

# The AK Party and the Evolution of Turkish Political Islam's Foreign Policy

GALİP DALAY\* and DOV FRIEDMAN\*\*

**ABSTRACT** *Turkish foreign policy under the AK Party government has long drawn scrutiny from a wide range of analysts. The Syrian uprising has raised the intensity, variance, and rapid change of such analysis. Though the events in Syria have forced a recalibration of Turkish foreign policy, this change can be better understood with attention to the history of the AK Party's foreign policy. That history is rooted in a tradition of both continuity and change vis-à-vis the AK Party's political Islamist predecessors, the Refah and Fazilet parties. By understanding the values, motivations, failures, and lessons of the AK Party's political forebears, we may better understand the last decade of the AK Party's foreign policy—and its continuing evolution.*

**A**lmost two years ago, after the first wave of Arab uprisings, cheering throngs hailed Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as he toured the Middle East. Questions about a supposed “Turkish Model” saturated the English and Arabic media, and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu spoke about the uprisings as if they were the natural course of events in the region. As the Syrian uprising—which Turkey prominently supported—became increasingly bloody and intractable, domestic critics turned sharply, proclaiming the failure of the AK (Justice and Development) Party's foreign policy and indicting Davutoğlu's performance.<sup>1</sup> When the Syrian conflict spilled over into Turkey, and the AK Party government first threatened and then responded with artillery fire, some analysts wondered if Turkey would transition to a more muscular foreign policy.<sup>2</sup> At best, these efforts to build narratives out of Turkish foreign policy were overzealous. Still, they represent only the most recent attempts to define the “new” Turkish foreign policy.

These constant, instantaneous redefinitions of Turkish foreign policy under the AK Party's leadership reach flawed conclusions precisely because they eschew

\* Department of International Relations, METU

\*\* Foreign policy research assistant (2011-2012) at the SETA Foundation

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a longer historical view. The evolution of the AK Party's foreign policy—and the recalibration instigated by the Syrian conflict—can be better understood by exploring the foreign policy visions and practices of the Islamist parties that preceded the AK Party. The rise and fall of Necmettin Erbakan's Refah (Welfare) Party, and the internal contestations over the short-lived Fazilet (Virtue) Party, deeply affected the AK Party as it rose to power and defined its foreign policy approach.

The AK Party—and the Fazilet Party before it—emerged from the ashes of the Refah Party, and the current ruling party's leadership spent its formative years within the ranks of Erbakan's party. Because of the deep links among, and

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common political Islamist tradition of, the parties' respective founders, their foreign policy visions may be better understood when situated within a historical narrative. Such a narrative presents a history of neither total continuity nor complete change in the foreign policy views and practices of these parties; rather, it bears elements of both. However, this narrative does reveal how the evolution of the parties' foreign

policy visions across historical periods were motivated by different factors. The ways the AK Party understands Refah's failure and seeks to transcend it help frame the evolution of AK Party's foreign policy—particularly in its first term—and illuminate the reassessment necessitated by the Syrian uprising.

### **The Limits of Refah's Binary Vision and the Transition to Fazilet**

When the Refah Party rose to power in 1996, it espoused a foreign policy vision centered on a binary, identity-based worldview: the West and the Muslim world were in opposition.<sup>3</sup> Of course, given Turkey's steadfast Western alliance through the Cold War, to newly elected Prime Minister Erbakan Turkey's foreign policy had been improperly oriented for 50 years. Erbakan adopted a familiar Third Worldist critique of the international system, viewing it as dominated by—and serving the interests of—the Western world.

