive strategy in its confrontation with the West risks undermining the EU's already fragile soft power and credibility in the region. The EU should strongly signal its unconditional commitment to international law. It should also signal to Turkey that it supports Ankara's regional rapprochement efforts insofar they align with the EU's regional interests. Last, but not least, the EU's migration cooperation with Ankara should account for the growing anti-refugee sentiments within Turkey.

# Paris of the East?

Turkey's socioeconomic change under the AKP is noted across the MENA. Ideological and political affiliations aside, there is an apparent consensus that Turkey is “no longer the developing country that it used to be in the 1990s” and has “become an economic power”.<sup>1</sup> If one overlooks the current high inflation, currency devaluation and growing income inequality, the statistics broadly confirm this belief. Since the AKP came to power in 2002 Turkey's GDP has increased from US\$415 billion to US\$1.19 trillion (2022).<sup>2</sup> Per capita GDP doubled during the same period, from US\$6,291 to US\$14,055.

The change is noticeable in everyday life, from modern highways to fancy shopping malls, from a vibrant service sector to technology festivals. The appeal of a supposedly European lifestyle in a majority-Muslim country functions as an additional attraction. Over the past two decades Turkey has become a popular destination for Arab tourists and students. It also hosts refugees and political migrants from the region. Moreover, Turkish investments and products are present across the region, while Turkish state- and non-state organisations are active in the humanitarian and cultural sectors.

## Changing modes of foreign policy

Ankara's opening to the Arab countries under the AKP is rooted in structural changes in foreign policy during the past two decades, specifically the introduction of an economy-driven foreign policy.<sup>3</sup> Perceived

as a shift away from the security-focused policy of the 1990s, scholars described this change as the emergence of a “trading state” with possible positive implications for regional peace.<sup>4</sup> The AKP elites' emphasis on economic relations as an element of foreign policy also reflected the post–Cold War assumption that economic liberalisation would bring security, stability and democracy.

Indeed, Turkey's ruling elites closely followed global developments (and continue to do so) as they moved to recalibrate foreign policy in line with the post–Cold War situation and an emerging identitarian understanding of world affairs. They noted that “the new dynamics of multiple modernities and multi-directional ‘glocalisation’”,<sup>5</sup> prompted by a “civilisational outlook”,<sup>6</sup> would help Turkey to capitalise on its geographical position through its cultural, religious and linguistic ties to its immediate and far neighbourhood.<sup>7</sup> The aim was to “overcome traditional dichotomies such as the East versus West, Europe versus the Middle East”.<sup>8</sup> Ahmet Davutoğlu – a founding member of the AKP, chief advisor to then Prime Minister Erdoğan between 2003 and 2009, Minister of Foreign Affairs until 2014, and finally prime minister himself between 2014 and his ousting in 2016,<sup>9</sup> firmly believed that Turkey had a specific role to play not only in resurrecting the so-called Islamic civilisation but also in bridging it to the West.<sup>10</sup>

1 Based on expert interviews conducted by the author.

2 Based on World Bank data, measured in US dollars (constant 2015), <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD?locations=TR>. Note that GDP growth was not linear during this period. All links accessed immediately before publication unless otherwise stated.

3 See İbrahim Kalın, “Turkish Foreign Policy: Framework, Values, and Mechanisms”, *International Journal* (winter 2011–12): 7–21 (10). Hakan Fidan, “A Work in Progress: The New Turkish Foreign Policy”, *Middle East Policy* 20, no. 1 (2013): 91–96.

4 On this: Kemal Kirişçi, “The Transformation of Turkish Foreign Policy: The Rise of the Trading State”, *New Perspectives on Turkey* 40 (spring 2009): 29–56.

5 Kalın, “Turkish Foreign Policy” (see note 3), 9.

6 *Ibid.*, 13.

7 On this: Ahmet Davutoğlu, “Turkey's Foreign Policy Vision: An Assessment of 2007”, *Insight Turkey* 10, no. 1 (2008): 77–96.

8 Kalın, “Turkish Foreign Policy” (see note 3), 12.

9 Ahmet Davutoğlu, “Political Transformation of the Islamic World: Periodization and Projection” (Turkish), *Divan* 1 (2002). Davutoğlu resigned from the AKP in 2019 and founded the Future Party (Gelecek Partisi).

10 Based on a closed reading of Davutoğlu's scholarly publications, Behlül Özkan argues that the intellectual under-

## Economic motivations, identitarian outlook and diversification of actors shape the AKP's approach to foreign policy.

As well as its economic motivations and civilisational underpinnings, the diversification of actors in the design and conduct of foreign policy also distinguishes the AKP's approach from earlier periods. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) has been increasingly complemented, at times even sidelined, by organisations such as the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA), the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities, the Yunus Emre Institute, the Turkish Maarif Foundation, and pro-AKP NGOs, think tanks and business associations. Humanitarian and cultural diplomacy have become active components of foreign policy.

### Turkey's economic overtures to MENA

The MENA countries follow Europe and Central Asia as one of the main destinations for Turkish exports.<sup>11</sup> The region's share of overall Turkish exports increased from 12.4 per cent in 2002 (US\$4.5 billion) to 22.2 per cent in 2020 (US\$37.6 billion).<sup>12</sup> Since 2002, Turkey has signed Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with a succession of Arab countries (see Table 1).<sup>13</sup> In 2022, Iraq, the UAE, Egypt and Morocco were among Turkey's top twenty export destinations.<sup>14</sup>

The region's young and growing population offers opportunities for Turkish businesses. While the AKP leadership initially sought to use economic ties to foster regional peace and elevate Turkey to regional power status, businesses simply wanted to open

pinnings of his mental map could best be described as pan-Islamist. Behlül Özkan, "Turkey, Davutoğlu and the Idea of Pan-Islamism", *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 56, no. 4 (2014): 119–40.

<sup>11</sup> World Bank, *Turkey: Exports, by Country and Region, 2020* <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/TUR/Year/2020/TradeFlow/Export>. World Bank figures match the data released by the Turkish Statistics Institute, TÜİK.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> As listed on the Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Trade website, <https://www.trade.gov.tr/free-trade-agreements>.

<sup>14</sup> Data compiled by the author from TÜİK statistics. Available at <https://data.TUİK.gov.tr/Kategori/GetKategori?p=dis-ticaret-104&dil=1>.

Table 1

### Turkey's free trade agreements with MENA countries, 2002–present

Country	Year
Palestine	2005 (in force)
Tunisia	2005 (in force)
Morocco	2006 (in force, amended in 2020)
Syria	2007 (suspended in 2011)
Egypt	2007 (in force)
Qatar	2008 (awaiting ratification)
Lebanon	2010 (awaiting ratification)
Jordan	2011 (repealed in 2018)
UAE	2023 (in force)

up new markets. For instance, in 2006 the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey (TOBB) initiated the "Industry for Peace Initiative in Palestine", which proposed an industrial zone on the border between Israel and the Gaza Strip.<sup>15</sup> The project was frozen in 2009 due to tensions between Turkey and Israel following the 2006 Gaza war,<sup>16</sup> and was moved to Jenin the following year.<sup>17</sup> The protocol establishing a council for economic cooperation between Turkey and Palestine became effective in 2017, and the council held its first meeting the following year.<sup>18</sup>

Business councils have also been key to Turkey's economy-driven foreign policy approach. Turkey's

<sup>15</sup> TOBB-BİS, "Industry for Peace Initiative: Conceptual Framework" (Turkish), (Ankara: Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey [TEPAV], 2006), [https://www.tepav.org.tr/upload/files/1269865515r7447.TOBB\\_BIS\\_Baris\\_icin\\_Sanayi\\_Girisimi.pdf](https://www.tepav.org.tr/upload/files/1269865515r7447.TOBB_BIS_Baris_icin_Sanayi_Girisimi.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> "Industry for Peace Initiative Is Frozen" (Turkish), *Habertürk*, 1 January 2009, <https://www.haberturk.com/ekonomi/makro-ekonomi/haber/118464-baris-icin-sanayi-projesi-askiya-alindi>.

<sup>17</sup> "Palestine Leases Land to Turkey" (Turkish), *Milliyet*, 18 March 2010, <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/ekonomi/filistin-Turkiyeye-toprak-veriyor-1213078>.

<sup>18</sup> "The Economic Outlook of Palestine" (Turkish), *Website of the Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/filistin-ekonomisi.tr.mfa>.

Foreign Economic Relations Board (DEİK) has become a key actor facilitating Turkish investment abroad. While its origins date back to 1985, new legislation in 2014, following the Erdoğan-Gülen fallout,<sup>19</sup> expanded DEİK's responsibilities to conducting "foreign economic relations on behalf of the Turkish private sector".<sup>20</sup> Turkey established business councils with Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia in the 1990s, adding Iraq, Jordan, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and UAE in the second half of the 2000s.

**Since its rise to power, the AKP leadership has aimed to create a Muslim business community, embracing Turkish and Arab alike.**

Since its rise to power, and even more so after the Arab uprisings, the AKP leadership has aimed to create a Muslim business community, embracing Turkish and Arab alike.<sup>21</sup> Speaking at a conference organised by the Palestinian Business Forum in Tunisia in 2012, for instance, the President of Turkey's Independent Industrialists' and Businessmen's Association (MÜSİAD), which has close ties to the AKP, welcomed "the rise of Islamic countries in economy and politics".<sup>22</sup> The Muslim Brotherhood – affiliated Egyptian Business Development Association was established the same year and signed a cooperation agreement with MÜSİAD "to join an international business forum that will allow Egyptian and Turkish businesses to network and Egyptian entrepreneurs to attend educational workshops".<sup>23</sup> In 2012, 92 countries participated in the International Convention and International Business Forum organised by MÜSİAD.

19 On this: Cihan Tugal, "Towards the End of a Dream? The Erdoğan-Gülen Fallout and Islamic Liberalism's Descent", *Jadaliyya*, 22 December 2013, <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/29981>.

20 Taken from the website of DEİK, <https://www.deik.org.tr/kurumsal-hakkimizda>.

21 On this: Marie Vannetzel and Dilek Yankaya, "Crafting a Business Umma? Transnational Networks of 'Islamic Businessmen' after the Arab Spring", *Mediterranean Politics* 24, no. 3 (2019): 290 – 310.

22 "Activities in Africa" (Turkish), *Cerceve* 63 (Istanbul: MÜSİAD, January 2014), 52, <https://www.musiad.org.tr/uploads/yayinlar/cerceve-dergileri/pdf/cerceve63.pdf>.

23 Nadine Marroushi, "Senior Brotherhood Member Launches Egyptian Business Association", *Egypt Independent*, 26 March 2012, <https://egyptindependent.com/senior-brotherhood-member-launches-egyptian-business-association/>.

That same year the region hit a historical record of 32.1 per cent of all Turkish exports (around US\$49 billion).<sup>24</sup>

The main Turkish exports to the MENA region are chemicals, food, steel, furniture, paper, electrical and electronic goods, and textile products. The Arab Barometer for 2022 places Turkey among the top five countries regarded as producing the highest quality at low prices – together with Germany, the United States, China and France.<sup>25</sup> Turkish products have the reputation of being affordable ("as cheap as their Chinese counterparts") and of high quality ("similar to European products").<sup>26</sup> Palestinians overwhelmingly consider Turkey a preferred economic partner.<sup>27</sup> A considerable proportion of Jordanians,<sup>28</sup> Algerians and Moroccans<sup>29</sup> also think that economic relations with Turkey should be strengthened.

Arab societies also encounter Turkey as an economic actor in the construction sector. Turkish contractors have been a presence across the region since 1972, when Turkey commenced construction projects in Libya.<sup>30</sup> Between then and 2021, Turkish companies have undertaken 11,125 projects in 131 coun-

24 World Bank, *Turkey Exports* (see note 11).

25 "Public Views of the U.S.-China Competition in Mena", *Arab Barometer VII*, July 2022, [https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/ABVII\\_US-China\\_Report-EN.pdf](https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/ABVII_US-China_Report-EN.pdf).

26 Based on interviews conducted by the author. See also: Marwa Rashad, "Saudi Retail Chains Join Growing Informal Boycott of Turkish Products", *Reuters*, 19 October 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-turkey-trade-idUSKBN2741XF>.

27 *Arab Barometer VII, Palestine Report*, 2022, [https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/Arab-Barometer-VII\\_Palestine-Report-2021-2022.pdf](https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/Arab-Barometer-VII_Palestine-Report-2021-2022.pdf).

28 The proportion declined from 81 per cent to 62 per cent between 2018 and 2022. See *Arab Barometer VII, Jordan Report*: [https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/ABVII\\_Jordan\\_Report-EN.pdf](https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/ABVII_Jordan_Report-EN.pdf) (51).

29 *Arab Barometer VII, Morocco Report*: [https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/ABVII\\_Morocco\\_Report-ENG.pdf](https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/ABVII_Morocco_Report-ENG.pdf).

