



## COMMENTARIES

**The Evolutionary Feature of Turkey's Soft Power in the Middle East, 2011-2020**

**ALI OMIDI**

**The Turkey-Africa Bromance: Key Drivers, Agency, and Prospects**

**ABDINOR DAHIR**

**How Algeria-Turkey Ambitious Strategic Rapprochement Will Affect France's Sahel Policy?**

**ABDENNOUR TOUMI**

**The Muslim Brotherhood Faultline in Saudi-Qatari Relations: Domestic Divisions and Regional Rivalry**

**MUSTAFA MENSRAWY and SIMON MABON**

**Unveiling the Unseen: The Role of the Gulf over the Sudanese Transition Period**

**MEHMET RAKİPOĞLU**

# The Evolutionary Feature of Turkey's Soft Power in the Middle East, 2011-2020

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**ABSTRACT** *Today, soft power plays an important role in advancing states' foreign policy goals. As one of the world's emerging economic powers, Turkey pays special attention to the development and maintenance of its soft power. This commentary uses a descriptive-analysis approach to address the components of Turkey's soft power in the Middle East North Africa (MENA) region in the years 2011-2020, the second decade of AK Party governance. Turkey's soft power during this time period has mainly targeted and become influential in the Muslim-majority countries of the Middle East and Asia. Although certain events, such as the 2016 failed coup, the Gezi Park protests, the Syrian crisis, fluctuations in the value of the Turkish lira, etc., have somewhat tarnished the country's image, various indicators of Turkey's soft power demonstrate that it has remained strong in the MENA region during the time span of the present research.*

**Keywords:** Turkey, Soft Power, MENA, AK Party

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## Introduction

**T**urkey has set a number of historic targets for the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of the modern Turkish Republic, which will be celebrated in 2023; these include being among the top 15 economies of the world, raising gross domestic product (GDP) to \$1,080 billion, rising per capita income to \$12,484, increasing exports to \$226.6 billion, reducing the unemployment rate to 9.9 percent and holding inflation to consistently low, single-digit figures.<sup>1</sup> Politically, Ankara envisages achieving the highest levels of intellectual and value-oriented democracy, a competitive and knowledge-oriented economy, a progressive and innovative foreign policy, and cultural rejuvenation in line with Turkey's ancient history, fulfilling its role as a connection point between the East and West and further integrating with the international community.<sup>2</sup> These goals are ambitious, but if realized, they would make Turkey the first economic power after Indonesia among the predominantly Muslim-majority countries. Turkey is well aware that in order to realize its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary goals, it should first and foremost endeavor to build up its soft power; since countries need both soft and hard power to exert political influence and engage successfully in economic markets.

The present commentary investigates the evolution of Turkey's soft power during the reign of the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) and argues that although Turkey's soft power has been subject to fluctua-

tion in 2002-2020 period, it has generally been maintained in terms of both audience and pace. Therefore, this article challenges the notion of a decline in Turkey's soft power, which has been touted in some academic papers.<sup>3</sup> This text is a commentary; as such, it reflects the author's analysis of the targeted people's perceptions about Turkey's soft power, with reference to quantifiable measurements.

Soft power refers to a country's ability to influence others with the aim of achieving desired goals through appeal and attraction rather than compulsion and coercion. If we translate 'power' as the ability to produce desired outcomes by influencing others' behavior, soft power is the ability to get 'others to want the outcomes that you want.'<sup>4</sup> The major sources of a country's soft power include culture, history, attractions, and progressive political values, successful foreign and domestic policies, and effective public diplomacy. The sources of hard power can generate soft power, and vice versa as well. In other words, the material and tangible indices of hard power, including a potent armed force and strong economic capability, can be sources of soft power by producing attraction for others, depending on the circumstances and the mode of application.<sup>5</sup>

As a response to the EU's reluctance to take Turkey in as a full member, President Erdoğan once stated that if the EU did not open the way, Turkey would convert the Copenhagen criteria to Ankara criteria and would continue its reforms: "Turkey's aim

is full membership in the EU. We are not ready to accept anything else.”<sup>6</sup> Ankara’s novel policy provided Turkey with a remarkable position in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The public of many Muslim-majority countries consider Turkey a successful example among Muslim countries, due to its blending of liberalism, secularism, economic and political development, and the preservation of local cultural values. Indeed, while examining Turkey’s soft power, one should not confuse the country’s popularity among the publics of Muslim countries with its unpopularity among some of their governments. Moreover, Turkey’s less popularity among western governments and their people should also be taken separately.