In response to the Western-dominated international system, Erbakan argued, the Islamic world should set up a parallel, and independent, structure. The Refah Party advocated Islamic analogs to the UN and UNESCO, an Islamic common market, and a unified Islamic currency—the dinar. Erbakan initiated a Developing-8—mirroring the then-Group of 8 developed economies—com-

prised of Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Bangladesh, Egypt, and Nigeria.<sup>4</sup> Given Turkey's historical leadership of the Islamic world, naturally Erbakan believed that Turkey should lead the establishment of this new transnational Islamic system.<sup>5</sup>

Refah's foreign policy was shaped in opposition to the West in two different ways. Erbakan attacked Western values and imperialism—in keeping with the party's Third Worldist perspective. He accused the West of under-developing the Muslim countries. Beyond these familiar critiques, Erbakan used Turkey's historic alignment with the US to set Refah apart. Other parties had done the US's bidding for decades he argued. These “imitator” regimes had been eager to serve the US and Europe.<sup>6</sup> Refah offered an alternative international alignment and, more resonantly, a remedy for the years of foreign policy constrained by Cold War alliances.<sup>7</sup> Refah described its foreign policy as possessing an independent character—*şahsiyetli dış politika*—that gives priority to the interests of Turkey and reflects its values. Erbakan's identity-driven vision of Turkey leading the Islamic world was in part an early effort to increase power and carve out maximum flexibility in foreign policy.

However, Refah was unable to implement its foreign policy vision, in part due to the nature of its coalition, and in part because Refah's ideas roused the suspicions of the still politically dominant military. The political climate in June 1996 diminished Erbakan's ability to carry out his foreign policy goals. From the military's perspective, both Islamic and Kurdish identities posed expanding challenges to the secular and Turkish nature of the republic. The armed activity of both the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) and the Hezbollah of Turkey contributed to the securitization of these identities and the increased power of the military in matters of security and foreign policy. The military perceived Erbakan's revisionist foreign policy as a threat to the secularism and Turkishness of the republic.

Thus although Refah attracted ardent support from a plurality of the electorate, its starkly different political ideology remained polarizing. Having won just over one fifth of the vote, Refah formed a coalition government with Tansu Çiller's Doğru Yol (True Path) Party. Under the power-sharing agreement, Çiller owned the foreign ministry portfolio and pursued policies more in line with Turkey's traditional Western-oriented foreign policy. The National Security Council was heavily dominated by voices opposed to Erbakan's foreign policy vision. Of the 10 members on the mixed military-civilian Council, Erbakan and Justice Minister Şevket Kazan were the only Islamists.<sup>8</sup>

Despite these structural challenges, Erbakan continued promoting his own foreign policy from the prime ministry. His first trip abroad included visits to Iran, Pakistan, Indonesia, and Malaysia. He visited Libya despite warnings

from his advisers that this would be misunderstood by opponents of political Islam. He remained critical of the European Union (EU) and unbending in his opposition to the accession process. Though Erbakan possessed limited direct power over foreign policy, his brash statements and actions alarmed the military and simply reinforced the military's narrative that the Refah-led government threatened the secular nature of the state.<sup>9</sup> Despite Erbakan's politically expedient concessions—including signing a major defense pact with Israel and implementing the military-mandated February 28<sup>th</sup> process—the Refah government was toppled in the 1997 postmodern coup and the party was disbanded.

With Erbakan temporarily banned from politics, Refah reconstituted itself as the Fazilet Party. Fazilet was a transitional party, serving as the ideological battleground between Erbakan's closest followers and Turkish political Islam's younger generation, whose leaders would go on to found the AK Party.

This younger generation grew disenchanted with Erbakan for political, personal, and ideological reasons. As the central figure within Turkish political

## **Fazilet's younger generation articulated a foreign policy vision refracted through the lens of domestic considerations**

Islam from the 1970s onward, Erbakan was a known commodity—and one that attracted the scrutiny, skepticism, and ire of the Kemalist establishment and military. The closure of Refah was the third time an Erbakan-led political party had been shuttered in the name of Kemalism.<sup>10</sup> Yet, in each new iteration of the party, Erbakan maintained great personal influence over the movement. Refah's closure and the rise of Fazilet brought new voices to the leadership conversation. With Erbakan temporarily banned from politics, former Refah MP Abdullah Gül challenged Recai Kutan, a close Erbakan ally, for party

leadership. Though he lost, the contest sharpened the ideological divergences of the new generation of Turkish political Islamists. The part of the new generation that would go on to found the AK Party understood that Refah had advanced a polarizing vision but ultimately failed to implement it in concrete policies.

