
Changes in Turkish Regional Policy from an Arab Perspective in the aftermath of Arab Uprisings

ABSTRACT This study presents Arab perspectives on changes in Turkish policy in the Middle East from 2010 until 2020. It examines how Arab countries perceive changes in Turkish regional policy after the 2010-11 uprisings. Unlike Western and Turkish literature that has highlighted identity-security combinations behind changes in Turkish regional policy, this study argues that the Arabic research literature provides a different perspective. Based on a foreign policy analysis concept of operational milieu, this study argues that Arab countries negatively perceive the changes in Turkish policy due to structural transformations in the region during and after the uprisings that paved the way for the reemergence of psychological barriers between both sides. **KEYWORDS** Turkish-Arab relations, Operational Milieu, AKP, Middle East politics

INTRODUCTION

A few months before the eruption of the Tunisian uprising, Sefer Turan, adviser to the Turkish prime minister and former coordinator of the Turkish radio and television channel in Arabic, asserted that concerns over Turkey's regional domination and occupation of Arab territories were over thanks to the Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi's (AKP) visa cancellation policy and economic rapprochement.¹ For Arab scholars, this statement proved right after the AKP's rise to power in 2002 and its adoption of intense socioeconomic relations with Arab countries that prompted Syria and Iraq to stop raising the issue of the occupied region of Hatay and the distribution of the water of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers (al-Labbād 2011a; Maḥfūz 2012). Arab scholars praised Turkey's soft power tools and cheered the possibility of a prospective regional integration involving Turkey and Arab countries, based on economic interdependence and political coordination. During the first two

1. Interview with Sefer Turan, Ankara, 15 January 2010.

terms of AKP rule, Arab scholars reiterated concepts that promoted a positive perception of Turkish regional conduct such as “proactive diplomacy,” “friendly state,” and “Turkish role model.” However, this perception shifted with the spread of protests across the region starting from December 2010.

Copious scholarship has identified changes in Turkish regional policy without agreeing on the reasons behind this visible shift. Western and Turkish research literature has underlined a series of identity–security combinations behind the AKP’s impulsive and confrontational attitude in the Middle East. However, Arab scholars have presented different views. They have referred to the emergence of historical unresolved psychological factors that were overshadowed by the AKP’s active engagement in promoting regional belongingness, common interests, and shared destiny. In contrast to Turkey’s principle of zero problems with its neighbors since 2002, these factors reemerged by the end of 2010. In reaction to Turkey’s regional conduct during and after the Arab uprisings, Arab scholars evoked concerns over Turkey’s “domination,” “disturbance of regional status quo,” and “occupation of Arab territories.” These perspectives, often deemphasized by scholarly writings, addressing Turkish foreign policy, are examined in the psychological approach in foreign policy analysis (FPA) and its underlying concept of “operational environment” in order to interpret Arab perceptions of changes in AKP leaders’ behavior and regional policy after 2010. The FPA’s psychological approach indicates that while the psychological milieu of Turkish and Arab leaders overlapped within their regional operational environment from 2002 until 2010, this was not the case during and after the uprisings. The Arab uprisings and their aftermath resulted in structural transformations in the Middle East that broadened the gap between Turkish leaders’ psychological milieu and operational environment modifying their code of conduct.

This study answers the following question: What are the reasons behind the shift in Turkish policy in the Middle East since 2010 from Arab perspectives? It posits that Arab perspectives provide a complementary understanding of Turkish regional conduct during the last decade. While Arab scholars highlighted different perceptions behind the shift in the AKP’s regional policy, this study focuses on three main psychological factors that were commonly introduced by academic writings from Egypt, Syria, Libya, Iraq, Lebanon, and the United Arab of Emirates (UAE). The analysis of Arab perceptions is based on five open-ended and semi-structured interviews conducted with the Head of the Arab League Delegation in Ankara, the Syrian Consul in Gaziantep, Arab businessmen in Müstakil Sanayıcı ve

İşadamlar Derneği (MÜSIAD), and Egyptian–Syrian reporters based in Istanbul. The study also relies on Critical Discourse Analysis to examine Arab scholarly writings addressing Turkish regional policy after the Arab uprisings. In addition, the study is based on twenty open-ended and semi-structured interviews conducted by the author with Turkish officials in the Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFA), Economy, and the Prime Ministry from 2010 to 2016. Respondents consisted of ten low-to-middle ranking diplomats in the Middle East Department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, four advisors for the prime minister, six businessmen affiliated to MÜSIAD in Istanbul, Ankara, and Gaziantep.