30 Amir Tavakoli and Şevket Can Tülümen, "Construction Industry in Turkey", *Construction Management and Economics* 8, no. 1 (1990): 77 – 87; Heyecan Giritli et al., "International Contracting: A Turkish Perspective", *Construction Management and Economics* 8, no. 4 (1990): 415 – 30. Cited from John Calabrese, "Building in Africa: Turkey's 'Third Way' in China's Shadow", *Middle East Institute*, 21 June 2022, [https://www.mei.edu/publications/building-africa-turkeys-third-way-chinas-shadow#\\_ftn4](https://www.mei.edu/publications/building-africa-turkeys-third-way-chinas-shadow#_ftn4) (accessed 23 July 2023).

tries, with a total value of US\$453 billion.<sup>31</sup> Under the AKP, the value of international projects undertaken by Turkish contractors increased from US\$4.4 billion in 2002 to US\$30.7 billion in 2021.<sup>32</sup> 24.8 per cent of these projects were in the Middle East and 17.8 per cent in Africa, with Iraq (6.9 per cent), Saudi Arabia (5.3 per cent), Algeria (4.4 per cent), Qatar (4.1 per cent), and the UAE (2.8 per cent) taking the lead.<sup>33</sup> In 2022 forty Turkish companies were listed among the top 250 international companies based on revenues generated from overseas income, placing third after China (78) and the United States (41).<sup>34</sup>

## Growing people-to-people contacts

If Ankara's diverse and expanding economic engagement contributes to the view that Turkey is an economically powerful actor, so do the growing people-to-people contacts associated with soft-power instruments such as humanitarian aid and cultural diplomacy. Turkey has also become a popular tourist destination for MENA under the visa-free regime introduced during the first decade of the 2000s by Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu. Between 2000 and 2022, the number of visitors from MENA increased almost ninefold,<sup>35</sup> while the region's share of the total number of tourists increased from 6.3 per cent to 13.2 per cent. In contrast, the proportion of visitors originating from European members of the OECD decreased during the same period from 56.8 per cent to 38.3 per cent.<sup>36</sup>

31 "Turkish International Contracting Services (1972–2021)", *Turkish Contractors Association*, <https://www.tmb.org.tr/files/doc/1623914018902-ydmh-en.pdf>.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

34 Calabrese, "Building in Africa" (see note 30).

35 Data compiled by the author from the statistics available on the website of the Turkish Statistics Institute (TÜİK), <https://data.TUİK.gov.tr/Kategori/GetKategori?p=egitim-kultur-spor-ve-turizm-105&dil=1>.

36 The proportion of visitors from Russia, Ukraine, the southern Caucasus and Central Asia also increased considerably during the same period, from 13 per cent to 22 per cent.

## Growing people-to-people contacts associated with various soft-power instruments contribute to Turkey's popularity.

As well as the mobility that visa liberalisation offered to citizens from many Arab countries, access to perceived European standards at cheaper prices also increases the country's attractiveness (or did so until recently). Over the past two decades, Turkey has become a popular medical tourism destination. Tourism income attributable to health expenditure increased from US\$203 million in 2003 to US\$2 billion in 2022, accounting for around 4.5 per cent of total tourism income in 2022 (up from 1.4 per cent in 2003).<sup>37</sup>

Similarly, Turkey's relatively better infrastructure and services compared to many other non-Gulf Arab countries and the appeal of a perceived European lifestyle in a majority Muslim country also play a role, as encapsulated by the saying: "Alcohol on one side, and mosque on the other".<sup>38</sup> The ease of practising Muslim rituals such as fasting and prayer and the ordinariness of the headscarf in daily life contribute to positive attitudes towards the country.

Besides tourism, migration is another key factor generating contact between the MENA region's citizens and Turkey. Today, approximately 3.6 million Syrian refugees reside in Turkey under temporary protection status,<sup>39</sup> mostly in Istanbul, followed by the south-eastern border cities of Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa and Kilis.<sup>40</sup> There are also several hundred thousand political exiles of different nationalities (mostly Islamists).<sup>41</sup> The neighbourhoods of Başakşehir, Fatih,

37 Compiled by the author from tourism income expenditure data available on the website of TÜİK, <https://data.TUİK.gov.tr/Kategori/GetKategori?p=egitim-kultur-spor-ve-turizm-105&dil=1>.

38 Based on expert interviews conducted by the author.

39 From the UNHCR website, <https://bit.ly/3VhSrb5>.

40 "Number of Syrians in Turkey July 2023", *Mülteciler Derneği*, 22 August 2023, <https://bit.ly/3wTYZmt>.

41 Killian Cogan, "The Perfect Balance between Islam and Modernity: Istanbul, Home to the New Arab World?" *Le Monde Diplomatique*, June 2021, <https://mondediplo.com/2021/06/07/istanbul>. Also see M. Hakan Yavuz, *Erdogan's Soft Power Arm: Mapping the Muslim Brotherhood's Networks of Influence in Turkey*, Center for Research and Intercommunication Knowledge Special Reports 187/2020 (Riyad: Center for Research and Intercommunication Knowledge, 2020), <https://>



Esenyurt and Şirinevler in Istanbul have considerable Arab diasporas.

Some of the migrants from the MENA region also acquired citizenship in the last couple of years. Although not the only path to citizenship, real estate investments have been widely used to this end. Amendments to the Turkish Citizenship Law in 2009 paved the way for foreign nationals to invest in the housing market. With the transition to the presidential system in 2018, the President acquired responsibility for granting naturalisation, which had previously been the responsibility of the Council of President.<sup>42</sup>

Those “who obtain a residence permit by investing within the scope and amount determined by the President” and “foreigners who hold the Turquoise Card” may acquire citizenship. “Buying at least US\$500,000 (or equivalent foreign currency or Turkish lira) worth of real estate investment fund share or venture capital investment fund share with the condition that they cannot be sold for at least three years” is one such criterion for foreign investors.<sup>43</sup> The share of house sales to foreign nationals increased from 1.1 per cent in 2013 to 4.5 per cent in 2022.<sup>44</sup> Citizens of Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Libya, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen invested prominently in the Turkish housing sector between 2015 and 2022.<sup>45</sup> Buyers from MENA accounted for around 40–45 per cent of foreign property purchases between 2015 and 2019, declining to 31 per cent in 2020 and 21 per cent in 2022.<sup>46</sup>

[crik.sa/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Erdoğans-Soft-Power-Arm.pdf](http://crik.sa/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Erdoğans-Soft-Power-Arm.pdf).

<sup>42</sup> Ayşe Serdar, “An Illiberal Inclusion? The AKP’s Politics of Exceptional Citizenship”, *Turkish Studies* 24, no. 1 (2023): 51–74.

<sup>43</sup> The website of the Presidency of the Republic of Turkey Investment Office, Guide to Foreign Citizens’ Acquisition of Turkish Citizenship, <https://www.invest.gov.tr/en/library/publications/lists/investpublications/guide-to-foreign-citizens-acquisition-of-turkish-citizenship.pdf>. According to the latest available data from the Ministry of Environment and Urban Affairs, 19,630 foreigners acquired Turkish citizenship between 2018 and 2021 on the basis of real estate investments.

<sup>44</sup> The website of the TÜİK, <https://data.TUİK.gov.tr/Kategori/GetKategori?p=insaatt-ve-konut-116&dil=1>.

<sup>45</sup> The website of the TÜİK. See also Cameron Deggin, “Seven Reasons Arabs Are Investing in Turkey”, *Property Turkey*, <https://www.propertyturkey.com/blog-turkey/seven-reasons-arabs-are-investing-in-turkey>.

<sup>46</sup> Compiled by the author from housing sale statistics issued by TÜİK. Russian buyers rank first since the war in Ukraine.

Last, but not least, education has also been a driver of social connectivity between Turkey and the Arab countries. Between 2017 and 2021, the number of international students in Turkey increased from 108,076 to 224,048, ranking behind the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Germany, Canada and France.<sup>47</sup> In Turkey, students from Arab states constitute the majority of these, with 29,803 in 2017 and 94,075 in 2021. Some students from MENA fund their own study, while others receive scholarships from Turkish institutions.

## Turkish defence industry: Manifestation of hard power

Ankara’s deployment of hard power and the country’s growing defence industry also contribute to the perception that Turkey has become a regional power under AKP rule. As a significant aspect of Turkish trade, defence exports increased from 883 million in 2011 to US\$3.2 billion in 2021.<sup>48</sup> In 2021, Turkey was among Europe’s ten most militarised countries.<sup>49</sup>

Although the ambition to create a home-grown defence industry goes back to the 1970s, the AKP leadership has significantly developed and expanded it.<sup>50</sup> The sector has grown continuously during the past two decades, most remarkably since 2016.<sup>51</sup> This period coincides with Turkey’s deployment of military power outside its own borders, exemplified by its military incursions into northern Syria between 2016 and 2019, its crucial military support for Azerbaijan during the second Nagorno-Karabakh war in 2020,

<sup>47</sup> Based on UNESCO data, <http://data.uis.unesco.org>.

<sup>48</sup> Kerim Ülker, “Turkey Plays a Big Role in Defense” (Turkish), *Dünya*, 25 July 2023, <https://www.dunya.com/kose-yazisi/Türkiye-savunmada-buyuk-oyunuyor/699344>.

<sup>49</sup> Markus Bayer, *Global Militarisation Index 2021* (Bonn: Bonn International Center for Conflict Studies, 2021), [https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/83191/ssoar-2021-bayer-Global\\_Militarisation\\_Index\\_2021.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/83191/ssoar-2021-bayer-Global_Militarisation_Index_2021.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y).

<sup>50</sup> Sinem Adar, “Understanding Turkey’s Increasingly Militaristic Foreign Policy”, *APSA Mena Politics Newsletter* 3, no. 1 (spring 2020): 10–13 (12), <https://apsamena.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/apsa-mena-politics-newsletter-spring-2020-final.pdf>.

<sup>51</sup> Bahadır Özgür, “From Koç to Sancar: Turkey’s War Machine” (Turkish), *Gazete Duvar*, 23 February 2021, <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/koctan-sancaka-Türkiyenin-savas-makinasi-makale-1514116>.

and its brinkmanship in the Eastern Mediterranean in 2019–2020. Ankara’s pronounced emphasis on defence and security since 2016 also tallies with the political and economic need to recalibrate foreign policy, in light of the regional rivalry triggered by the AKP’s support of Sunni Islamists.<sup>52</sup> Last but not least, it also coincides with the end of the AKP’s informal partnership with the Gülenists, which heralded the failed coup attempt in 2016 and the formation of a new alliance with the ultranationalist actors.<sup>53</sup>

**Turkey being the “only Muslim country producing drones” is a typical comment.**

Turkey has deepened defence and security relations with various Arab countries, including Algeria, Qatar, Tunisia, and, most recently, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Turkey also sells defence products, the best known being its unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs or drones). In the MENA, Algeria, Iraq, Kuwait, Morocco, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates have so far purchased Bayraktar TB2 drones produced by the defence manufacturer Baykar – which is owned by the family of Erdoğan’s son-in-law Selçuk Bayraktar.<sup>54</sup> Most recently, Saudi Arabia signed a deal with Baykar to manufacture drones there.<sup>55</sup> Egypt was also recently

reported to be purchasing drones from Turkey.<sup>56</sup> The developments in the Turkish defence industry, as manifested in Ankara’s militarised foreign policy and its expanding defence sales, seem to earn admiration in the Arab world. “Not even the Saudis or Emiratis can produce drones” and Turkey being the “only Muslim country producing drones” are typical comments.<sup>57</sup>

52 On this: Federico Donelli, *UAVs and Beyond: Security and Defence Sector at the Core of Turkey’s Strategy in Africa*, Megatrends Africa Policy Brief (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, March 2022), [https://www.megatrends-afrika.de/assets/afrika/publications/policybrief/MTA\\_PB02\\_2022\\_Donelli\\_UAVs\\_and\\_beyond.pdf](https://www.megatrends-afrika.de/assets/afrika/publications/policybrief/MTA_PB02_2022_Donelli_UAVs_and_beyond.pdf); Nebahat Tanrıverdi Yaşar and Hürcan Aslı Aksoy, *Making Sense of Turkey’s Cautious Reaction to Power Shifts in Tunisia*, SWP Comment 52/2021 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, October 2021), doi: 10.18449/2021C52; Murat Yeşiltaş, “Deciphering Turkey’s Assertive Military and Defense Strategy: Objectives, Pillars, and Implications”, *Insight Turkey* 22, no. 3 (2020): 89–114.

53 Adar, “Understanding Turkey’s Increasingly Militaristic Foreign Policy” (see note 50).

54 Jack Dutton, “From Ukraine to Libya. Why Are Turkey’s Baykar Drones so Popular?”, *Al-Monitor*, 23 July 2023, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/07/ukraine-libya-why-are-turkeys-baykar-drones-so-popular>.