Though both factions sought to temper the Refah vision, they did so for different reasons. These differing rationales for change were revealed in divergent attitudes toward the EU between the old and new guards. The disciples of Erbakan were chiefly concerned that the party should appear different in kind from Refah. Professing support for the EU served as a symbolic gesture to the secular state apparatus of Fazilet's independence from Refah. This calculus typified the party under Kutan's leadership: superficial modifications representing minimal change. The party would not last three years.

Fazilet's younger generation professed support for the EU as well, but for more sophisticated reasons. The Refah experience had altered younger MPs' understanding of a viable framework for Turkish political Islam. Former Refah MP Bülent Arınç—in a surprising break from political Islamist orthodoxy—said that religion would be relegated to the private sphere.<sup>11</sup> With the EU no longer viewed through the prism of religion as a “Christian club,” opposition dissipated and was replaced with savvy recognition of its value to Turkey as a liberalizing and democratizing force. The EU's values and accession requirements would diminish the military's influence over politics. Here, Fazilet's younger generation articulated a foreign policy vision refracted through the lens of domestic considerations. The strategy prefigured the ideas that would shape the AK Party's earliest foreign policy approach.<sup>12</sup>

## Foreign Policy Vision, Domestic Policy Considerations

The core of the AK Party formed out of the Fazilet Party in the summer of 2001, and in the approximately 15 months before its resounding 2002 electoral triumph, the AK Party shaped its vision around lessons learned from its Fazilet and Refah past.<sup>13</sup> The military had deposed one Islamist government and maintained its self-conception as the historical defenders of Kemalism and secularism. Refah's narrow Islamic conservatism produced an inchoate coalition with policy initiatives working at cross purposes.<sup>14</sup> To pursue Refah's Islamically oriented vision and to appeal narrowly to religious conservatives would yield coalition government, arouse the suspicions of the military, and jeopardize the AK Party's chances to lead the country as a single-party government. The AK Party responded by building a broader conservative coalition with support from liberals which emphasized a market economy and fighting injustice, corruption, and inequality. The AK Party's platform crucially promoted religious freedom, economic liberalization, and democratization—a shift that helped redefine Turkish political Islam within the confines of the secular state and enabled common cause with non-Islamist conservatives.

This domestically oriented approach extended to the AK Party's early foreign policy as well, manifesting itself in the importance attached to the EU accession process.<sup>15</sup> In light of the AK Party's political considerations, the EU stance was a winner. For the secular elite, membership signified completion of the Kemalist project of modernization and Westernization. For the Kurds, EU accession promised greater cultural and political rights. Religious groups supported the process hoping to broaden the scope of religious freedom in Turkey. Liberals believed the EU's influence would prod Turkey toward liberalizing reforms. The AK Party eagerly seized on a foreign policy issue with such broad-based support, earning a December 2004 decision to formally commence the EU accession process.





Egyptian President Mursi delivered speech at 4th Grand Regular Congress of AK Party.

AA / Mehmet Kaman

Beyond EU accession's attractiveness as a unifying issue in Turkish politics, the preconditions for negotiations allowed the AK Party to diminish the military's power and participation in politics under the guise of broadly popular reform. Recalling that on the National Security Council, Refah had been outnumbered and its policy preferences stymied, the AK Party leveraged EU accession preconditions to reposition the council domestically. The AK Party transitioned the council from being an architect of foreign and security policies into an advisory body. The EU policy marked a major shift for the AK Party from its Refah days. Just as important, it centered the AK Party's early foreign policy agenda on domestic considerations which strengthened the party's position at home.<sup>16</sup>

Turkey's emphasis in the early AK Party years on seeking a resolution to the Cyprus conflict may be viewed as an extension of the country's domestically oriented EU accession aspirations. Opening EU accession negotiations was contingent on the unanimous approval of member states, and without a