This study is divided into three sections. The next section examines the Western and Turkish literature addressing Turkey’s regional role under AKP rule from 2010 until 2020. The third section part explores the origins of psychological barriers in Turkish–Arab relations. The fourth section addresses Arab countries’ perceptions of the contrast between the AKP’s regional conduct before and after the uprisings based on the FPA concept of operational environment.

CHANGES IN TURKISH POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST UNDER AKP RULE, 2010–20

Western and Turkish scholarship presented two identity–security combinations, Kemalism (national independence) and Neo-Ottomanism (regional supremacy), in order to interpret changes in Turkish policy in the Middle East since 2010. According to scholars, these combinations contributed to the manifestation of a confrontational and assertive policy in the pursuit of security exigencies based on a confirmed identity.

Writings underscored the Kemalism—national independence combination—behind the metamorphosis of a revisionist and security-driven policy that took a step back from Western allies in favor of Eastern neighbors, notably Russia, with the aim of pursuing regional interests. According to Taşpınar, Tocci, and Barkey (2011), Turkey developed an assertive policy in pursuit of its national interests, independently from the West, notably the United States and the European Union (EU). He underlined the AKP’s suspicion of its traditional Western allies and the rupture with the principles of soft power and human rights in light of the US support for the Iraqi and Syrian Kurds and partial withdrawal from the region that evoked Turkish fears of territorial dismemberment. In line with this argument, Haugom

(2019) examined the impact of the AKP's alliance with the Nationalist Movement Party (Milli Hareket Partisi) and the 2016 military coup on the emergence of a nationalist tone and suspicion toward the West, in addition to shifts in Turkish regional and international engagements. Similarly, Özel (2019) and Kirişçi and Toygür (2019) confirmed the shift in Turkish foreign policy due to the weakening of the West and its liberal principles, notably after Trump's inauguration and EU ideological revisions, the rise of nationalism, and the disintegration of democratic principles in Turkey. Furthermore, Tol and Başkan (2018) added that the uprisings sparked a new security momentum that shifted regional traditional alliances and prompted Turkey to use military power in its regional maneuvering.

Concerning the Neo-Ottomanism–regional supremacy combination, studies linked the AKP's conservative and Islamic identity to its regional power-based conduct. According to Yavuz and Öztürk (2019) and Yavuz (2020), Turkish policy manifests responsibilities vis-à-vis its neighbors in order to ensure its stability and territorial integrity, which explains its intervention in Libya, opposition to the Egyptian regime, and military campaigns in Syria and Iraq. This argument echoed Altunışık and Leonore's (2011) reference to the AKP's assertive regional role as a means to protect Turkish economic, political, and strategic interests in spite of Arab concerns. On the other hand, Akgönül (2018) and Öztürk (2021) underlined that the abrupt shift in Turkey's pro-Western alliances and adoption of a pro-Islamic agenda is based on designs for leadership in the Middle East where Sunni Muslims, notably the Islamic opposition, would be politically empowered in Arab countries. Akgönül added that the AKP's Neo-Ottomanism, as a form of Turkish Islamism, aims to legitimately rally supporters in order to create an orthodox Sunni regional alliance as opposed to the heterodox Shiite-Alevi one, encompassing Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, and Iraq.

THE HISTORY OF PSYCHOLOGICAL BARRIERS IN TURKISH-ARAB RELATIONS

Based on Arab academic sources and respondents' accounts of Turkish policy, this section presents an overview of psychological barriers that has troubled Turkish–Arab relations since the 1950s. These barriers consist of Egypt, Libya, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and the UAE's shared concerns over Turkey's disturbance of the regional status quo, regional domination, and occupation of Arab territories.

Arab concerns are based on several factors. First is the formulation of a regional alliance with the West in consolidation of its modernization process and pursuit of national security. Turkey joined Western institutions such as the Council of Europe (1949), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) (1952), and applied for the EU membership (1963). Unlike Arab countries, it recognized and initiated diplomatic relations with Israel after the 1948 United Nations resolution (1949). According to the seminal works of the Center for Arab Unity Studies (1990, 1991), Turkey's compliance with the US containment policy during the Cold War and adoption of a pivotal role in maintaining regional stability in favor of the United States awakened Arab countries' memory of colonization. This policy undermined Arab states' regional security and power, notably after Turkish attempts to rally Arab countries into alliances with Western powers such as the Middle East Defense Organization (MEDO)² and the Central Middle East Organization (CENTO),³ originally known as the Baghdad Pact in spite of their non-alignment.