55 Jack Dutton, “Saudi Arabia Agrees to Produce Turkey’s Baykar Drones”, *Al-Monitor*, 7 August 2023, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/08/saudi-arabia-agrees-produce-turkeys-baykar-drones>.

56 “Turkey Agrees to Provide Drones to Egypt”, *Reuters*, 4 February 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-agrees-provide-drones-egypt-2024-02-04/>.

57 Based on expert interviews conducted by the author.

# Hegemonic Aspirations: Between Popular Legitimacy and Sunni Leadership Ambitions

Admiration of Turkey's relatively competitive political system and high election turnout is another factor behind the favourable views about Turkey. The view – also propagated by the AKP leadership – that Erdoğan derives his legitimacy from the popular will is not rare. The Turkish ruling elites' deployment of democracy promotion as a strategic instrument in foreign policy has also contributed to positive perceptions, albeit in more polarising ways. The AKP justified its support for Sunni Islamists after the Arab uprisings by pointing to the democratic process and the fact that Muslim Brotherhood – affiliated parties were winning elections throughout the region. As part of this policy, Turkey has granted refuge to many Islamist exiles and has generously supported their organisations. Ankara has often been regarded by Arab Islamists as a balancing force to Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which see political Islam as a threat to their survival.

## Turkey's political system: Between political representation and majoritarianism

Erdoğan won the run-off elections on 28 May 2023, gaining 52.2 per cent of the vote on an 84 per cent turnout. He will rule the country for another five years, violating the constitutional limit of a maximum of two terms. His People's Alliance (between the AKP and various far-right nationalist and Islamist parties) holds a majority in parliament. Until the next elections in 2028, Erdoğan and the AKP will strive to stabilise the presidential system that grants

the executive unchecked powers over the legislative and judiciary.

Before the 2023 elections, enthusiasm about Turkey's democratic resilience<sup>58</sup> and a possible opposition victory was not rare among Turkey observers and Turkish voters. An ideologically diverse set of opposition parties came together – for the first time in modern Turkey – on the basis of their objection to the presidential system.<sup>59</sup> Notwithstanding criticisms about certain aspects of the opposition alliance, there was a reasonable expectation that Turkish citizens would be able to vote an autocrat out of office.

Party competition has been a long-standing feature of the Turkish political system.<sup>60</sup> The country's demo-

58 Ayşe Zarakol, "Turkey's Democratic Resilience", *Project Syndicate*, 11 May 2023, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/turkish-election-shows-opposition-dedication-to-democracy-by-ayse-zarakol-2023-05>. Gönül Tol and Ali Yaycıoğlu, "Yes, Erdoğan's Rule Might Actually End This Weekend", *Foreign Policy*, 9 May 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/05/09/turkey-election-Erdoğan-kilicdaroglu-akp-nation-alliance/>.

59 A coalition government of ideologically different parties is not new. What is new is the formation of an informal coalition before the elections. This is an imperative of the presidential system, given that no political party alone can expect to exceed 50.1 per cent of the vote.

60 Kerem Öktem, "The Limits to Autocratisation or Autocratisation without Limits? Turkey and the May 2023 Elections" (German), *Südosteuropa Mitteilungen* 63, no. 3–4 (2023): 31–42. On the opposition alliance: Berk Esen, *The Opposition Alliance in Turkey: A Viable Alternative to Erdoğan?* SWP Comment 52/2022 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, August 2022), doi: 10.18449/2022C52v02.



cratic legacy goes as far back as 1876, with the proclamation of the (first) Ottoman Constitution and the founding of the Ottoman Parliament. Voting rights were extended to women in 1934, earlier than in France, Greece or Switzerland. Competitive elections have been held since 1950, although governments and legislative bodies have been intermittently suspended or discontinued. Turkish citizens regard voting as the primary means of expressing their political views and holding political actors accountable.<sup>61</sup> Turnout rates have historically been high, with the lowest being 64.3 per cent in 1969 and the highest 93.3 per cent in 1987.<sup>62</sup>

Even though elections held before the AKP's rise to power were not immune to transparency issues,<sup>63</sup> and there have been systematic irregularities in Kurdish cities since at least the 1990s, Erdoğan's gradually yet steadily expanding grip over the media and the blurring boundaries between the AKP and the state institutions have exacerbated the situation and fundamentally distorted the fairness of elections. Patronage in distribution of resources, political manipulation and control of rivals through coercion and cooptation, electoral gerrymandering,<sup>64</sup> and criminalisation and stigmatisation of opponents through (extra)legal means now lend Erdoğan and the AKP an overwhelming competitive advantage.<sup>65</sup> Reflecting a majoritarian understanding of democracy, the AKP leadership sees the ballot box not only as a source of legitimacy, but also as a means to capture and consolidate power.<sup>66</sup>

### The relatively more competitive nature of the Turkish political system and high turnout seem to appeal to many Arab citizens.

Nevertheless, the relatively more competitive nature of the Turkish political system, with the existence of ideologically diverse political parties and high turnout, seems to appeal to many Arab citizens across the MENA region, which, according to some measures, "continues to be the most authoritarian region in the world".<sup>67</sup> In Egypt only 41 per cent of eligible voters cast their vote in the 2018 elections that resulted in the re-election of President Abd al-Fattah as-Sisi with 97 per cent of the votes.<sup>68</sup> Even in Tunisia, one of the few MENA states with relative competition, the President Kais Saied has reversed nearly a decade of democratic gains by expanding his control over institutions after dissolving the government in 2021.<sup>69</sup> A majority of Iraqi citizens see parliamentary elections as significantly flawed.<sup>70</sup> In Libya, hopes for elections in late 2021 were crushed. Given their poor economic conditions, weak or failed governance structures captured by corrupt patronage networks and narrow interests, and continuous curtailment of political and civil rights, many Arab states suffer from a legitimacy crisis.

61 Hürcan Aslı Aksoy and Salim Çevik, *Is Extensive Election Fraud Possible in Turkey's Fiercest Elections*, SWP Point of View (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 10 May 2023), <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/is-extensive-election-fraud-possible-in-turkeys-fiercest-elections>.

62 "How have we voted since 1920!" (Turkish), *Bianet*, 20 May 2015, <https://bianet.org/bianet/siyaset/164654-1920-den-bugune-nasil-sectik-secemedik>.

63 Sinem Adar and Yektan Türkyılmaz, "Turkey: Post-election Brawl – A Regime at a Crossroads", *Open Democracy*, 30 April 2019, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/turkey-the-post-election-brawl-a-regime-at-a-crossroads/>.

64 "Erdoğan Changes 4 Provincial Borders 'as Part of Gerrymandering'", *Duvar English*, 21 March 2021, <https://www.duvarenglish.com/Erdoğan-changes-4-provincial-borders-as-part-of-gerrymandering-news-56724>.

65 Berk Esen and Şebnem Gümüüşçü, "How Erdoğan's Populism Won Again", *Journal of Democracy* 34, no. 3 (2023): 21–32.

66 Yunus Sözen, "Popular Will against Democracy: Populist Autocratization in Turkey", *Reflektif: Journal of Social Sciences* 1, no.1 (2020): 9–29.

67 "The Global State of Democracy 2022: Forging Social Contracts in a Time of Discontent", *Global State of Democracy Initiative*, 2022, 11, <https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/global-state-of-democracy-2022>.

68 "Egypt's Sisi Wins 97 Percent in Election with No Real Opposition", *Reuters*, 2 April 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-election-result-idUSKCN1H916A>.

69 Sarah Yerkes and Maha Alhomoud, "One Year Later, Tunisia's President Has Reversed Nearly a Decade of Democratic Gains" (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 22 July 2022), <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/07/22/one-year-later-tunisia-s-president-has-reversed-nearly-decade-of-democratic-gains-pub-87555>. Note that the power capture in Tunisia was viewed mostly positively by citizens as an attempt "to break the political deadlock more than a political coup". See *Arab Barometer VII, Tunisia Report*, 2022, 2, <https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/AB7-Tunisia-Report-EN.pdf>.

70 *Arab Barometer VII, Iraq Report*, 2022, 2, [https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/ABVII\\_Iraq\\_Country\\_Report-ENG.pdf](https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/ABVII_Iraq_Country_Report-ENG.pdf).

## The “Turkish model”: A remedy at critical turning points?

Despite its increasingly authoritarian elements, the Turkish political system’s apparent appeal is arguably driven by the widespread disenchantment with political representation in the region. Despite initial optimism about the future of democracy across MENA during the Arab uprisings,<sup>71</sup> the authoritarian elites have proven resilient. According to the Arab Opinion Survey 2022, the proportion who think that “the Arab Spring is presently facing obstacles but will eventually achieve its aims” dropped from 60 per cent in 2014 to 40 per cent in 2022.<sup>72</sup> 39 per cent of those surveyed in 2022 think that the “Arab Spring has come to an end and the old regimes are returning to power.”

The question of popular legitimacy only partially explains Turkey’s popularity under Erdoğan’s leadership, however. As a NATO member with close economic ties to Europe and a constitutionally secular Muslim country with an electoral democracy and a liberal economy, the United States promoted Turkey during the 2000s as a paradigm of Islam’s compatibility with democracy and a Muslim nation’s integration into the West.<sup>73</sup> The AKP leadership happily embraced such promotion.

<sup>71</sup> On this: Eva Bellin, “Reconsidering the Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Lessons from the Arab Spring”, *Comparative Politics* 44, no. 2 (2012): 127–49; F. Gregory Gause III, “Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring: The Myth of Authoritarian Stability”, *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 4 (2011): 81–84; Marc Lynch, “After Egypt: The Limits and Promise of Online Challenges to the Authoritarian Arab State”, *Perspective on Politics* 9, no. 2 (2011): 301–10.

<sup>72</sup> *Arab Opinion Index 2022 Executive Summary* (Washington D.C.: Arab Center, 2022), <https://arabcenterdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Arab-Opinion-Index-2022-Executive-Summary.pdf>.

<sup>73</sup> In the immediate aftermath of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, which ushered in a new era of political and economic liberalisation, international cooperation and connectedness, the so-called Turkish model became a point of reference for the newly independent Central Asian Republics’ integration into the West. On this: Andrew Mango, “The Turkish Model”, *Middle Eastern Studies* 29, no. 4 (1993): 726–57. The United States was a strong promoter of the Turkish model, and the idea was certainly well-received by the Turkish political elites who were anxious not to lose the country’s strategic leverage in a world which was no longer bipolar. See Dov Friedman, *The Turkish Model: The History of a Misleading Idea* (Washington, D.C.: Center for American Progress, 25 August 2015), <https://www.americanprogress.org/>

Given its roots in Turkey’s Islamist Nationalist Outlook Movement and its founding by the movement’s self-declared moderates, the AKP’s rise to power in 2002 was a convenient coincidence at a time when Washington’s Middle East policy was shaped by the “global war on terror”.<sup>74</sup> During the early 2000s, the view that the Turkish model highlighting Islam’s compatibility with democracy “would provide an alternative path to the ‘clash of civilisations’” was popular.<sup>75</sup> For instance, in the aftermath of the 2007 Turkish parliamentary elections, Nicholas Burns – then US Secretary of State – applauded Turkey as “the most impressive democracy in the Muslim world”.<sup>76</sup>

The euphoria about Turkey as a model for an imagined Muslim world was more than mere rhetoric. The United States played an indispensable and influential role in advocating Turkey’s EU membership, culminating in the start of the accession negotiations in 2005 – just as it had worked hard during

article/the-turkish-model/. Friedman argues that the idea of Turkey being a model is not limited to the post–Cold War era and was in fact evident at the beginning of the Cold War when the then president, Ismet Inonu, presented Turkey “as a Middle East state firmly allied against Soviet communism and eager to facilitate Western diplomacy in a volatile region”.

<sup>74</sup> Note that even before the 2000s, the Turkish government promoted Turkish Islam as a moderate variant, and it was considered easy to work with, particularly in Europe. It is no coincidence that many European countries with Turkish labour migrants outsourced religious services to the Turkish state institution, Diyanet. This was due to two factors: relatively well-functioning relations between Turkey and its Western allies during the Cold War and its immediate aftermath and the perception that Turkish Islam was moderate compared to its counterparts. On this: Zana Çitak, “Between ‘Turkish Islam’ and ‘French Islam’: The Role of the Diyanet in the Conseil Français du Culte Musulman”, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 36, no. 4 (2010): 619–34; Sinem Adar, *Rethinking Political Attitudes of Migrants from Turkey and Their Germany-Born Children: Beyond Loyalty and Democratic Culture*, SWP Research Paper 7/2019 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, June 2019), doi: 10.18449/2019RP07.

<sup>75</sup> Christopher de Bellaigue, “Welcome to Demokrasi: How Erdoğan Got More Popular Than Ever”, *Guardian*, 30 August 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/30/welcome-to-demokrasi-how-erdogan-got-more-popular-than-ever>.