As mentioned above, Turkish evolutionary soft power can be measured according to its main indicators such as political-economic accomplishments, cultural features, educational progress, media outreach, religious tolerance, etc.

### **Ingredients of Turkey’s Soft Power**

In 2002, a new understanding of foreign policy emerged in the AK Party, and it adopted a new approach aligned with the writings and thoughts of Ahmet Davutoğlu. The main principle behind the new approach, ‘zero problems with neighbors,’ included creating a developed country at the heart of the Middle East and the strategic depth approach. It was on this basis that Turkey altered its position

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on issues relating to Armenia, Syria, Iraq’s Kurds, and Northern Cyprus. The AK Party’s manifesto emphasized the necessity of a multilateral foreign policy, taking into account the nation’s historical past, geographical and cultural depth, and strategic position. The main goal of the AK Party’s foreign policy at this time was to extract Turkey from its passive and defensive stance and convert it into a key player with a local, regional, and even global perspective.<sup>7</sup>

Economic development is pivotal to a state’s soft power image. While many economies failed to recuperate from the global financial recession of 2008, Turkey’s economy recorded a growth of 8.5 percent and 11.2 percent in 2010 and 2011, respectively. Between 2011 and 2018, Turkey’s economic growth did not drop below 3.3 percent. Even in 2013 and 2017, it experienced a growth of 8.5 percent and 7.5 percent consecutively.<sup>8</sup> It was only in 2019 and 2020 that Turkey’s economic growth subsided, like that



Aiming to enter the top 3 most watched news channels in the Arab world, TRT Arabic met the audience, Istanbul, Turkey on January 7, 2019.  
ISLAM YAKUT / AA

of the rest of the world, owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, but it never scaled down to the zero or negative point. All in all, Turkey's rating in the *Soft Power 30 Index* rose from 42.55 in 2015 to 49.70 in 2019.<sup>9</sup> This signals that although Turkey's soft power underwent occasional ups and downs after 2012, it nonetheless developed to a remarkable degree.

Throughout these same years, 3,702 foreign firms were active in Turkey, engaged in producing consumer goods and supplying services to the Turkish populace.<sup>10</sup> Rapid growth, a single-digit inflation rate by 2017, political stability, and deeper integration within the international economy underpinned Turkey's standing as Europe's 7<sup>th</sup> largest economy with an export value of more than \$150 billion and made the Turkish model attractive for the Middle East

in terms of economic perspectives. Since the economic growth of the EU contracted following the 2008 global financial recession, Turkey's contrasting economic success catalyzed its increased economic relationship with the Arab world and the Middle East, and Turkey signed several economic Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) with regional and other countries, including agreements on free trade zones, in order to gain a greater economic foothold in the Middle East.<sup>11</sup>

Although Turkey's share of the production of industrial goods in 2018 accounted for merely 1 percent of global output and occupied the world's 16<sup>th</sup> place, the quality of Turkish goods, particularly clothing brands, is cherished internationally. Turkey is the 6<sup>th</sup> major manufacturer of cotton products globally. The quality of Turk-

ish clothes is widely admired, to the extent that Turkey is the third major exporter of clothes to Europe,<sup>12</sup> and Turkish product and service brands compete with major European manufacturers.<sup>13</sup> Aside from the revenues this production earns for Turkey, the country's reputation for quality has contributed to the expansion of its soft power both globally and in the Middle East. It is worth noting that MENA was the second export target of Turkey textiles and clothing in 2019 with more than \$5 billion revenues.<sup>14</sup>

Turkey has undertaken different strategies in its nation branding. Nation branding is defined as "the application of corporate marketing concepts and techniques to countries in the interest of enhancing their reputation in international relations."<sup>15</sup> According to the *Nation Brands 2021 Ranking 2021*, Turkey ranked 32<sup>nd</sup> in the nation branding ranking. Although its rank has dropped significantly since 2015, it remains a regional power with the potential to increase its nation branding due to its growing economy, cultural significance, and political relevance.<sup>16</sup>