Cyprus overture, Turkey believed Greece might veto its application. The AK Party—over the objections of the Kemalist and nationalist parties—supported then-UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's peace plan, which envisaged a unification of the island through consent of both parts. Though the Turkish Cypriots approved the plan in April 2004, the Greek Cypriots rejected it. Cypriot reunification may have been stymied, but Turkey's EU accession plans were not. After the AK Party's support for a reasonable Cyprus resolution, the European Council summit approved the formal beginning of the Turkish accession process.<sup>17</sup>

The debate in Turkey over permitting U.S. troops to launch the Iraq War from Turkish soil also typifies the early AK Party years' domestically focused foreign policy. Though the party publicly supported the Bush administration's plan, it did so resignedly. Turkey was concerned with the possible effects of the U.S. invasion on the Iraqi Kurdish region—and by extension, on Turkey's domestic Kurdish issue. If Turkey did not facilitate the U.S. invasion, it could expect little say on the future of Iraq and its Kurds. The Kurds' support for the U.S. indicated they might have an increased role in the new Iraq, and an increased role would fuel and embolden Kurdish nationalism in Turkey. Turkey believed that siding with the U.S. might help contain some of these negative effects. However, the public overwhelmingly opposed the war and some AK Party members were unwilling to take part in the invasion of a neighboring Muslim country. The AK Party did not want to support the war, but its desire to maintain strong relations with the U.S. coupled with its concerns regarding the Kurdish issue narrowly surpassed its opposition. Still, the AK Party brought the issue before the Grand National Assembly. It received majority support, but not the qualified majority required for parliamentary approval; the AK Party swiftly reversed course and accepted the Assembly's decision. The discourse surrounding the unpredicted shift portrayed the AK Party as influenced by its deep-seated Islamic roots. However, the real reasons were much simpler. First, the AK Party aligned itself with the popular will as expressed by the legislature—the majority of which was made up of AK Party deputies. Equally important, Turkey showed a willingness to diverge from the U.S.—a development noted by France and Germany that alleviated suspicion Turkey might become the U.S.'s Trojan Horse in Europe.<sup>18</sup>



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The early years of the AK Party's foreign policy also saw the nascent stages of Turkey's widely scrutinized Zero Problems with Neighbors policy. Though the policy would expand and become more complex in later years, its beginnings were humble—and domestically oriented. The warming of relations with Syria and Iran, for example, began by focusing on increased trade, which Turkey accomplished with both countries several-fold. Only after accruing several years of leadership, gaining confidence in its domestic stability, and seeing evidence of Turkey's domestic growth did the AK Party begin leveraging its multifarious relationships toward more active foreign policy ends.

### Mediation, Facilitation, and the Rise of Turkey Internationally

By 2005, the AK Party had begun to outline a more ambitious foreign policy vision—and to devise Turkey's role in its realization. In a few short years, government policies had helped stabilize both the economy and the domestic political environment while earning a date for EU accession talks. These domestic successes enabled the AK Party to think about foreign policy more expansively. The party's foreign policy increasingly came to express the ideas of Davutoğlu, the “intellectual architect” of Turkey's foreign policy.<sup>19</sup> Davutoğlu's seminal work *Stratejik Derinlik (Strategic Depth)* emphasizes Turkey's historical legacy and geopolitical uniqueness as possible foundations for Turkey's ascent to “central power” status through a multidimensional foreign policy.<sup>20</sup> In his conception, Turkey's regional status would serve as one basis for increased international influence. Leveraging Turkey's geopolitical advantages, Davutoğlu began pursuing his Zero Problems with Neighbors strategy. The phrase gained widespread popularity, expanding Davutoğlu's international profile and earning him plaudits for reimagining Turkey's foreign relations.

However, Zero Problems was the precondition of a more extensive policy approach. By defusing regional tension, enabling broader regional engagement, and forging economic interdependence, the AK Party facilitated Turkey's ascent to a new international role—one focused on mediation and facilitation<sup>21</sup> in international affairs and enhanced status in regional and international organizations.