<sup>76</sup> “Speech delivered by H. E. Ali Babacan, Foreign Minister of Turkey, the Atlantic Council, Global Leadership Speaker Series, 3 June 2008”, *website of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, [https://www.mfa.gov.tr/speech-delivered-by-h\\_e\\_-ali-babacan\\_-foreign-minister-of-turkey\\_-the-atlantic-council\\_global-leadership-speaker-series\\_-3-june-2008.en.mfa](https://www.mfa.gov.tr/speech-delivered-by-h_e_-ali-babacan_-foreign-minister-of-turkey_-the-atlantic-council_global-leadership-speaker-series_-3-june-2008.en.mfa).

the 1990s for a Customs Union Agreement between Ankara and Brussels. US advocacy was driven by a firm belief in a unipolar order sustained by economic and political liberalisation. During the first decade of the 2000s, the region's authoritarian leaders and secular and liberal circles all welcomed the AKP's leadership, as a party with roots in political Islam. The EU accession talks added to the fervour. The belief that integrating an Islamist party, previously seen as excluded from the political system, marked "the rise of democratic society in Turkey"<sup>77</sup> enhanced the AKP's image on the international stage.

### Ankara's democracy promotion agenda

The Arab uprisings marked a turning point for regional perceptions about Turkey. As far as the region's ruling elites were concerned, Turkish support for the Muslim Brotherhood and other Sunni Islamists across the region challenged "the possibility of harmonising Islam, democracy, and the modern state".<sup>78</sup> Their admiration for Turkey under AKP leadership swiftly gave way to mistrust and suspicion. Meanwhile, Turkey became many things for Arab Islamists, including a democracy promoter, a spokesperson, a custodian, and even a home. Their earlier caution towards the AKP for allegedly adhering to a "Western notion of secularism", and for its tactical alliance with Turkish secularists and liberals, its foreign policy alignment with the United States, and its emphasis on Turkey's EU membership gradually gave way to rapport.<sup>79</sup>

In a speech to the Turkish parliament in 2011, then Prime Minister Erdoğan noted that "stability can only be provided by systems that derive their legitimacy from the people", concluding that reform would have to occur across the region to meet "legitimate demands" of Arab citizens.<sup>80</sup> In June of the same year, the AKP won the parliamentary elections for the third

time, gaining 49.8 per cent of the vote and a majority of seats (327). Already emboldened by the impressive growth rates (generated by financial flows following the 2008 global crisis) and by the disempowerment of the country's traditional veto powers, the military and the judiciary, the party's growing electoral popularity further boosted its leadership's confidence.

At this juncture, amid the Arab uprisings, the so-called Turkish model enjoyed another round of popularity. An article in the *Economist* in February 2011 promoted Turkey as a "Muslim democracy in action" that should be emulated.<sup>81</sup> Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton noted at a conference on US-Turkey relations in October of that year that the United States was aware that "Turkey has a unique opportunity in this time of great historic change ... to demonstrate the power of an inclusive democracy and responsible regional leadership."<sup>82</sup>

At the onset of the Arab uprisings, when the protests first broke out in Tunisia and Egypt, the AKP elites were initially quiet. As events continued to unfold, Ankara shifted its position in favour of actors demanding change, albeit in a selective manner "depending on Turkish interests at stake".<sup>83</sup> Turkey was the first NATO member to request Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to step down, calling upon him to "take the necessary steps to satisfy the Egyptian people's demands first without providing an opportunity for those who have dark scenarios for Egypt".<sup>84</sup> Similarly, after initial efforts to convince Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to pursue reforms, Ankara moved to an anti-Assad position lending support to the Syrian opposition.

### Ankara presented its support of political dissent as an act of virtue and principle in line with its democracy promotion agenda.

Ankara presented its support of political dissent as an act of virtue and principle. Responding to Turkish

77 Mustafa Akyol, "What Makes Turkish Islam Unique?", in *Turkey's Accession to the European Union: An Unusual Candidacy*, ed. Constantine Arvanitopoulos (Berlin: Springer Link, 2009), 183–93.

78 Ammer Fayed, "Factors Determining Egyptian Policy towards Turkey after 2014", *Al Sharq Forum*, 10 September 2021, <https://research.sharqforum.org/2021/09/10/egyptian-policy-towards-turkey/>.

79 Friedman, "The Turkish Model" (see note 73).

80 Taken from Soli Özel and Gencer Özkan, "Do New Democracies Support Democracy: Turkey's Dilemmas", *Journal of Democracy* 22, no. 4 (2011): 124–38 (137).

81 "A Muslim Democracy in Action", *Economist*, 17 February 2011, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2011/02/17/a-muslim-democracy-in-action>.

82 Friedman, "The Turkish Model" (see note 73).

83 Şebnem Gümüşçü, "Turkey's Reactions to the Arab Spring", *Yale Journal of International Affairs*, 16 May 2012, <https://www.yalejournal.org/publications/turkeys-reactions-to-the-arab-spring>.

84 Daniela Huber, *Democracy Promotion and Foreign Policy: Identity, Interests in US, EU and non-Western Democracies* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 157.

criticisms of Ankara's anti-Assad position, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu said in 2012 that “standing against the tyrant is a moral question, a matter of justice”.<sup>85</sup> Similarly, the then head of Turkish intelligence, Hakan Fidan, who currently serves as foreign minister, noted in an academic article published in 2013 that “Turkey has in recent years moved further in the direction of defending the principles of democracy and human rights, especially in the context of the political transformation in the Middle East and North Africa.”<sup>86</sup> The view that Turkey's emphasis on popular legitimacy “underscored its Western character” was not uncommon among foreign and security policy experts within Turkey.<sup>87</sup>

The Turkish foreign policy elites' emphasis on democracy promotion was not only discursive. The AKP leadership believed that promoting democracy in the region would serve the strategic goal of elevating Turkey to regional power status, bridging a liberated Muslim world with the West and overcoming mental barriers between Europe and the Middle East. In the summer of 2010, a new law mandated the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to promote democracy and human rights to “help achieve Turkey's foreign policy aims in the Middle East”.<sup>88</sup>

## Hegemonic aspirations devouring claims to popular legitimacy

In the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, the AKP's growing confidence, combined with an identity-based perception of the world, led Ankara to engage in a regional offensive at the risk of drifting apart not only from its Western allies but also from Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. The 2013 coup against the Mohamed Mursi government in Egypt and the declaration of the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist orga-

nisation further exacerbated the fault lines. The second half of the 2010s witnessed intense rivalry over regional hegemony between Turkey, on the one hand, and Egypt, and Saudi Arabia and the UAE, on the other.

The media was an essential element of these rivalries. In 2018 the Saudi satellite network MBC suspended Turkish soap operas to curtail Turkish influence in the region; they had already been banned from Egypt's pro-government TV channels in 2013.<sup>89</sup> In a similar move, Dar al-Ifta, the Egyptian authority responsible for issuing religious edicts, warned Egyptians against watching Turkish soap operas (on satellite channels).<sup>90</sup> In 2020 Saudi Arabia banned access to Turkey's state-run Anadolu Agency website and its state broadcaster TRT's Arabic service.<sup>91</sup> Meanwhile, the UAE started promoting itself as a regional power with a “vision for a moderate, modern Muslim world”.<sup>92</sup>

The conflict was conducted intensively at the geopolitical level. After the UAE and Egypt opposed the Turkish military incursion into Afrin in northern Syria in 2018,<sup>93</sup> the Turkish pro-government daily *Yeni Safak* accused Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE of sending troops to replace American forces stationed in northeastern Syria.<sup>94</sup> In 2019, Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, and Israel established the informal Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum to facilitate cooperation among suppliers, buyers, and transit countries. In

<sup>85</sup> Cengiz Çandar, “Talking Syria...” (Turkish), *Hürriyet*, 7 July 2012, <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/suriye-konusmak-20934333>.

<sup>86</sup> Fidan, “A Work in Progress” (see note 3).

<sup>87</sup> Şaban Kardaş, “Turkey and the Arab Spring: Coming to Terms with Democracy Promotion”, *German Marshall Funds Policy Program* (October 2011).

<sup>88</sup> Özel and Özkan, “Do New Democracies Support Democracy” (see note 80), 134. For a critical analysis of how Ankara's foreign policy promotion changed from cooperative during the first half of the 2000s to confrontational after the Arab uprisings, see Huber, *Democracy Promotion and Foreign Policy* (see note 84).

<sup>89</sup> Hend El-Behary, “Turkey's Soft Power Threatened after MBC Bans Turkish Dramas”, *Egypt Independent*, 7 March 2018, <https://egyptindependent.com/turkeys-soft-power-threatened-after-mbc-bans-turkish-dramas/>.

<sup>90</sup> Shahira Amin, “Dar al-Ifta Joins in Egypt-Turkey Culture War”, *Al-Monitor*, 16 February 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/02/dar-al-ifta-joins-in-turkish-egyptian-culture-war.html>.

<sup>91</sup> “Internet Watchdog Bans Access to the Independent's Turkish Website”, *Duvar English*, 19 April 2020, <https://www.duvarenglish.com/media/2020/04/19/internet-watchdog-bans-access-to-the-independents-turkish-website>.

<sup>92</sup> Yousef al Otaiba, “A Vision for a Moderate, Modern Muslim World”, *Foreign Policy*, 2 December 2015, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/12/02/a-vision-for-a-moderate-modern-muslim-world-uae-abu-dhabi-isis/>.

<sup>93</sup> Youssef Sheiko, “The United Arab Emirates: Turkey's New Rival” (Washington Institute, 16 February 2018), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/united-arab-emirates-turkeys-new-rival>.

<sup>94</sup> “The UAE and Saudi Arabia Are Present in Northeast Syria” (Turkish), *Yeni Safak*, 20 November 2018, <https://www.yenisafak.com/dunya/bae-suudfiratin-dogusunda-3409878>.

2021, Saudi Arabia and Greece held a joint training exercise at the Souda Air Force Base in Crete,<sup>95</sup> and signed a defence agreement.<sup>96</sup> The UAE and Greece also strengthened ties, signing a strategic partnership agreement in 2020 that includes defence and foreign policy cooperation.<sup>97</sup>

### From democracy promotion to leader of the ummah

Ankara's support for Sunni Islamists continued throughout the 2010s. As noted above, Turkey had become a refuge for the region's Islamists, many of whom viewed Erdoğan as the saviour of political Islam. Until recently, Turkey's ruling elites were generous in supporting the Sunni Islamists' political organisations within the diaspora.<sup>98</sup>

### After the Arab uprisings, Turkey had become a refuge for the region's Islamists.

In turn, at critical moments such as the failed coup attempt in 2016 and the 2017 constitutional referendum that institutionalised the presidential system, Sunni Islamists lent important support to Erdoğan and the AKP.<sup>99</sup> At a "Thank you, Turkey" meeting organised by Arab Islamists in Istanbul in 2016, for instance, Khalid Meshaal, the former leader of Hamas, praised Turkey for presenting "the best example of

political Islam in democracy, governance, and economy".<sup>100</sup> At the same meeting Yusuf al-Qaradawi, an Egyptian scholar of Islam and former chairperson of the International Union of Muslim Scholars, who passed away in 2022, also expressed his gratitude to Erdoğan and Turkey for defending Islam and the causes of Arab and Muslim nations.<sup>101</sup>

In 2018, representatives of Arab communities in Turkey called on Arabs and Muslims within and outside Turkey to support the Turkish economy. They asserted that the currency crisis severely affecting Turkey had been "orchestrated by external actors that were unhappy with Turkey's rise to regional power status and with its support for the Arab uprisings".<sup>102</sup> Two years later, Erdoğan was celebrated at an event organised in 2020 by the Union of Arab Communities in Turkey as "the leader of the Islamic nation, who made sacrifices and stood against the forces of tyranny in the name of the 1.3 billion Muslims."<sup>103</sup>

<sup>95</sup> "Saudi and Greek Air Forces Begin Joint Exercises in Greece", *Arab News*, 18 March 2021, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1826716/saudi-arabia>.

<sup>96</sup> "Greece Signs Deal to Provide Saudi Arabia with Patriot Air Defence System", *Reuters*, 20 April 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/greece-signs-deal-provide-saudi-arabia-with-patriot-air-defence-system-2021-04-20/>.

<sup>97</sup> Cinzia Bianco, "Understanding the Emirati-Greek Relationship" (Washington, D.C.: Middle East Institute, 27 January 2021), <https://www.mei.edu/publications/understanding-emirati-greek-relationship>.

<sup>98</sup> Mohanad Hage Ali, "Exiles on the Bosphorus", *Diwan* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Middle East Center, 10 March 2020), <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/81249>. Also see Abdelrahman Ayyash, Amr Elafifi and Noha Ezzat, *Broken Bonds: The Existential Crisis of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, 2013–22* (Washington, D.C.: Century Foundation, 2023).