A panoply of cultural elements, such as a nation's historical and cultural capacities, its scientific, natural, lingual, and religious assets, as well as its popular icons and luminaries, can leave an indirect impact on audiences and attract the public. Accordingly, the blossoming of Turkey's tourism industry has contributed positively to the augmentation of its soft power. The introduction of visa waiver programs and the political stability the

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country enjoyed prior to 2015 resulted in Turkey becoming the primary destination for countless Middle East tourists. Although Beirut had been regarded as the capital of tourism for the Arab people for several decades,<sup>17</sup> İstanbul has emerged as the top travel destination favored by the Arab people in the past couple of decades. According to the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the number of tourists coming from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries was 44,222 in 2002, while in 2017, the number reached 1,089,614.<sup>18</sup> The development of tourism is one of the paths to raising awareness about a country; if handled appropriately, it leads to the expansion of soft power and revenues. In 2019, more than 45 million foreign travelers visited Turkey. With a glance at the 2002 figures, when the number of foreign visitors to Turkey totaled just 10 million, we can see that the rate of foreign nationals traveling to Turkey for tourism has steadily risen, except for the years 2016, 2017, and 2020, when it declined due to terrorism-related concerns and the COVID-19.<sup>19</sup> In support of the tourism sector, Tur-

***Global Humanitarian Assistance Report, Turkey was ranked as the 'most generous country' in 2020 in terms of official humanitarian assistance to its national income with almost 1 percentage of its gross national income***

key has invested in offering tuition in some 35 tourism-related disciplines at academic institutions and has trained and recruited a large number of skilled tourism professionals through its support at the university level.

The attractiveness of a country is a potential competence, but today, countries are working to deploy public diplomacy measures and introduce these attractions to a broader audience. Public diplomacy encompasses various aspects, but two dimensions are particularly important to a country's soft power: the first dimension is the day-to-day communication by which the domestic and foreign policies of a country are relayed to global audiences, resulting in increased awareness of that country. The second facet is the development of sustainable relations with the people of the target country. This is accomplished by awarding academic scholarships, promoting cultural and institutional exchanges, hosting conferences, and holding cultural events.

By establishing the Presidential Directorate of Communications, the Turkish government punctually communicates political developments relating to Turkey and projects a positive image of Turkey to the global public. Drawing inspiration from western public diplomacy institutions, Turkey launched the powerful Yunus Emre Institute in 2007. The Institute is the equivalent of American cultural centers, the British Council, the *Institut Français*, and the *Goethe Institut*, and presently maintains 58 offices in different countries around the world. These centers sponsor Turkish language education, cooperation with the academic institutions of different countries, and a university-level Turkology discipline. These cultural centers carry out extensive activities to promote Turkish culture and arts and take part in various national and international projects representing Turkey.

The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) is responsible for Turkey's official development assistance to developing countries, with a particular focus on Turkic countries and communities. TİKA was first established after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1992 to cement Turkey's influence in the Balkans, Caucasus, and Central Asia. Capitalizing on loans and financial assistance to further its work in the realms of economy, trade, social activities, culture, and education, this agency set its sights on expanding influence in the regional countries. Continuing its policies of affirming its soft power, Turkey reorganized TİKA in 2011.

The organization and structure of the agency, which had previously been oriented toward Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Balkans, and Eastern Europe, shifted focus to the MENA region. Presently, TİKA maintains offices in 60 countries and is active in more than 150 countries. Between 1992 and 2002, TİKA initiated and ran 2,000 projects, while between 2002 and 2016, the figure exceeded 11,000 – a 99 percent increase. Moreover, the developmental contributions of the agency soared from 85 million in 2002 to around \$8 billion in 2017 and 2018.<sup>20</sup>

TİKA functions as a prestigious institution facilitating Turkey's foreign aid and humanitarian diplomacy efforts on the global stage, strengthening Turkey's international credibility, and contributing to the country's image as a global player assisting others.<sup>21</sup> According to the *Global Humanitarian Assistance Report*, Turkey was ranked as the 'most generous country' in 2020 in terms of official humanitarian assistance to its national income with almost 1 percentage of its gross national income.<sup>22</sup> Most of this aid goes to war-torn countries such as Yemen, Gaza, Syria, and Iraq.

The Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB) established on April 6, 2010, has the task to coordinate the activities for Turks living abroad, related (sister) communities and Türkiye Scholarship Program, and develop the services and activities carried out in these fields. As of 2019, the institute had conducted 228 software-oriented and

public diplomacy initiatives. Since 2012, as one of Turkey's largest public diplomacy efforts, it has awarded the Turkey Scholarships, considered to be the counterpart of the U.S. Fulbright Scholarships, to international students to study in Turkey. Demand for the Turkey Scholarships surged rapidly since 2003, and in 2021 alone, more than 165,000 applications from 178 countries were received and nearly 15,000 international students are currently studying in Turkey as part of the Türkiye Scholarships program.<sup>23</sup> At present (2021), around 170,000 foreign students study in Turkey, which ranks 10<sup>th</sup> globally in the number of foreign students. Turkey aims to host 200,000 international students by 2023.<sup>24</sup> The majority of foreign *alumni* relay a positive image of Turkey to the people of their respective countries, significantly contributing to the country's soft power abroad.

Utilizing the media to showcase Turkey's attractiveness and impart a positive impression of the country is of utmost importance. Through its media, Turkey has endeavored to project an image of itself as the cradle of different civilizations with multicultural Ottoman heritage and a democratic, Muslim identity to the international community, presenting Turkey as a role model for both the West and the Muslim world. The *Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT)* and the *Anadolu Agency (AA)* were both reconstructed in the mid-2000s in keeping with their role as an essential means of conducting Turkey's public diplomacy and soft

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power in the sphere of international media; these agencies aim to exhibit Turkey's advancements and boost its popularity in different world regions, particularly the Middle East. As part of this reconstruction, the first *TRT* broadcast in the Arabic language was launched in 2010. Sefer Turan, the coordinator of the broadcast, says the objective of *TRT Arabi* is "to make programs in Arab countries, translate them and air them on other *TRT* channels broadcasting in Turkish so we can explain the Arab world to our Turkish-speaking viewers properly and directly."<sup>25</sup> Alongside children's programming and music channels, *TRT Arabi* now broadcasts news and other programs to Arab audiences across the Middle East on a round-the-clock basis.

Turkey's extensive investment in the production and airing of TV series and soap operas has generated a great deal of interest worldwide, particularly among the people of the Middle East; these shows expand Turkey's

soft power in the region by artfully combining beauty, regional dialects, Arabic names and viewers' desire for conspiracy theories. TV sets in Arab and other Muslim households are dominated by nostalgic Turkish series; Turkey currently ranks second after the U.S. in global TV series exports.<sup>26</sup> The exponential growth in the popularity of Turkish shows can be construed as the expansion of Turkey's soft power in the Middle East. Turkish soap operas in particular depict Turkey as a role model for its neighboring Muslim countries; the series *Gümüş* (Silver), known in the Arab world as *Noor*, attracted some 85 million viewers between 2005-2007.<sup>27</sup> Another popular series titled *Fatmagül* had 70 million viewers in the Middle East. The same applies to other works, such as the Full Moon, İstanbul Bride, Mother, and Broken Pieces.<sup>28</sup> This is also true for soap operas such as *Resurrection: Ertuğrul*. By August 2020, *Ertuğrul* has surpassed 1.5 billion views on *YouTube* alone.<sup>29</sup> According to a report by the Turkish Ministry of Trade, Turkey's revenues from exporting TV series amounted to \$150 million in 2013, surpassed \$350 million in 2017, and exceeded \$500 million in 2018.<sup>30</sup>