Second, Turkey's military superiority over Arab countries during the Second Gulf War and its alliance with Israel were additional reasons behind this concern. Turkey had launched military campaigns in northern Iraq since 1984 in pursuit of PKK militants, participated in the Second Gulf War in 1991, and contributed to the imposition of sanctions against Iraq by closing the pipelines. Not only did Turkey launch fifty-seven military operations and enter into a 200-km zone in northern Iraq in 1997, but it also announced the possible reconsideration of bilateral borders with northern Iraq in order to control the PKK (Nurredin 2004). Turkey's attitude toward Iraq provoked outrage and demands for the adoption of a resolution against Turkey in the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) in 1997. Also, the Turkish-Israeli rapprochement in 1996 was perceived as an additional source of Turkish regional supremacy. According to the Head of the Arab League Delegation in Ankara, the conclusion of a military alliance with Israel in 1993 and 1996 led to the perception of Turkey as an American security agent in the region. Turkey overlooked Arab countries' concerns relating to Israeli

2. MEDO was created by the United States in order to fill the power vacuum left by the fall of Britain in the Middle East, protect the Suez Canal, and those countries producing petroleum in the region in cooperation with northern tier countries: Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan.

3. CENTO is a Cold War alliance in the Middle East created in 1955 in order to contain the Soviet Union's expansion into the region. It involved the United States, Britain, Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Cyprus.

threats, ignored the OIC resolution for boycotting Israel, and invited them to join bilateral military exercises in the 1990s. Arab countries refused the former Turkish President Turgut Özal's (1989–93) initiative of mediation between Arab countries and Western powers in the post-Madrid peace process in 1991 since it was perceived as an attempt to empower Israel, weaken Arab countries, and consolidate Turkish leadership (Serī-al-Dīn 1998).

Conflicts over the distribution of water from the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and the PKK issue, in addition to Turkey's military supremacy, triggered Arab concerns over the former's regional domination (Abdul-Azīz 2000; Arbid 1998). Arab studies underlined Turkey's "sovereignist" and "antagonistic" attitude vis-à-vis Syria and Iraq in water and PKK issues. By launching a development project in south-eastern Anatolia, Turkey refused to share both rivers' water with Syria and Iraq in spite of the Damascus Declaration (1993) in support of Syrian and Iraqi demands (Salīm 1997). Arab countries perceived the water issue as a matter of "Turkish domination," "manifestation of power," and "tool of political pressure" vis-à-vis Arab countries, notably Syria and Iraq, that would not be able to respond in the event of a water shortage or interruption, as was the case in the late 1980s. In the words of the Syrian Consul in Gaziantep, "while Turkey was economically developed, interregional conflicts exhausted Syria and Iraq, weakened their socio-economic infrastructure, and incited Arab countries to support their demands for water sharing against Turkish interruption of water flows in 1990 and 1993."⁴ Also, by including Israel as a partner, the project increased Turkish–Israeli influence over Arab countries and confirmed the Turkish official declaration of "water in exchange for oil" (Serī-al-Dīn 1998). While the water issue remained unsolved, the Syrian and Iraqi regimes used the PKK militants as a pressure card against Turkey providing them with a safe haven, logistical, and material support. However, Arab countries' inability to create a counter-alliance to Turkish–Israeli cooperation in fighting the PKK insurgents in Syria and the Turkish ultimatum of launching a military attack against Syria in 1998 incited Egypt to mediate between both parties in order to formulate a constructive agreement.

Territorial conflicts over the Hatay/Alexandretta region and Mosul province had raised concerns over Turkish threats to Arab countries' territorial integrity since the 1920s. Based on the National Pact, Mithaqī-Milli (1921), the French High Commissioner's decree (1918), and the Friendship and

4. Interview with the Syrian Consul in Gaziantep, December 2010.

Neighborhood Agreement (1926), Hatay was accorded a special administrative status and became part of Turkey (Nawwār 1999). These agreements allowed Turkey to adopt a series of cultural, security, and emigration policies that increased the Turkish presence in Hatay and enabled its attachment to Turkey, notably after the Hatay National Assembly's favorable vote in 1939. Although Syria declared its respect for all agreements, signed under the rule of the French occupation authorities, in 1944 it opposed Turkey's annexation of Hatay on the basis of its historical belongingness to Greater Syria. This question has remained engraved in Syrians' collective memory through an educational system that considers Hatay within Syrian northern borders at the junction of the Tigris and Habur (al-Mu'allim 1988). Former Syrian Minister of Foreign Affairs Walid al-Mu'allim declared that Syria will claim Hatay after the independence of the Golan Heights (al-Mu'allim 1998). Also, Hafiz al-' Assad created the Hatay Recovery Committee in Ḥassa in commemoration of Hatay as a stolen territory, especially with its strategic and commercial importance for Syria after the loss of Latakia and Tripoli to Lebanon under the French occupation.