<sup>99</sup> Abdelrahman Ayyash, *The Turkish Future of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood*, (Washington, D.C.: The Century Foundation, 2020), <https://tcf.org/content/report/turkish-future-egypts-muslim-brotherhood/>.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> "Qaradawi: Thanks to Turkey and to the President Erdoğan", website of the *International Union of Muslim Scholars*, 23 April 2016, <https://www.iuonline.org/en/Content/Details.aspx?ID=6176>.

<sup>102</sup> Musab Turan, "De-dollarization Campaign by Arabs living in Turkey" (Turkish), *Anadolu Agency*, 15 August 2018, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/turkiye/turkiyede-yasayan-araplardan-dolar-bozurma-kampanyasi/1232197>.

<sup>103</sup> "The Union of Arab Communities Announces 'Thank you Türkiye' Festival" (Arabic), *Anadolu Agency*, 2 February 2020, <https://bit.ly/49RPlz5>.



# From Bridge to Confrontation

In the MENA region Turkey is widely perceived as “a resurgent Muslim power posing a long-awaited challenge to the regional status quo underpinned by US military power and regimes who survive through a policy of appeasing Washington”<sup>104</sup> or “the only Muslim country that stands against the West”.<sup>105</sup> Ankara seems to have acquired over the years the reputation of a country that is willing and able to play hardball with Western powers. Western criticisms of Turkey are frequently associated with frustration over Ankara’s aspirations to follow an independent path.

Turkey’s economic visibility across the region, increased people-to-people contacts, and Ankara’s more assertive foreign policy all shape these perceptions. The AKP leadership’s systematic efforts to position Ankara as the defender of the globally disenfranchised are equally, if not more, influential. Government officials, pro-government experts and scholars employ four key talking points: i) Palestine and the rights of the Palestinians, ii) combatting Islamophobia, iii) critiquing Western colonialism, and iv) reform of the international order. For Ankara, these talking points are designed to create rally-support within and outside Turkey, expand Turkey’s influence and improve its international standing. For many a region’s citizen, on the other hand, Ankara’s confrontational rhetoric is a source of pride and empowerment.

## Palestine and the rights of the Palestinians

Ankara’s focus on Palestine and the rights of the Palestinians has three components. During the 2000s,

<sup>104</sup> Murat Sofuoğlu, “How Arabs Perceive Turkey’s Foreign Policy in the Middle East”, *TRT World*, 2020, <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/how-arabs-perceive-turkey-s-foreign-policy-in-the-middle-east-40415>.

<sup>105</sup> Killian Cogan, “Istanbul, Home to the New Arab World”, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, June 2021, <https://monde.diplo.com/2021/06/07/istanbul>.

the defence of Palestinian rights was framed as part of Turkey’s democracy promotion agenda. Ankara stood by Hamas after its electoral victory in the 2006 Palestinian parliamentary election. This was a critical moment as Turkey “took strong exception to the Western position of not recognising Hamas because it did not renounce violence and did not accept Israel’s right to exist”.<sup>106</sup> The United States and the European Union consider Hamas a terrorist organisation. Ankara, in contrast, considers it “a resistance movement that defends the Palestinian homeland against an occupying power”.<sup>107</sup>

### Democracy promotion, peace-making, and the aspiration for the leadership of the ummah mark Ankara’s focus on Palestine.

Turkey was the first majority Muslim country to recognise Israel in 1949. It was also among the first to recognise the State of Palestine. Notwithstanding its close economic, diplomatic and defence relations with Israel, confrontational moments occurred even before the AKP’s rise to power.<sup>108</sup> Now, with the AKP in government, Palestine has become one of the central markers of Turkey’s self-promotion as a “peacemaker in the periphery of the international system”<sup>109</sup> – the second component of Ankara’s focus on Palestine and the rights of the Palestinians. During the fighting in Gaza in December 2008 and January 2009 (Operation Cast Lead) Ankara’s ties to Hamas

<sup>106</sup> Özel and Özkan, “Do New Democracies Support Democracy” (see note 80), 127.

<sup>107</sup> Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, “Reminder to Netanyahu”, *Twitter [X]*, 15 May 2018, <https://twitter.com/RTErdoğan/status/996469218085429249?lang=de>.

<sup>108</sup> On this: Bulent Aras, *Turkey and the Palestine Question*, SETA Policy Brief 27 (Ankara: Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research [SETA], January 2009), [https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/pbei/seta/0015602/f\\_0015602\\_13607.pdf](https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/pbei/seta/0015602/f_0015602_13607.pdf).

<sup>109</sup> On this: Bulent Aras, “The Davutoglu Era in Turkish Foreign Policy”, *Insight Turkey* 11, no. 3 (2009): 127 – 142.

helped Turkey to fill “the mediation vacuum left by the EU’s and the US’ policies”<sup>110</sup>, albeit without concrete results.

That episode also represented a significant challenge to Turkish mediation efforts. The Israeli military incursion started only four days after Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert had visited Ankara, where “a blueprint for talks with the Assad regime in Syria” was agreed upon.<sup>111</sup> When the fighting began, Turkey suspended its facilitating role in the talks. At the end of January 2009, then-Prime Minister Erdoğan openly confronted Israeli President Simon Peres at the World Economic Forum in Davos, criticising the violent aggression of the Israeli army and again positioning himself and Turkey as the guardian of Palestinian rights. Turkish-Israeli relations soured further a year later in 2010, when Israeli commandos boarded a convoy of ships carrying aid to the Gaza Strip, in an operation that ended in the death of nine Turkish activists. A year later, Ankara expelled the Israeli ambassador and other senior diplomats over Israel’s failure to apologise for the deadly raid in 2010. Until Turkey’s rapprochement efforts began in 2022, diplomatic relations oscillated between reconciliation attempts (such as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s apology for the Gaza flotilla incident) and sporadic tensions (for example over alleged Turkish involvement in the exposure of Israeli agents in Iran or the expulsion of the Israeli ambassador in 2018 in protest at Israel’s killing of Palestinians demonstrating against the US recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel).

Although Ankara’s diplomatic ties with Israel deteriorated, economic relations remained constant. Meanwhile, identitarian motivations have become a more salient component of the Turkish emphasis on Palestine and the rights of the Palestinians. For Ankara, safeguarding Palestine and the rights of the Palestinians is part of its quest for justice for Muslims worldwide. According to this narrative, the liberation of the Muslims started in Turkey (thanks to Erdoğan’s leadership) and has spread to other Muslim countries. Erdoğan has promoted this rhetoric, for instance describing the conversion of the Hagia Sophia into a

mosque in 2020 as the “harbinger of the Al-Aqsa Mosque’s liberation”.<sup>112</sup>

These three components were strikingly visible in Turkey’s response to the most recent episode of violence in Gaza, since October 7, 2023. In the early days of the conflict, Turkish Foreign Minister Fidan noted that Ankara considers Hamas “a part of the Palestinian state and a political party within the state system”.<sup>113</sup> President Erdoğan also repeated Ankara’s view that Hamas was a “patriotic liberation movement fighting to protect Palestinian lands and people”.<sup>114</sup> Similarly, since the early days of the latest war on Gaza, Ankara has tried to position itself as a mediator, albeit without success. Finally, Ankara’s civilisationist understanding of the conflict has also been salient. For instance, in a speech at an event in Turkey, Erdoğan accused the West of lightly ignoring human rights because “the blood being spilt is Muslim blood”.<sup>115</sup>

## Combatting Islamophobia

“Combatting Islamophobia” (in the West) constitutes a second talking point in Ankara’s foreign policy. The term appeared for the first time in the Turkish Parliament’s Human Rights Sub-Committee reports in the late 2000s. The report covering the period between October 2009 and October 2010 noted that “Islamophobic, xenophobic and racist tendencies influenced decision-makers” (referring to the legal debates in Europe on migration).<sup>116</sup> Following the deadly attacks in Norway in June 2011 by the right-wing extremist Anders Breivik, the sub-committee decided to monitor

**110** Nathalie Tocci, “Firm in Rhetoric, Compromising in Reality: The EU in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict”, *Ethno-politics* 8, no. 3–4 (2009): 387–401 (399).

**111** Kemal Kirisci and Rob Keane, “Turkey’s Israel-Palestine Opportunity”, *National Interest*, 1 August 2013, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/turkeys-israel-palestine-opportunity/>.

**112** “On 24 July, We Plan to Open Hagia Sophia during Friday Prayers for Religious Service” (Turkish), *Euronews*, 10 July 2020, <https://tr.euronews.com/2020/07/10/ayasofya-n-n-cami-olarak-ac-lmas-karar-sonras-Erdoğ-an-ulusa-sesleniyor>.

**113** Muhammed Enes Calli, “Denying Existence, Rights of Palestinians Will Not Bring Peace to Israel”, *Anadolu Agency*, 27 October 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/denying-existence-rights-of-palestinians-will-not-bring-peace-to-israel-turkish-foreign-minister/3034818>.

**114** Amberin Zaman, “Turkey’s Erdogan Hails Hamas as Liberators”, *Al-Monitor*, 25 October 2023, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/10/turkeys-erdogan-hails-hamas-liberators-leaving-detente-israel-shreds>.

**115** Aile Şurasi, *Youtube* (Turkish), 26 October 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VkvYZM0adl4>.

**116** Adar, *Rethinking Political Attitudes of Migrants* (see note 74).

Islamophobia in Europe and the US.<sup>117</sup> These initial efforts were further expanded with the launch in January 2016 of a new group within the sub-committee to systematically investigate “Islamophobia in the West”.<sup>118</sup>

Around the same time, the pro-government think tank SETA Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research launched its first annual European Islamophobia Report., to which internationally renowned scholars on Islamophobia contributed.<sup>119</sup> SETA was conceived by former President Abdullah Gül, launched in 2005 by Ahmet Davutoğlu and is currently run by members of Erdoğan’s extended family. İbrahim Kalın, the current head of the Turkish National Intelligence Organisation and the former spokesperson and advisor to the Office of Presidency, served as its founding director. For Davutoğlu and Kalın, Islamophobia represents a challenge to the Muslim world and to Islam, requiring a coordinated collective response by Muslim countries.<sup>120</sup> In 2019, Turkey was reported to have reached a trilateral agreement with Malaysia and Pakistan to launch a TV channel to fight Islamophobia, although the project has yet to materialise.<sup>121</sup> Still, efforts to mobilise political elites against Islamophobia continue. At the UN General Assembly in 2021 Erdoğan announced that Turkey’s state-run news agency would launch an “Islamophobia Watch” unit,<sup>122</sup> and demanded that March 15 be designated the “international day to combat Islamophobia”.<sup>123</sup> A year later, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution sponsored by 60

member states of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, designating March 15 as such.<sup>124</sup>

## Anti-colonialism

Ankara’s favourite nemesis in its campaign against Islamophobia is France. After President Macron asserted in 2020 that Islam was in crisis, İbrahim Kalın described the statement as “dangerous and provocative, encouraging Islamophobia and anti-Muslim populism.”<sup>125</sup> Numerous articles appeared on pro-government media channels tying Islamophobia in France to the country’s colonial past and identifying it as “neo-colonialism”.<sup>126</sup> A critique of colonialism and its legacies has been recently added to Ankara’s talking points.

### Pro-government circles see Turkey’s Muslim identity and its perceived lack of a colonial past as a foreign policy advantage.

At the height of the Eastern Mediterranean conflict in 2020, Macron argued that the EU needed to be strict with Erdoğan. AKP spokesperson Ömer Çelik retorted: “Macron continues colonialism, while our President continues to defend the interests of the oppressed peoples, protect the peace, and frustrate the colonialists’ games.”<sup>127</sup> In the wake of the 2023 coup d’état in Niger, Erdoğan accused France of “years of oppression against Africans”. “All France’s activities in Algeria, Mali and Rwanda recorded. Africans know them all well. They suspended gold and uranium exports to France. This is a response to French oppres-

117 Ibid.

118 Ibid.

119 Note that SETA stopped publishing the report in 2021, when one of the authors parted ways with the organisation.

120 Hulya Corakci Ertan, “We Should Unite in Our Response to Islamophobia” (Turkish), *Anadolu Agency*, 14 April 2016, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/turkiye/basbakan-davutoglu-islamofobiye-karsi-ortak-tavirda-bulusmaliyiz/554974>. İbrahim Kalın, “Islamophobia Will Not Solve Europe or Asia’s Problems”, *Al Jazeera*, 15 June 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2019/6/15/islamophobia-will-not-solve-europe-or-asias-problems>.

121 Aamir Latif, “Turkey, Pakistan, Malaysia Unite to Fight Islamophobia”, *Anadolu Agency*, 26 September 2019, <https://bit.ly/3IWB5JP>.

122 Zeliha Eliaçık, “Turkey Is the Leading Actor in the Global Fight against Islamophobia” (Turkish), *Anadolu Ajansı* (15 June 2021), <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/analiz/islamofobi-ile-kuresel-mucadelede-oncu-rol-turkiyenin/2274321>.

123 Ibid.

124 The website of the UN, <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n22/288/70/pdf/n2228870.pdf?token=3SZ1T2uwzLBiKR1pTw&fe=true>.