The AK Party's attitudes toward Israel and the Palestinians presented one example of this approach. The party criticized both Israeli policies in the territories and Palestinian suicide bombings. Erdoğan met then-Prime Minister Ariel Sharon on a state visit to Israel in 2005. After the 2006 Gaza elections, Erdoğan drew criticism from the U.S. and Israel for hosting Hamas's Khaled Mashaal. Erdoğan argued that Hamas won the election, and ostracizing the group would counteract moderating efforts and increase Iranian influence over Hamas. In 2007, Israeli President Shimon Peres and Palestinian Authority (PA) President



Mahmoud Abbas met in Ankara to discuss a Turkish-sponsored West Bank industrial park. In advance of revived peace talks in Annapolis, both addressed the Grand National Assembly.<sup>22</sup> Here was Turkey insinuating itself into an international conflict by leveraging regional relationships and an economic development initiative to bridge differences among diverse actors.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert also visited Ankara in 2007, marking the start of indirect talks with Syria. Olmert met Erdoğan, and they agreed Turkey would mediate within the Madrid Conference framework. In May 2008, Jerusalem, Damascus, and Ankara released simultaneous statements that the countries had commenced peace talks. The four rounds of talks ended abruptly when Israel launched Operation Cast Lead in Gaza. Erdoğan criticized the Israeli offensive—perhaps in part because it foiled progress with Syria—and some Israelis raised the first doubts about Erdoğan's viability as an impartial mediator. Yet, Turkey had been able to facilitate a brief period of optimism and momentarily break the longstanding hostility between Syria and Israel.

In 2009, relations between Serbia and Bosnia—historically difficult, especially since the wars of the 1990s—worsened considerably. Where other efforts to mediate failed, Davutoğlu brokered a deal in which the Serbian parliament adopted the Declaration of Srebrenica—thereby officially apologizing for the Srebrenica Massacre—and Bosnia named an ambassador to Serbia.<sup>23</sup>

The following year, Turkey and Brazil collaborated on negotiations with Iran over its contentious nuclear program.<sup>24</sup> In May 2010, the countries announced that Iran had agreed to relinquish 1,200 kilograms of low-enriched uranium in return for fuel for its research reactor. Erdoğan hailed the agreement as obviating the need for further sanctions.<sup>25</sup> Though U.S. and EU officials criticized the deal as insufficiently tough and proceeded with new sanctions, Turkey demonstrated again a foreign policy preference for mediating intractable international conflicts.

The AK Party capitalized on its newfound status by pursuing greater status and formal leadership in regional and international organizations. In 2005, Turkey's Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu became secretary-general of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. With Spain, Turkey co-chaired the Alliance of Civilizations initiative in the UN, and Istanbul hosted the initiative's second forum in 2009. In 2010, AK Party founding member and Turkish MP Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu

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served as president of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. Finally—and most significantly—Turkey served as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council during the 2009-2010 term. Immediately upon rotating off the Security Council, Turkey submitted another bid to serve on the Council during the 2015-2016 term.

Thus, the AK Party leveraged regional mediation and facilitation to advance its international station—thereby gaining prominence and influence within the international system. The AK Party may have abandoned Refah's international vision focused exclusively on leadership in the Islamic world; however, the AK Party did not forsake Refah's belief that flexibility and a unique international role could engender an increase in Turkey's power internationally. Refah saw an exclusionary world order and sought to build a parallel structure for the apparently disenfranchised—one at which Turkey would stand at the head, in Erdogan's words, as the "leader country."<sup>26</sup> The AK Party saw an international system that lacked mechanisms to bridge between powers and exploited its unique geopolitics—its status as Davutoğlu's "central power"—to facilitate dialogue and international mediation.

## The Syrian Uprising: Challenges to Turkey's Foreign Policy and Recalibration

International prominence and leadership opportunities expanded commensurately with Turkey's rise as a facilitating power in the international sphere. The nascent Arab uprisings of late 2010 and early 2011 were thus seen by the AK Party as an opportunity to further expand Turkey's role. Erdogan and

Davutoğlu championed the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions from their early stages. The throngs that cheered Erdogan in Egypt were acknowledging his support for their revolutionary movement.