Also, the Mosul province evoked insecurity complexities in Turkish–Arab relations. The Ankara Agreement (1926) traced the Turkish–Iraqi borders following the failure of the British–Turkish talks over the status of Mosul at the Lausanne Conference (1923). Although Turkey insisted on holding a plebiscite in the “Vilayet of the Mosul,” Britain referred it to the League of Nations which refused its attachment to Turkish territory (Dahhām 1999). Turkey recognized Mosul as part of Iraq fearing its Kurdish population would exacerbate security issues for Ankara. According to an Iraqi reporter, Mosul remained a source of tension in bilateral relations due to its historical ties with Turkey, oil reserves, and demographic structure that was subject to change since 1958.⁵ Turkey compensated its non-annexation of Mosul with successive military interventions in Iraq within the framework of anti-terrorist operations against the PKK in the 1980s, with the Coalition Forces Operations in northern Iraq in the 1990s, and the US war on Iraq in 2003. Having more than 1700 troops stationed in northern Iraq, Turkey has officially declared its concerns over the disintegration of the Iraqi territory, refused Kurdish annexation of the Mosul and Kirkuk, and called for the protection of the Turkmens (Faūr 1993). Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, former Turkish Prime Minister and current President of the Republic, and Ilker

5. Interview with an Iraqi reporter, Istanbul, July 2012.

Başbuğ, the Turkish Forces spokesman, underlined the need to guarantee a special status for Mosul, and warned against an inter-confessional civil war in case of its attachment to Iraqi Kurdistan, calling for a referendum to determine its status after the stabilization of Iraq.

ARAB PERSPECTIVES ON CHANGES IN TURKISH MIDDLE EAST POLICY FROM 2010 TO 2020

This study borrows from the FPA psychological model's operational environment in order to interpret Arab countries' perception of change in Turkish Middle East policy. It does so by examining the relationship between the actors' psychological milieu and the operational environment that shapes the leaders' code of behavior and impacts their decision-making (Sprout and Sprout 1956). Acting as the leaders' subjective view of their operational/structural environment, the psychological milieu defines states' policies in reaction to leaders' perception of their context. While the leaders' psychological and operational milieu hardly overlap, the broader the gap between them, the more changes occur in the leaders' codes of conduct and the greater number of conflicts emerge in interstate relations. In light of the FPA psychological model, this section explains why Arab scholars underline negative changes in AKP regional policy since 2010 while this was not the case in the period following its inauguration in 2002. Based on respondents' answers, Turkish leaders developed a conciliatory psychological milieu with their operational environment from 2002 to 2010. However, the Arab uprisings and their aftermath broadened the gap between leaders' psychological milieu and the resulting operational environment, reshaped the regional power balance, and revived old psychological barriers in Turkish–Arab relations.

The psychological approach is an explanatory framework that conforms to the human reality of state actors by considering their worldviews, beliefs, loss aversion, and cognitive biases, notably with the importance of national identity and culture as basic components in foreign policy formulation (Goldstein and Hogarth 1998; Rosati 2000). By examining actors' power capabilities, strategies, and intentions, the psychological approach integrated micro- and macro-levels of analysis into a cross-national and middle-ranged theory in explaining foreign policies. It bypassed the dominant actor-general theory in FPA and developed a more actor-specific theory that enriched the understanding of actors' behavior by focusing on personal characteristics, national environment, and regional-systemic factors. By decomposing the state unitary

vision as the aggregation of a wide array of actors involved in policymaking, the actor-specific theory made an insightful analysis of changes in policy formulation (Hudson and Vore 1995). The national dimension was added to the analysis of actors' behavior in order to understand variations in foreign policy choices and behaviors and identify policymakers' specificities, context perception, and compatibility with reality. The importance of the psychological approach emanates from its consideration of the complexity of the policymakers' cognitive map and personal characteristics derived from emotions, national, self-conceptions, memories, and experiences. Culture, ideology, history, geography, and politics are considered societal factors that influence the actors' operational milieu (Sprout and Sprout 1956).

While national dimension and personal characteristics are explanatory variables of changes in Turkish regional policy since 2010, this section will mainly focus on regional transformations that were emphasized by Arab scholars and respondents as the main reason behind negative changes in Turkish regional policy since 2010.