125 İbrahim Kalın, X (formerly Twitter), 5 October 2020, <https://twitter.com/ikalın1/status/1313067636880801793>.

126 On this: “Analysis: France’s Never-ending Battle with Islam”, *TRT World*, 2020, <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/analysis-france-s-never-ending-battle-with-islam-34498>. Abdulaziz Ahmet Yaşar, “France’s Islamophobia and Its Roots in French Colonialism”, *TRT World*, 2019, <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/france-s-islamophobia-and-its-roots-in-french-colonialism-25678>.

127 “Turkey Says France’s Macron Endangers EU Interests, Playing Colonial Games”, *TRT World*, 10 September 2020, <https://www.trtworld.com/turkey/turkey-says-france-s-macron-endangers-eu-interests-playing-colonial-games-39653>.



sion in the continent. We will continue to develop our positive relations with Africans.”<sup>128</sup> Government officials and pro-government commentators see Turkey’s Muslim identity and its perceived lack of a colonial past (attributing colonialism only to Western empires) as a foreign policy advantage over Western states (particularly in Syria and Africa).<sup>129</sup>

## Critique of the international order

Ankara’s critique of Western colonialism is often intertwined with its fourth talking point on the perceived inequalities of the international order, famously encapsulated as “the world is bigger than five”. The slogan was first coined by Erdoğan in 2013 at the opening event of the “Asia Pacific Retail Conference and Fair”, referring to the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). Since then, it has become integral to Turkish foreign policy rhetoric. Erdoğan brought it up in 2014 at the UN General Assembly, accusing the West of double standards and noting that “that double standard leads to significant and serious mistrust, including towards the United Nations; it harms a sense of justice and leads millions of people to despair.”<sup>130</sup>

Erdoğan’s speeches on the topic between 2014 and 2016 were collated and published by the Directorate of Communications as a book in 2017.<sup>131</sup> At a meeting organised the same year by the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, Erdoğan repeated his criticism that the UNSC lacked a Muslim country among its permanent members. The book was later translated into English and Arabic, and in 2018 material was

**128** “After Russia and France, Turkey Has Also Joined the Debate on Africa: Critical Remarks at Macron” (Turkish), *Haber Global*, August 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Ah6JYcELN0>.

**129** “The Local Population Will not Accept the Presence of the Ex-colonizer States Such as France and the UK” (Turkish), *SETA*, 24 December 2018, <https://www.setav.org/fransa-ve-ingiltere-gibi-eski-somurgeci-devletleri-bolge-halki-uzun-vadede-kabullenemez/>.

**130** President Erdoğan Addresses the UN General Assembly, The website of *Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanlığı*, 24 September 2014, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/3255/president-erdogan-addresses-the-un-general-assembly>.

**131** “Available in Three Languages: ‘The World Is Bigger Than Five’” (Turkish), *A Haber*, 12 November 2017, <https://www.ahaber.com.tr/gundem/2017/11/12/3-dilde-dunya-5ten-buyuktur>.

integrated into a 12th-grade textbook on Turkish history.<sup>132</sup> In 2021, Erdoğan published a second book entitled “A more just world is possible”, continuing his criticism of the international order.<sup>133</sup>

In his speech at the 2023 annual meeting of Turkish ambassadors, Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan referred to these two slogans — “the world is bigger than five” and “a more just world is possible” — as essential pillars of Turkish foreign policy. He added that Turkey believes that the Bretton Woods institutions need to be reformed if they are to function effectively.<sup>134</sup> Addressing the UNSC on 24 January 2024, Fidan similarly noted that “the continuation of the current situation in Gaza will further undermine the fundamental principles and moral values of the international system.”<sup>135</sup> Despite the agreement of “most of the members of the international community on the urgency of a cease-fire, humanitarian assistance, and the two-state solution”, he added, an “effective mechanism for getting Israel to implement it” was lacking.

## Counter-Hegemonic Struggles<sup>136</sup>

These talking points are circulated via government officials’ speeches, pro-government think tanks,

**132** “Erdoğan’s Motto ‘The World Is Bigger Than Five’ Is in School Textbooks”, *Birgün*, 8 December 2018, available online at: <https://www.birgun.net/haber/Erdoğan-in-dunya-5-ten-buyuktur-sozu-ders-kitabina-girdi-239497>.

**133** Deniz Dede, “The Search for a World Order without ‘Spoiled Behavior’: A More Just World Is Possible” (Turkish), *Kriter* 6, no. 61 (October 2021), <https://kriterdergi.com/kitaplik/kaprissiz-bir-duzen-arayisi-daha-adil-bir-dunya-mumkun>.

**134** “Speech delivered by the Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan at the 14<sup>th</sup> annual meeting of the Turkish ambassadors” (Turkish), the website of the *Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Dışişleri Bakanlığı*, 7 August 2023, <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/disisleri-bakani-sayin-hakan-fidan-in-14-buyukelciler-konferansi-acilisinda-yaptigi-konusma--7-agustos-2023.tr.mfa>.

**135** Diyar Guldogan, “Shame International Community”, *Anadolu Agency*, 24 January 2024, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkiye/shame-international-community-still-unable-to-stop-bloodshed-in-gaza-turkish-foreign-minister/3116844>.

**136** On this: Rebecca Adler-Nissen and Ayşe Zarakol, “Struggles for Recognition: The Liberal International Order and the Merger of Its Discontents”, *International Organization* 75 (2021): 611–34. Senem Aydın-Düzgüt, “Authoritarian middle powers and the liberal order: Turkey’s contestation of the EU”, *International Affairs* 99, no. 6 (2023): 2319–2337.

research centres, universities and state media channels such as *Anadolu Agency* and the *TRT* (which broadcast in Arabic and other languages).<sup>137</sup> Ankara's (selective) defence<sup>138</sup> of the marginalised and disenfranchised worldwide is based on a perception that "a (post-colonial) new subjectivity is being created through 'new Turkey'".<sup>139</sup> The term "new Turkey" was coined by Erdoğan in 2014 after his election to the presidency, and refers to the aspiration to engage in a new nation-building project that is "post-Kemalist with its aim of democratisation", "post-Western with its aim of independence", and "post-Westphalian with its aim of a new political unit and institutionalisation".<sup>140</sup>

For the AKP leadership the empowerment of Turkey's so-called underrepresented citizens through Erdoğan's consolidation of power is nothing less than a prelude to the liberation of disenfranchised communities – first and foremost, Muslims around the world. Speaking at the annual TRT World Forum in 2018, İbrahim Kalın applauded "the resilience of people of the Muslim World" (in comparison to the nihilism of the West despite its political stability, economic privileges and development) and noted that "political leadership, wisdom, and determination" were necessary "to realise their dreams".<sup>141</sup> Erdoğan's son-in-law Selçuk Bayraktar, whose family's company is known for the famous Turkish military drones, similarly noted that the family business aims at "giving the youth self-confidence that we've [Turkey] lacked for centuries" (as the centre of gravity shifted to the West).<sup>142</sup>

### Ankara propagates its outspoken criticism of Western domination as evidence of Turkey's international standing.

According to İbrahim Kalın, Ankara's criticism of Western hegemony is not a call to "replace it with a new Russian- or Chinese-centric framework", but to "establish a new order that treats every nation as an equal, in which every country feels safe".<sup>143</sup> Ankara sees (and propagates) its outspoken criticism of Western domination and international inequalities as evidence of Turkey's international standing. The message to the masses inside and outside Turkey is clear: Under the AKP, Turkey has acquired capabilities that enable it to play hardball with global powers.

**137** Sinem Adar and Halil İbrahim Yenigün, "A Muslim Counter-Hegemony? Turkey's Soft Power Strategies and Islamophobia", *Jadaliyya*, 6 May 2019, <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/38646/A-Muslim-Counter-Hegemony-Turkey's-Soft-Power-Strategies-and-Islamophobia>.

**138** Chinese aggression against Uyghur Turks, for instance, does not receive as much criticism as Islamophobia in Europe.

**139** Zeynep Gulsah Capan and Ayşe Zarakol, "Postcolonial Colonialism? The Case of Turkey", in *Against International Relations Norms*, ed. Charlotte Epstein (London: Routledge, 2017), 193–211 (202).

**140** *Ibid.*, 203.

**141** "TRT World Forum 2018 Highlight: İbrahim Kalın on the Resilience of the People of the Muslim World", *TRT World*, 2018, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ChmlKJ\\_tIfo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ChmlKJ_tIfo).

**142** Ken Moriyasu and Sinan Tavşan, "Turkish Drone Maker Baykar Seeks to Extend Global Influence", *Nikkei Asia*, 18 August 2023, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/Business-Spotlight/Turkish-drone-maker-Baykar-seeks-to-extend-global-influence>.

**143** İbrahim Kalın, *A Century of Turkish Foreign Policy: Conference Proceedings (Turkish)*, SETA (Ankara: SETA, 26 April 2023), <https://setav.org/assets/uploads/2023/05/TDP-Yuzyili-KK.pdf>.

# Limits to Turkey's Regional Aspirations

Despite the AKP leadership's efforts to gain influence across the MENA region and the largely positive reception of Turkey under Erdoğan's leadership, Turkish policies have not been immune to backlash and criticism. This is principally a consequence of polarisation within Arab societies, Turkey's waning influence among Arab Islamists, its autocratic turn, and rising xenophobia within Turkish society.

## Polarised societies

Polarisation cuts through the region. The wide gulf between ruling elites and the wider population initially played into the AKP leadership's hands, especially during and after the Arab uprisings. However, the same polarisation also harmed Turkey's ambitions for regional influence. For one, Ankara's close ties with the Sunni Islamists antagonised many non-Islamist actors. To cite the former Egyptian Ambassador to Ankara, Abdurrahman Salahaddin:<sup>144</sup> "We admired Turkey until 2012. Egyptians admired the secular, modern Turkey with a rising economy and strong aspirations to become an EU member. They admired the economic governance in Turkey by competent names such as Kemal Derviş. We also admired the respect that a conservative political party like the AKP had for the secular constitution of the Turkish state."<sup>145</sup>

<sup>144</sup> Also see Meliha Benli Altunışık, *Turkey: Arab Perspectives*, Foreign Policy Analysis Series 11 (İstanbul: Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation, 2010), [https://www.tesev.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/report\\_Turkey\\_Arab\\_Perspectives.pdf](https://www.tesev.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/report_Turkey_Arab_Perspectives.pdf).

<sup>145</sup> Hediye Levent, "Abdurrahman Salahaddin: We Admired Secular and Modern Turkey" (Turkish), *Gazete Duvar*, 20 December 2021, <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/abdurrehman-salahaddin-sekuler-modern-turkiyeye-hayrandik-makale-1546144>.

Over time, what arguably started as a "maximum benefit-minimum cost"<sup>146</sup> calculation — when the AKP leadership decided to back the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt (and elsewhere) — turned into a low gain-high loss adventure. Trapped in the mismatch between its ambitions and capabilities, Turkey's relations with its Western allies soured. It was also caught in a fierce rivalry with Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, as mentioned above.<sup>147</sup>

## Negative repercussions of these growing tensions appeared in the economy, hurting Turkish interests.

Negative repercussions of these growing tensions appeared in the economy, hurting Turkish interests. Although economic relations between Ankara and Arab countries did not cease amid the geopolitical rivalry ushered in by the Arab uprisings, Ankara's trade with the region peaked in 2012, but would have likely continued to grow if Ankara had not found itself regionally isolated. Tunisia is a good example. Following the success of secular parties in the 2014 elections, Turkey's trade volume with Tunisia fell below the figure for 2013 (US\$1.03 billion) and remained largely stable until 2021 (US\$1.37 billion), when it started to rise again against the backdrop of regional rapprochement efforts.<sup>148</sup> Popular support

<sup>146</sup> Hakkı Taş, "Erdoğan and the Muslim Brotherhood: An Outside-in Approach to Turkish Foreign Policy in the Middle East", *Turkish Studies* 5, no. 23 (2022): 722–42.

<sup>147</sup> On this: Osman Bahadır Dincer, "The Legacy of the Arab Uprisings on Turkey's Foreign Policy: Ankara's Regional Power Delusion", *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* (2022): 1–20; Mustafa Kutlay and Ziya Öniş, "Understanding Oscillations in Turkish Foreign Policy: Pathways to Unusual Middle Power Activism", *Third World Quarterly* 42, no. 12 (2021): 3051–69.