Erdogan and Davutoğlu framed their support for the uprisings in language tinged with liberalism.

Davutoğlu situated the revolutions' legitimacy in the context of citizens' voice in their representation, human dignity, and human rights. In a long interview with the *Cairo Review*, Davutoğlu urged Egypt to write an inclusive constitution with liberal and minority protections.<sup>27</sup> Turkey's efforts to frame the revolution in democratic terms countervailed Iran's eagerness to proclaim an Islamic awakening.<sup>28</sup> Even regarding Libya—where Turkey's support for revolution was far less enthusiastic due to economic considerations and the safety

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of Turkish nationals in Libya—Turkey eventually gravitated toward an internationalist discourse and supported NATO actions against the Qaddafi regime.

The contrast between the respective lessons Turkey and Iran drew from the uprisings helps illuminate the evolution from the Refah Party to the AK Party. Refah's Islamist identity-based vision stood athwart the existing international system. That vantage point—although it stemmed from a different era and set of interests—bears remarkable similarities to Iran's narrative that the Arab uprisings are an Islamic awakening. In contrast, the AK Party's language and policies have been deeply rooted in the existing international system. To whatever extent the AK Party saw the rise of popularly elected, Islam-oriented governments as an opportunity for closer relations and deeper influence, the party sought Turkish leadership from within the international sphere.

Thus, the first year of the Arab uprisings marked a third phase in AK Party foreign policy. Turkey renewed its focus on the Middle East, seemingly positioning itself as a leading regional champion of liberal/democratic values in the international sphere.<sup>29</sup> The government's discussion of the uprisings focused on the dignity and will of the citizens, celebrating their potential and stressing the legitimacy derived from popular consent. The AK Party had forged multifaceted regional relationships and deepened relations with both world powers and international institutions. The uprisings seemed to present an opportunity for Turkey to leverage its unique international position.

Davutoğlu downplayed the idea of overt Turkish leadership in his response to the so-called Turkish Model. After the uprisings toppled dictators, newly free regional neighbors looked to Turkey as a Muslim democracy with a strong economy and an international role. Whenever Davutoğlu was asked about Turkey's role as a model, the Foreign Minister demurred, claiming he preferred the term "inspiration." While the AK Party positioned Turkey where it could seek an even greater role in international affairs, it downplayed praise that might foster resentment of its subtle efforts to expand its international influence through regional leadership.

Yet the eruption of the Syrian conflict plainly exposed the limits of Turkey's new approach. Once Turkey realized that Assad was impervious to calls for reform, Erdoğan turned harshly on his former friend. The AK Party government quickly became one of Syria's most strident critics, and its response to the Assad regime's brutality fit with its increasing emphasis on internationalist language and leadership.

After Russia's obstructionism at the UN, Turkey moved swiftly to the vanguard of the movement seeking alternative international approaches, hosting the second meeting of the Friends of Syria in Istanbul. Like many international

powers, Turkey had already imposed diplomatic and economic sanctions on the Syrian regime. In March 2012, Turkey openly considered whether it might establish a buffer zone inside Syria.<sup>30</sup> When Syrian forces shot across the border, Turkey threatened to invoke Article V of the NATO Charter. Yet, the disparity between Turkey's words and actions made its rhetoric seem blustery and its policies seem feckless. Turkey spoke of interventionist measures it would not—and could not—carry out alone and threatened to demand military support from its NATO allies.

Meanwhile, the regional ties that had enabled Turkey's previous mediation- and facilitation-centered foreign policy were damaged.<sup>31</sup> Turkey's chosen approach damaged relations with Syria, Iran, Iraq, and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Turkey lost diversity and depth in its regional relationships—and the capacity to employ facilitation and mediation in the Middle East—without demonstrating a capacity to effect change in Syria.<sup>32</sup> The Syrian crisis simply exposed the limits of Turkey's latest foreign policy evolution.