The expansion of Turkey's cinema and filmmaking industries, in addition to creating jobs domestically, has prompted the growth of exports of other Turkish consumer goods and increased the number of foreign visitors to Turkey. It is said that the popularity of these TV series in Latin America accounts for a 46 percent increase in the arrival of nationals from



tine. Sami Hamdi, an Arab political analyst, maintains that citizens of MENA look favorably on Ankara because “Turkey is seen as an ‘enabler,’ challenging the traditional powers in the region, presenting a credible alternative to the current systems of governance and demonstrating the capabilities of asserting these trends and imposing them into mainstream politics in the region.”<sup>34</sup>

### Regional Events Affecting Turkey’s Soft Power

Since 2011, a few political developments have affected Turkey’s soft power in the Middle East. The events of the Arab Spring increased Turkey’s popularity in the Middle East because Turkey sided with the people of the region. However, the bitter developments that ensued, including the military coup in Egypt and civil wars in Yemen, Libya, and Syria put Turkey at a crossroads. During the initial stages of the Arab Spring, Turkey attempted to emerge as the political role model of the Middle East nations. President Erdoğan presented Turkey as an example of the coexistence of Islam, secularism, and democracy, thriving on a bearish economy. Ahmet Davutoğlu referred to the Arab Spring as ‘normalization in the Middle East’<sup>35</sup> and hyped Turkey as a patron of the people of the region.

Yet the main challenge to Turkey’s regional policies arose in the Syrian crisis. Prior to 2011, Syria had been a consummate example of Turkey’s

policy of ‘zero problems with neighbors’ advanced by Davutoğlu. However, Turkey was forced to intervene in Syria for security reasons, which posed a challenge for Turkey’s soft power. The purpose behind the presence of Turkish troops in Northern Syria, in addition to supporting the groups opposed to President Assad, was to strike a blow to the PKK affiliated groups and evict them from the East of the Euphrates. With Operation Euphrates Shield in mid-2017, Ankara shifted its focus to overtaking parts of the Syrian territories as a buffer zone. This Turkish maneuvering certainly appealed to the opponents of Bashar al-Assad and the states supporting them. Yet, for some in Iran and Syria, this action appeared reprehensible. Thus, Turkey’s military action in Syria had mixed results in terms of soft power, as it was appealing to some audiences and unappealing to others.<sup>36</sup>

In Egypt, Turkey is a staunch detractor of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, and some chieftains of the Muslim Brotherhood carry out their political and propaganda campaigns from Turkish soil. The Egyptian Foreign Ministry accuses Turkey and Qatar of financing the TV stations *El Sharq*, *Watan TV*, and *Mekameleen*,<sup>37</sup> and has so far made several futile attempts to shutter four TV broadcasts operated by the Muslim Brotherhood in Turkey. After the death of Mohamed Morsi in an Egyptian jail, Erdoğan called him a martyr.<sup>38</sup> Some conservative Arab states and nations denounce these actions by Turkey, and others praise them.

In Tunisia, Turkey backs the Ennahda Movement under the leadership of Rached Ghannouchi, the current Speaker of the Assembly of the Representatives of the People. This party is an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood in Tunisia, whose leaders returned to the country from exile after the fall of Zine el Abidine ben Ali and were able to form one of the most influential political parties in Tunisia. As of 2021, the Ennahda Movement is the most well-represented party in the parliament compared to other fractions, with 69 members out of a total of 217 MPs. For this reason, Turkey's policy in Tunisia does not bode well with West-leaning and conservative parties.

In January 2020, the Turkish parliament approved President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's proposal to deploy troops in Libya by a vote of 324 to 184. The objective sought by Turkey in deploying troops was to militarily support the al-Wefaq government led by Fayeze al-Sarraj based in the Libyan capital Tripoli fighting against the forces of General Khalifa Haftar. Haftar receives support from Egypt, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Jordan and Russia, and controls large swaths of Eastern Libya, particularly the important oil crescent of Sirte-Ju-fra. Even here, it is possible to notice a dissonance in the Arab world in praising and denouncing the policies of Turkey.<sup>39</sup>

Following the reignition of lethal conflict between the Republic of Azerbaijan and Armenia over the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave in the

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latter months of 2020, Turkey unambiguously expressed its support for Baku. For years, Ankara had been throwing its weight behind Baku, but its endorsement in the recent Azerbaijan-Armenia hostilities was unprecedented. Some analysts believe it was in effect Turkey that won the battle against Armenia, liberating large territories of Azerbaijan's soil.<sup>40</sup> Turkey's involvement was acclaimed by a large number of Muslims and Turkic people worldwide but raised objections from the West, Iran, and Armenia.