<sup>148</sup> Tanrıverdi Yaşar and Aksoy, *Making Sense of Turkey's Cautious Reaction to Power Shifts in Tunisia* (see note 52). See

for economic relations with Turkey also declined by 14 percentage points between 2013 and 2021, while support for better economic relations with Saudi Arabia increased from 47 per cent to 61 per cent during the same period.<sup>149</sup>

The region's economic and political elites also fear Turkey swamping their markets. After concerns about its growing current account deficit with Turkey, for instance, Tunisia imposed new customs duties on Turkish products in 2018.<sup>150</sup> Two years later, Morocco similarly asked a Turkish retail company to increase the proportion of local goods it sells to at least half.<sup>151</sup> Turkey's trade surplus became a cause for concern among Morocco's ruling elites and business community, culminating in a revision of the FTA the two countries signed in 2004.<sup>152</sup> Under this, Morocco imposed a "90% additional customs duty on 1,200 Turkish products in 150 different industrial, food, and textile categories for five years".<sup>153</sup> Also in 2018, Saudi Arabia's non-governmental Chambers of Commerce called for a boycott of Turkish products.<sup>154</sup>

## Waning support for the Islamists

Erdoğan's (and Turkey's) appeal to many Arab Islamists was driven as much by ideology as by interests. For many, Turkey was a balancing force against the region's authoritarian elites, which regard political Islam as a threat to their survival. Ankara's increasingly confrontational foreign policy and expanding military footprint since 2016 have contributed to this view, which seems to be shared by the region's ruling elites. According to Danforth and Stein, the view of Turkey as "a strong and serious country capable of

causing a lot of problems for rivals if it wanted to" was influential in the rapprochement efforts between Turkey and Egypt since 2020/21.<sup>155</sup>

Since 2020, Turkey has been on a charm offensive to break nearly a decade of regional isolation. This shift in policy towards Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE was forced by a combination of factors, including Ankara's economic woes, US President Joseph Biden's election, the geopolitical realignment in the region following the Abraham Accords, the Syrian government's rapprochement with regional governments, and the mending of ties between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates with Qatar. Ankara had also grown wary of the increasing cooperation between Greece, the Republic of Cyprus, Israel, and the Arab states in the eastern Mediterranean. The temporal overlap with the divergence of interests among Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, as well as the decreasing trust in the continued US involvement in the region, encouraged Turkey's rapprochement efforts.<sup>156</sup>

### Ankara has recently been more cautious and distanced itself from Arab Islamists.

In order to mend its strained relations with its Sunni rivals at a time of economic woes and financial needs, Ankara has recently been more cautious and distanced itself from Arab Islamists. It asked the Muslim Brotherhood – affiliated media channels in Turkey to tone down their criticism. In 2022 an Islamist satellite TV channel based in Istanbul – Mekameleen – announced that it was ceasing broadcasting and closing its eight studios.<sup>157</sup> Ankara reportedly also

also: "Tunisian Economy" (Turkish), *The Website of the Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/tunus-ekonomisi.tr.mfa>.

149 Arab Barometer VII, *Tunisia Report* (see note 69).

150 Tanrıverdi Yaşar and Aksoy, *Making Sense of Turkey's Cautious Reaction to Power Shifts in Tunisia* (see note 52).

151 "Morocco Threatens to Close Down Turkish Retailer amid Trade Talks", *Reuters*, 11 February 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/morocco-turkey-trade-idINL8N2AB4SR>.

152 Ibid.

153 Fuat Emir Şefkatli, *Saudi Arabia Casting Shadow over Morocco-Turkey Economic Relations* (Ankara: Center for Middle Eastern Studies [ORSAM], November 2020), <https://www.orsam.org.tr/en/saudi-arabia-casting-shadow-over-morocco-turkey-economic-relations/>.

154 Rashad, "Saudi Retail Chains" (see note 26).

155 Nicholas Danforth and Aaron Stein, *Turkey's New Foreign Policy: Ankara's Ambitions, Regional Responses, and Implications for the United States* (Philadelphia, PA: Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2023), <https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/02/turkeys-new-foreign-policy-ankaras-ambitions-regional-responses-and-implications-for-the-united-states/>.

156 On this: Hürcan Aslı Aksoy and Stephan Roll, *A Thaw in Relations between Egypt and Turkey: Weaknesses in Foreign Policy and the Economy Bring the Regimes in Cairo and Ankara Closer Together*, SWP Comment 39/2021 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, June 2021), doi: 10.18449/2021C39; Stephan Roll, *Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE: The End of an Alliance*, SWP Comment 47/2023 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, August 2023), doi: 10.18449/2023C47v02.

157 "Turkey's Shutdown of 'Mekameleen' Signals the End of an Era in Muslim Brotherhood Activity, Regional Policy

asked Brotherhood members to leave.<sup>158</sup> In a similar move in April 2022, a Turkish court transferred the trial of the alleged murderers of Saudi dissident Jamal Khashoggi to Saudi Arabia. Ankara has also recently arrested Tunisian Ennahda leaders at the request of President Saïed. Last, but not least, despite the dissatisfaction of actors within the Syrian opposition, Turkey has also tried to mend ties with Bashar al-Assad, albeit with no concrete outcome. These moves — motivated by Ankara's shifting foreign policy priorities — have weakened its reputation as an actor with disruption capacity and damaged its credibility.

These moves have so far not led to open criticism against Turkey among Sunni Islamists, however. Islamist exiles have limited range of alternative bases and the Muslim Brotherhood is in retreat amid internal struggles and divisions.<sup>159</sup> Moreover, despite its increasing caution, the AKP leadership appears not to have completely turned its back on the Islamists. In early August 2023 for instance, Erdoğan received a delegation from the International Union of Muslim Scholars.<sup>160</sup> A month earlier he had hosted Ismail Haniyeh, the Head of the Hamas Political Bureau (and Mahmoud Abbas, the leader of the Palestinian National Authority).<sup>161</sup> Turkey continues to support and cooperate with Sunni groups in Northern Syria.

### Turkey's autocratic turn and the regime's survival

There is also an increasing awareness — among Islamists and non-Islamists alike — that Turkey has turned into an autocracy and that Erdoğan resembles the region's other leaders. Instead of Turkey leading the region — as once assumed and hoped by various actors for different reasons — the AKP leadership

seems to have integrated Turkey into a region shaped by growing authoritarian consolidation and fierce transactionalism.

In this respect discontent about tensions among Turkey's Islamists themselves, such as Erdoğan's fall-out with Gülenists, and later, with figures such as Ahmet Davutoğlu is noteworthy. Arab Islamists are aware that Ankara's support was neither solely a matter of ideology nor of foreign policy interests. In the eyes of many, domestic politics and particularly the AKP leadership's survival struggles were also influential. For instance, the perception that Erdoğan's fear of a military coup was behind Turkey's reaction to Sisi's takeover in Egypt is not uncommon.

Indeed, 2013 marks a crucial year in the unfolding of Turkish authoritarianism. Erdoğan's informal alliance with the Gülenists ended, and the AKP government was taken aback by mass demonstrations — the largest against Erdoğan's rule — against plans to replace Taksim Gezi Park with a shopping mall. Around 2.5 million citizens joined demonstrations across the country, 4,900 were taken into custody and approximately 4,000 were injured.<sup>162</sup> In 2019, six years after the demonstrations, an Istanbul court put Osman Kavala, a prominent Turkish philanthropist and businessman, on trial along with fifteen others on charges of “attempting to overthrow the Turkish government by force”.<sup>163</sup> Depicted by the AKP leadership as “an insurrection”,<sup>164</sup> the protests were also included in the 12th-grade history textbook in 2018 as examples of “uprisings against democracy” with “significant economic repercussions.”<sup>165</sup>

Shift”, *Arab Weekly*, 3 May 2022, <https://thearabweekly.com/turkeys-shutdown-mekameleen-signals-end-era-muslim-brotherhood-activity-regional-policy-shift>.

**158** Ayyash et al., *Broken Bonds* (see note 98), 15.

**159** Ayyash et al., *Broken Bonds* (see note 98), 111.

**160** “President Erdoğan Receives IUMS Delegation”, the website of the *Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye*, 8 August 2023, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/149023/president-erdogan-receives-iums-delegation>.

**161** “Statement on President Erdoğan's Meeting with Abbas and Haniyeh”, the website of the *Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye Directorate of Communications*, 26 July 2023, <https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/english/haberler/detay/statement-on-president-erdogans-meeting-with-abbas-and-haniyeh>.

**162** Cuma Cicek, “Opening”: *Kurdish Issue and Search for Solutions* (Turkish) (Istanbul: İletisim Yayınları, 2018), 193.

**163** “Turkey's Gezi Trial Verdict a Travesty of Justice”, *Freedom House*, 26 April 2022, <https://freedomhouse.org/article/turkeys-gezi-trial-verdict-travesty-justice/>.

**164** Berk Esen, *What Does the Gezi Trial Tell Us about Erdoğan's Regime in Turkey?* SWP Point of View (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 9 May 2022), <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/what-does-the-gezi-trial-tell-us-about-erdogans-regime-in-turkey>.

**165** M. Şakir Saraç, “Gezi Terror Is Part of School Curriculum” (Turkish), *Yeni Safak*, 20 September 2018, <https://www.yenisafak.com/gundem/gezi-terorumufredatta-3396797>.

## Increasing xenophobia within Turkish society

Suspicion and discontent about Turkey and its regional policies go beyond the region's elites – Islamists and non-Islamists alike. Rising anti-refugee and anti-Arab sentiments within Turkish society taint the image that Ankara wants to portray. The question of Syrian refugees was one of the most contested topics in the run-up to the 2023 parliamentary and presidential elections and even more so between the two rounds of the presidential elections.

### Verbal and physical attacks against refugees and other Arabs are not uncommon.

Verbal and physical attacks against refugees and other Arabs are not uncommon. In September 2023, for instance, a Kuwaiti tourist was beaten unconscious in the Black Sea city of Trabzon, causing outrage across the Arab world as the video of the incident circulated.<sup>166</sup> A Syrian refugee was shot dead the previous year outside his home in Istanbul.<sup>167</sup> Refugee children are reported to face ill-treatment by teachers or classmates at schools.<sup>168</sup> Syrian women find themselves facing sexual harassment and even violence.<sup>169</sup>

**166** “Kuwaiti Tourist ‘Beaten Unconscious’ in Turkey’s Trabzon amid Rising Anti-Arab Racism”, *The New Arab*, 18 September 2023, <https://www.newarab.com/news/kuwaiti-tourist-assaulted-turkey-amid-anti-arab-racism> (accessed 23 September 2023).

**167** Paul Benjamin Osterlund, “Killing of Refugee Highlights Struggle Facing Syrians in Turkey”, *Aljazeera*, 5 October 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2022/10/5/killing-of-refugee-highlights-struggle-facing-syrians-in-turkey>.

**168** Muhammed Fansa, “Bullying, “Kimlik” and Poverty Make Third of Syrian Children out of Turkey’s Schools”, *Enab Baladi*, 4 February 2023, <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2023/02/bullying-kimlik-and-poverty-make-third-of-syrian-children-out-of-turkeys-schools/>.

**169** Burcu Karakas, “The Fragility of Syria Refugee Women in Turkey”, *Osservatorio Balcanie Caucaso Transeuropa*, 24 December 2018, <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Turkey/The-fragility-of-Syrian-refugee-women-in-Turkey-191805>. Also see: Aysun Dogutas, “Gender Based Violence Against Syrian Refugee Women in Turkey”, *Border Crossing* 9, no. 2 (July – December 2019): 113 – 24.



# Conclusions

Overall, Turkey's apparent popularity, especially among the region's citizens, is driven by i) the country's economic growth under AKP leadership and the appeal of a perceived European lifestyle in a Muslim country, ii) the ostensibly competitive, albeit not free and fair, nature of the Turkish political system, and finally, iii) Ankara's posturing as the defender of the globally disenfranchised. Yet, these positive perceptions of Turkish economy, political system, and foreign policy rhetoric are relative.

For instance, the admiration for Turkey's economic growth in the last two decades cannot be considered independently of poor socio-economic development of the broader region.<sup>170</sup> Outside the oil-rich Gulf, most Arab countries struggle with low economic growth, rising food prices, income inequality and poverty. Despite its own economic troubles — high inflation, high current account deficit and growing income inequality — Turkey's position is, at least for the time being, comparably better.

Similarly, the positive reception of the Turkish political system cannot be approached independently of the widespread frustration over deepening authoritarian rule in the region. Despite Turkey's gradual but steady turn to autocracy in the last two decades, elections with high turnout remain a source of appeal for some in the region. The AKP leadership propagates the view that Turkey is a functioning democracy thanks to its elections. Finally, Ankara's rhetorical confrontation with the West appeals to Arab public opinion against the background of past resentment and present discontent with the policies of the Western states.

For many an Arab citizen, the tale of Turkey under Erdoğan's leadership is essentially one of a changing world order marked by the rise of challengers to Western powers. Turkey's ruling elites systematically

promote this view. Still, Turkey's appeal to the masses does not easily translate into influence over regional elites, as evidenced by Ankara's growing regional isolation between 2013 and 2020. The perception of Turkey as a spoiler to the regional status quo in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings effectively ended the initially positive perception of AKP rule among the region's secular forces and autocratic elites. For the former, the country's authoritarian turn and the increasing salience of Islam in social and political life cast doubt on Turkey's credentials as a secular democracy. For the region's autocrats, Ankara's support for Arab Islamists has made it a competitor, if not a threat. Despite the thaw in relations with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and lately also Egypt, fully restoring trust will likely take longer and come at the cost of hurting relations elsewhere.