## **Rebuilding International Stature and the Future of AK Party Foreign Policy**

Though Turkey overextended itself, by the summer of 2012, there were indications the AK Party government had emerged with a clearer understanding of its limits. Erdoğan's response to Syrian provocations—the downed Turkish jet and artillery fire into Turkish territory—suggests a recalibration of the government's foreign policy strategy. Turkey invoked Article IV of the NATO charter, which merely calls for consultations within the alliance. To the stray artillery fire that killed Turkish civilians, Turkey retaliated in direct proportion with artillery fire of its own. Though Turkey has continued to use language that evokes liberal themes, it has tempered its approach. The full-throated lead advocate for intervention is not a role to which Turkey is well suited.

Yet, the relations strained by regional upheaval may be, in the intermediate term, beyond repair. Turkey could struggle to reclaim its position as international mediator and facilitator in the Middle East. Relations with Iran have worsened over the Syrian crisis. Turkey has strengthened ties with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and has sheltered Tariq al-Hashimi, souring relations with Nouri al-Maliki's Baghdad government. In Egypt, President Mohamed Morsi may emerge as an influential regional leader himself—one who seeks to reclaim Egypt's historic role in the Middle East. Turkey faces both a less friendly regional environment and a stiffer challenge as regional facilitator—as Morsi demonstrated in hammering out the Gaza ceasefire between Israel and Hamas.

Despite these challenges, Turkey's regional outlook is not nearly as bleak as it seems. Turkey has shown interest in supporting internal democratic transitions in the newest democracies in North Africa and the Middle East. The AK Party government has worked to establish close relations with the fledgling governments in Tunisia and Libya. Regarding damaged relations with Syria, Davutoğlu consistently replies that Turkey has strained its relations with Damascus to preserve its relations with Syria in the long term. Envisioning an important role for Turkey in a post-Assad Syria requires little imagination.

Meanwhile, Turkey has not ceased its mediation- and facilitation-centered foreign policy; its approach continues unabated outside the Middle East.<sup>33</sup> Since 2007, Turkey has facilitated between Afghanistan and Pakistan to find solutions to bilateral problems. Despite modest progress, dialogue between the sides is ongoing.<sup>34</sup> Turkey and Finland jointly spearhead the UN Friends of Mediation initiative, which supported the adoption of two resolutions on mediation in the 2011 and 2012 General Assembly meetings.<sup>35</sup> Turkey has also sought a role in finding a solution to the violence committed by Buddhist groups against Arakan Muslims in Burma, and Turkey lent support to the road map agreement between the Philippines government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front to end their four-decade long conflict.<sup>36</sup>

Turkey's increasing attentiveness outside the Middle East extends to Africa as well. This past January, Prime Minister Erdoğan visited Gabon, Niger, and Senegal and stated publicly Turkey's goal of increasing trade with Africa nearly five-fold, to \$50 billion. Turkey continues to pursue a free trade agreement with the East African Community, and the African Development Bank counts Turkey among its top five emerging partners. In Somalia, Turkey was among the first to deploy development and aid workers after the fall of al-Shabab in 2011. Undoubtedly, Turkey remembers well that it attained its 2009-2010 UN Security Council seat on the strength of support from 51 of the 53 African member states.<sup>37</sup>

The picture looks familiar. Turkey once before intensified economic cooperation as a prelude to broader, deeper foreign relations. The tactic became known popularly as Zero Problems with Neighbors. In the aftermath of the Syrian conflict, is Turkey seeking new outlets for its foreign policy? Will Turkey again translate economic ties into multifaceted foreign relations—this time outside its regional environment? Might those budding relations pose opportunities for Turkey to deploy its facilitation and mediation acumen? Prognostication



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would be hasty. But Turkey's regional setbacks have scarcely diminished its active foreign policy.