Turkey's response to the murder of dissident Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018, after he visited the Saudi consulate in Istanbul augmented Turkey's soft power. In recent years, Saudi Arabia and Turkey have been embroiled in serious rivalries to further their influence in the Middle East, and their differences over the developments of Egypt and Turkey have been markedly acute. Saudi Arabia's activities in the proximity of Turkey's border with Syria, and Riyadh's support for separatist Kurds in the region, which Turkey

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sees as a threat to its national security, have collectively resulted in tensions between the two nations, which ramped up further after the coming to power of Mohammed bin Salman. By disclosing Khashoggi's murder details, Turkey damaged Saudi Arabia's credibility while shoring up its own standing among Muslim nations as a country seeking justice.

Toward the end of May 2020, Turkey expressed its intent to begin explorations in several remote areas in the Eastern Mediterranean, prompting the apprehension of Greece and Cyprus, both of which are EU member states. For the purpose of exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean waters, including the coastal waters around the Greek islands of Rhodes and Crete, several permits were issued to the Turkish Petroleum Corporation.<sup>41</sup> The deployment of Turkey's exploration ships, together with five naval warships, to the waters off the coasts of the Greek island of Kastellorizo sparked Greece's anger and raised the possibility that the two countries would be dragged into a military showdown –the risk of a future fa-

ceoff still exists. Such Turkish ploys have triggered the anger of Germany, France, and the U.S., but appeal to some Muslims and Turkish-speaking populations who compare this audacious Turkey exploit with the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Greece was planning to devour Turkey, and the power balance at that time was against Turkey. Fuat Oktay, the Vice President of Turkey said in July 2020, "everybody should accept that it is impossible to dispossess Turkey and the Republic of Northern Cyprus of equal shares in the region's energy resources."<sup>42</sup>

A number of analysts consider Turkey's bold moves in the Mediterranean, Libya, Syria, and Azerbaijan as a harbinger of the emergence of a new doctrine in Turkey, according to which Turkey is a country surrounded by adversaries and abandoned by its western allies. Such a new doctrine would require Turkey to pursue a bold foreign policy predicated on the use of preventive military force beyond its borders.<sup>43</sup> This new approach is a source of soft power in certain parts of the Muslim world and the West, while it depletes its soft power in other regions such as Egypt.

### Conclusion

Over the past two decades (2002-2020), by emphasizing its historical and civilizational past and its geographical and economic standing in the region and the world, Turkey has endeavored to impart a positive impression of itself to the regional and

global public through the indices of soft power and cultural diplomacy and has been successful in this undertaking around the world, especially in the Middle East. Turkish leaders' success in political and cultural realms has laid the groundwork for economic growth and development and has contributed to Turkey's image as a successful economic and political role model. This strategy has contributed effectively to furthering and ameliorating Turkey's economic diplomacy, shoring up its foreign investment, increasing global trade transactions, and welcoming tourists. By blending secularism, liberalism, democracy, and cultural and political sovereignty, Turkey has fulfilled the role of an example in the Muslim world.

However, Turkey's involvement in the crises emanating from the Arab Spring in Syria, Libya, and Egypt, its engagement in the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis, the maritime border dispute with Greece, devaluation of the national currency, and fluctuations in its economic growth have been detrimental to its soft power. The shift in Turkey's strategy from 'zero problems with neighbors' to an 'assertive foreign policy' may reflect a transition from reliance on soft power to a greater focus on hard power. This shift may negatively impact Turkey's soft power, but given the structural trends in Turkey's power sources, Ankara may maintain its soft power's status and popularity in the Muslim world, as its firm stance could garner appreciation in MENA. *Turkey's rating in the Soft Power 30 Index* rose

from 42.55 in 2015 to 49.70 in 2019.<sup>44</sup> This signals that although Turkey's soft power has undergone fluctuations since 2012, Turkey still enjoys a remarkable level of soft power in the Muslim world. ■

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