In fact, the rapprochement between Turkey and its Sunni competitors represents more a convergence of interests than a structural realignment. Turkey's economic imperatives overlap conveniently with the Arab countries' "perceived need to manage Turkey and its frequent outbursts".<sup>171</sup> In the case of the Gulf countries, a rapprochement with Turkey also fits conveniently into their strategic ambitions. The cooperation agreement concerning port and logistics investments in Turkey by Abu Dhabi Ports<sup>172</sup> is, for instance, part of the UAE's long-term goal to invest in maritime trade infrastructure.<sup>173</sup> For Saudi Arabia, access to the

**170** Roberta Gatti et al. *Altered Destinies: The Long-Term Effects of Rising Prices and Food Insecurity in the Middle East and North Africa* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group, 2023), <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/8e31828f-f062-4a40-a929-fabe7d1b17cd/content>.

**171** Danforth and Stein, *Turkey's New Foreign Policy* (see note 155), 55.

**172** "Turkey and UAE Sign a Series of Investment Agreements", *Invest in Turkey* 94 (2021), <https://www.invest.gov.tr/en/news/newsletters/lists/investnewsletter/investment-office-dec-2021-newsletter.pdf>.

**173** Guido Steinberg, *Regional Power United Arab Emirates: Abu Dhabi Is No Longer Saudi Arabia's Junior Partner*, SWP Research Paper 10/2020 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 8 July 2020), doi: 10.18449/2020RP10.

Turkish market and defence cooperation with Turkey is partially driven by its competition with the UAE.<sup>174</sup>

Turkey's relations with Arab Islamists are also far from perfect. Ankara's charm offensive since 2020, seeking to break nearly a decade of regional isolation, came at the cost of distancing itself from Arab Islamists. Yet, exigencies continue to help maintain relations. Options are limited, especially for those in exile in Turkey. Nevertheless, there is an awareness of the limitations to what Turkey can offer, particularly given the state of its economy and its narrow space for manoeuvre in relations with the region's powers and its Western allies.

### The war on Gaza: Turkey's regional influence waning?<sup>175</sup>

The most recent episode of violent conflict between Israel and Hamas in Gaza illustrates Turkey's fragile influence. The Israel-Palestine conflict is one of the crucial talking points of Turkish foreign policy, as already mentioned. Positioning itself as the defender of Palestinians has helped Turkey gain sympathy among Arab citizens. Yet after almost two decades of seeking to expand Turkey's role in the Middle East, Ankara has been a marginal actor in the latest escalation. Despite Ankara's initial mediation efforts, Qatar became the decisive actor in hostage negotiations and ceasefire agreements, and Egypt leads the talks over border openings.

Not only did Ankara's relations with Hamas appear to be of little value, but Ankara also lacked influence on Israel. In an expert survey recently conducted by ISPI, Turkey was listed among the countries that have played a "somewhat negative" role in "defusing tensions or bringing the two parties to the table".<sup>176</sup> The Turkish foreign minister's proposal in the early days

of the war for a guarantee system involving international forces and regional actors has received little attention. Turkey has largely aligned itself with Egypt and the Gulf states.<sup>177</sup>

Lacking decisive influence on the region's elites, Islamists and non-Islamists alike, and constrained by its economic woes, Turkey is arguably left with largely rhetorical instruments. Ankara has starkly criticised Israel's disproportionate and indiscriminate response to Hamas' gruesome attacks since the early days of the conflict – yet maintained economic relations with Israel throughout.<sup>178</sup> Turkey also criticised the European Union and the United States for their hypocritical stance in giving unequivocal support to Israel. Ankara's accusation of double standards has long been accompanied by criticism of the unfairness of the international system. On 9 December 2023, after the United States vetoed a UN resolution for an immediate ceasefire, Erdoğan reiterated his call to reform the UNSC, which, he said, "has turned into a protector of Israel".<sup>179</sup> In the same speech, Erdoğan also criticised the West for "turning a blind eye to cultural racism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia" and noted that "the terms 'terrorist' and 'terrorism' have been turned into a guise for attacking Islam, demeaning Muslims, and massacring the innocent".

### Recommendations

Turkey's rhetoric appears to have mixed appeal in the region. According to a survey conducted by the Arab Barometer in Tunisia before and after the Hamas attacks, views of Turkey remained largely positive and unchanged even though approval of Erdoğan's for-

<sup>174</sup> Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *Saudi Reasons for a Rapprochement with Turkey* (Washington, D.C.: Arab Center, 31 May 2022), <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/saudi-reasons-for-a-rapprochement-with-turkey/>.

<sup>175</sup> See also: Sinem Adar, "Turkey's Response to the War in Gaza", *War on the Rocks*, 1 November 2023, <https://warontherocks.com/2023/11/turkeys-response-to-the-war-in-gaza/>.

<sup>176</sup> *Rome MED Dialogues Expert Survey: The Gaza War and Its Impact* (Milan: Italian Institute for International Political Studies [ISPI], 8 February 2024), <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/rome-med-dialogues-expert-survey-the-gaza-war-and-its-impact-163149#g5>.

<sup>177</sup> Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye Directorate of Communications, *The Joint Arab Islamic Summit Resolutions*, 12 November 2023: <https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/english/haberler/detay/the-joint-arab-islamic-extraordinary-summit-resolutions>.

<sup>178</sup> Reuben Silverman, "Can Turkey Both Stand Up to Israel and Do Business with It?" *Turkey Analyst*, 12 January 2024, <https://www.turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/717-can-turkey-both-stand-up-to-israel-and-do-business-with-it?.html>.

<sup>179</sup> Zehra Nur Duz and Esra Tekin, "Turkish President Reiterates Call for UN Reform after US Veto Blocking Cease-fire in Gaza", *Anadolu Agency*, 9 December 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkiye/turkish-president-reiterates-call-for-un-reform-after-us-veto-blocking-cease-fire-in-gaza/3078222>.



eign policy declined from 54 per cent to 47 per cent after the October 7 attacks.<sup>180</sup> In an Arab Opinion Poll conducted in sixteen Arab countries between December 2023 and January 2024, 47 per cent of respondents evaluated the Turkish position positively, while 40 per cent evaluated it negatively.<sup>181</sup> In contrast, an overwhelming majority of respondents have a negative view of the positions of Germany (75 per cent), France (79 per cent), and the United States (94 per cent).<sup>182</sup>

Ankara seeks to instrumentalise the growing discontent with American and European policies in the region by systematically emphasising the international order's weaknesses and the perceived double standards of Western states. The same narrative also brands the Western states — as do Russia and China — as “the culprits of the erosion of a cooperative international order and a lack of effort to ensure more mutually beneficial outcomes.”<sup>183</sup> Disenchantment in the region with Western states predates the most recent violence in Gaza of course, and has been strong since the American invasion of Iraq.<sup>184</sup> Meanwhile, Arab citizens tend to view the EU's policies as motivated by self-interests, despite the EU being one of the most important donors in the region.<sup>185</sup> The EU's perceived lack of a strategic approach to the

region risks weakening its credibility.<sup>186</sup> Indeed, the member states' “divided and undecided”<sup>187</sup> response to the war on Gaza further accentuates this view.<sup>188</sup>

In order to reduce the reputational costs, it is inflicting on itself and prevent the battle of narratives undermining its already fragile soft power, the EU should communicate to the region's citizens and elites its consistent and non-selective commitment to international law.

It is clear that Brussels and Ankara are not always on the same page regarding their goals, interests and threat perceptions in the MENA region. Yet cooperation is inevitable given the various challenges, notably the transition to a green economy and migration. The EU should support Turkey's regional rapprochement efforts, especially when they align with the EU's own interests. Alongside North Africa, the shores of the Eastern Mediterranean, particularly Egypt and Turkey, display colossal potential to produce green hydrogen for export to Europe. The region might also serve as an additional natural gas supplier during the transitional period.<sup>189</sup> Turkey's rapprochement with Egypt (and the Gulf states) might contribute positively to the EU's green energy ambitions.

Migration is another central area of ongoing cooperation between Turkey and the EU. The EU should

**180** Michael Robbins et al., “How the Israel-Hamas War in Gaza Is Changing Arab Views”, *Foreign Affairs*, 14 December 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/middle-east/how-israel-hamas-war-gaza-changing-arab-views>.

**181** *Arab Public Opinion about Israel's War on Gaza* (Washington, D.C.: Arab Center, 8 February 2024), <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/arab-public-opinion-about-israels-war-on-gaza/>.

**182** *Ibid.*

**183** Tobias Bunde et al., “Lose-Lose? Munich Security Report 2024”, *Munich Security Conference*, February 2024, [https://securityconference.org/assets/01\\_Bilder\\_Inhalte/03\\_Medien/02\\_Publikationen/2024/MSR\\_2024/MunichSecurityReport2024\\_Lose-lose.pdf](https://securityconference.org/assets/01_Bilder_Inhalte/03_Medien/02_Publikationen/2024/MSR_2024/MunichSecurityReport2024_Lose-lose.pdf).

**184** On this: Louise Fawcett, “The Iraq War 20 Years On: Towards a New Regional Architecture”, *International Affairs* 99, no. 2 (2023): 567–85; Peter Ricketts, “After Iraq: The Great Unravelling”, *New Statesmen*, 15 March 2023, <https://www.newstatesman.com/international-politics/geopolitics/2023/03/after-iraq-great-unravelling-peter-ricketts>.

**185** Andrea Teti, Gennaro Gervasio and Pamela Abbott, “Perceptions of the EU: Activists and Public Opinion in the Middle East”, in *Routledge Handbook in EU-Middle East Relations*, ed. Dimitris Bouris, Daniela Huber and Michelle Pace (London: Routledge, 2022).

**186** On this: Rosemary Hollis, “No Friend of Democratization: Europe's Role in the Genesis of the ‘Arab Spring’”, *International Affairs* 88, no. 1 (2012): 81–94. Assem Dandashly, “EU Democracy Promotion and the Dominance of the Security-stability Nexus”, *Mediterranean Politics* 23, no.1 (2018): 62–82.

**187** Muriel Asseburg, *Shaping the Future of Gaza: How Europe Could Contribute to Sustainable Stabilisation*, SWP Comment 4/2024 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 9 February 2024, doi: 10.18449/2024C04).

**188** Martin Konecny, “The EU's Response to the Gaza War Is a Tale of Contradiction and Division”, *Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, (winter 2024), <https://www.thecairoreview.com/essays/the-eus-response-to-the-gaza-war-is-a-tale-of-contradiction-and-division/>. See also: Daniel Levy et al., *Prospects of Reinvigorating the Middle East Peace Process: A Possible Joint EU-US Undertaking?*, Directorate General for External Policies Policy Department, European Parliament, (January 2023), [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2022/702573/EXPO\\_STU\(2022\)702573\\_EN.pdf#15](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2022/702573/EXPO_STU(2022)702573_EN.pdf#15).

**189** Moritz Rau, Günter Seufert and Kirsten Westphal, *The Eastern Mediterranean as a Focus for the EU's Energy Transition: Deep-Rooted Enmities and New Opportunities for Cooperation between Greece, Turkey and Cyprus*, SWP Comment 8/2022 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 10 February 2022), doi: 10.18449/2022C08.

not turn a blind eye to the mounting anti-refugee sentiments within Turkish society. Such growing discontent increases the pressure on Ankara concerning the integration of primarily Syrian refugees. To bear fruit in the long run, any EU-Turkey migration cooperation needs to account for the negative mood. After all, neither the advancement of the rights of refugees in Turkey nor reliable security cooperation is possible without the support of the Turkish political class and society. To this end, the EU should signal its intention to proactively support local integration efforts in Turkey.<sup>190</sup>

## Abbreviations

AKP	Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (Justice and Development Party)
DEİK	Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu (Foreign Trade Forum)
ISPI	Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale (Italian Institute for International Political Studies, Milan)
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MoFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MÜSİAD	Müstakil Sanayici ve İş Adamları Derneği (Independent Industrialists' and Businessmen's Association)
ORSAM	Ortadoğu Araştırmaları Merkezi (Centre for Middle Eastern Studies, Ankara)
SETA	Siyaset, Ekonomi ve Toplum Araştırmaları Vakfı (Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research, Ankara)
TEPAV	Türkiye Ekonomi Politikaları Araştırma Vakfı (Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey)
TÜİK	Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu (Turkish Statistics Institute)
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNSC	United Nations Security Council

**190** Sinem Adar and Friedrich Püttmann, *Making EU-Turkey Cooperation on Migration Sustainable: A Greater Focus on the Turkish Host Society is Required*, SWP Comment 7/2022, (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 9 February 2022), doi: 10.18449/2022C07.

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