## Conclusion

To evaluate the history of AK Party's foreign policy is to appreciate Turkey's astounding international rise over the course of the party's tenure. The Refah Party—in keeping with Necmettin Erbakan's binary worldview—attempted to create an alternative international system, in which Turkey would serve as the “leader country” of the Muslim world. Fazilet served as an ideological battleground between the political Islamist forces who sought to put a new gloss on Refah's old vision and those seeking a new role for Turkey internationally—one which embraced the idea of EU membership and closer relations with the West. The latter forces lost the internal battle but regrouped, forming the AK Party and sweeping into power in 2002.

The AK Party began its leadership seared by the experience of its Refah Party predecessors and determined to avoid that party's mistakes. The AK Party's

early foreign policy agenda deftly focused on initiatives that advanced both domestic and foreign policy goals. With domestic threats from the Kemalist-military establishment diminished, the AK Party expanded its foreign policy incrementally at first, but with new confidence. By the latter half of AK Party's second term in power, mediation and facilitation became centerpieces of Turkish foreign policy. The zeal for these efforts only increased as Turkey's international stature rose.

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The Syrian conflict has tested this foreign policy approach.<sup>38</sup> Turkey first tried to leverage its relationship with Assad to effect change and later briefly attempted a more strident approach. Turkey's policies vis-à-vis Syria were ineffective, and its regional relations were damaged. Yet, both the scope and the

severity of the damage have been overstated, and Turkey continues working to strengthen its ties in the Middle East. Meanwhile, Turkey has employed facilitation and mediation in a wider array of places, from Afghanistan to Burma and the Philippines.

It is difficult to escape the sense that the AK Party's still-evolving, ceaselessly active foreign policy is motivated by grander ambitions. Turkey has retrenched from its brief foreign policy expansion, broadened its international influence

once again by starting with economic relations, and refocused its efforts on mediation and facilitation. If the post-World War II international order that has reigned for nearly 70 years is due for revision, the AK Party wants Turkey primed to ascend into the upper echelon of international powers. Though this aim initially remained unspoken as Turkey has faced increased pressure internationally, its interests have become more urgent—and transparent. At the Istanbul World Forum in October 2012, Erdoğan critiqued the international system for its imbalance and promoted a system in which every member would have veto power. Veteran analysts of the Prime Minister recognize that he does not truly advocate a retrograde, League of Nations-style system.<sup>39</sup> Erdoğan's hyperbole reflects a more general critique of the international system and may represent frustration or agitation regarding Turkey's status.

Turkey's political Islamist tradition has envisioned a great role for the country internationally. Yet, its proponents have employed different means and methods at different historical moments in trying to reach this goal. Refah's binary worldview sought "leader country" status through the establishment of a parallel Islamic international system. In Davutoğlu's foreign policy vision, Turkey should stand as a "central power" in the world. Though the aspirations are similar, the AK Party's implementation has been starkly different—and vastly more successful. Turkey's dogged pursuit of a foreign policy that helps mediate and facilitate between countries may thus be seen as the AK Party striving to achieve "central power" status. Despite regional setbacks in the Syrian crisis, securing a place among any expansion of the great powers still animates AK Party foreign policy. Maintaining Turkey's indispensable role as a facilitating power constitutes, arguably, the AK Party's best opportunity to advance this key aspiration. Nearly two decades after Refah articulated a markedly different vision of how Turkey could become a leading power, the AK Party pursues a foreign policy its predecessors would fail to recognize or support. However the AK Party does so for goals—facilitation among great and small powers and expanding Turkey's international stature—its forebears might both understand and respect. ■

## Endnotes

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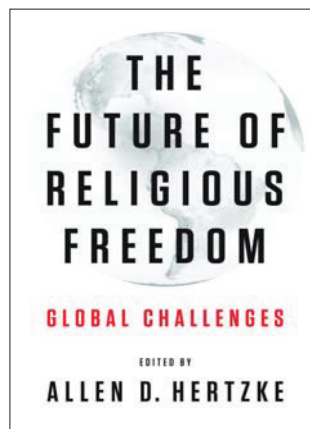
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