Based on interviews and Arabic sources addressing Turkish foreign policy, the results of the study assert that changes in the Middle East power structure during and after the Arab uprisings are coupled with the AKP leader's personal characteristics, in terms of harsh personal style and dominant character, and the perception of Turkey's role as a regional power. The weakening of Turkey's allies, the Muslim Brothers in Egypt and Libya, the consolidation of the Syrian regime's alliance with unfriendly regimes and actors such as Iraq, Iran, and Hezbollah, and the formulation of an anti-Turkish/Qatari alliance by Egypt and the Gulf countries have isolated the Turkish government and limited its pre-2010 regional maneuvers. The socio-political instabilities resulting from the uprisings threatened Turkey's economic interests and investment projects in Libya, Syria, and the Gulf region.⁶ By toppling four Arab leaders, these revolts left a considerable power vacuum leading to the emergence of Islamic opposition groups and extremist insurgents that disturbed the regional power balance and empowered Shiite actors such as Hezbollah, Iran, and the al-Assad regime. Also, the US military intervention in Syria and its presence in Libya and Iraq instigated Turkey's concerns over its territorial integrity in relation to the creation of a Kurdish autonomous zone in Syria.

6. Interviews with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ankara, 13 October 2015 and 9 September 2016.

These challenges paved the way for the development of a security-driven, confrontational, and impulsive regional policy that was accentuated by the AKP's authoritarian shift and nationalist outlook. The AKP's authoritarian grip on power, alliance with nationalist groups, and urgent need to preserve the interests of its business-oriented constituency have limited decision-makers' options and prompted the adoption of a security-driven policy. The repression of protestors in the Gezi park protests in 2013, the failed military coup of 2016, and the aggressive campaign of muzzling opposition groups and journalists have strained the national environment. The AKP launched a massive arrest campaign against opponents, shuttered local newspapers, laid off opponents from official and academic positions, restricted rights, and freedom, and hunted down members of the Fethullah Gülen community under charges of attempting to bring about a coup.

Based on the FPA concept of operational environment, changes in the Middle East power structure, during and after the Arab uprisings, have exacerbated historical psychological barriers since it broadened the gap between the AKP's psychological milieu and operational environment and prompted a shift in its pre-2010 policy toward its neighbors. This shift was manifested by the AKP support of radical Islamic groups and military intervention in Libya, Iraq, and Syria that revived Arab concerns in relation to Turkish disturbance of the regional status quo, regional domination, and territorial occupation.

The disturbance of the regional status quo

Since 2003, the AKP developed a conciliatory psychological milieu with its operational environment and deemphasized Arab countries' suspicion of negative impacts on regional status quo. In line with its multidimensional and rhythmic policy, Turkey used its strategic alliance with the United States for solving regional problems in coordination with Arab countries. Respondents praised the AKP's role in improving north–south and south–south relations toward regional empowerment and independence from foreign interference. Turkey used its Western ties in improving national conditions of Syria, Iran, Sudan, and the Palestinians, in line with global order exigencies by adopting a positive and conciliatory position toward neighbors.⁷ It benefited from US support for its rapprochement toward Syria and mediation in Israeli-Syrian peace talks in order to convince al-'Assad to withdraw

7. Interviews at the MFA 2010 and 2011; and the Arab League, Ankara, 2011.

from Lebanon and hold investigations over al-Ḥariri's death in 2005. Turkey's mediation efforts were an opportunity for Ḥamas, Ḥezbollah, and Iran to improve their image in the eyes of the international community, notably Iran's stance toward the European Troika and the UN Security Council's proposal over its nuclear program in 2006.

Arab support of a "Turkish model" underlined Turkey's positive regional role and the perception of it as a moderate Islamic model (Nafi' 2011; al-Labbād 2011b). Arab and Muslim countries welcomed Turkey's participation in the OIC conference in Jeddah (2003) and Dakar (2005) and positively received former Turkish Prime Minister and President Abdullah Gül (Gül 2006) and Erdoğan's (2004, 2005, 2006) call for democratization in the Muslim World and its criticism of human rights violations in the World Economic Forum (WEF) and the Euro-Asian Islamic Council.⁸

Also, Turkey was able to develop common interests with Arab countries, notably at the economic level. Although some Arab leaders were resistant toward Turkish rapprochement such as former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, who had reservations vis-à-vis Turkey's proactive regional policy, the AKP established intense economic and infrastructure projects in Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Libya, and the Gulf countries (al-Labbād 2011a; Maḥfūz 2012; Khāqānī 2017). Since 2002, the AKP adopted a pragmatic vision that aimed to reconsider the region's normative and structural weaknesses after the invasion of Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) in order to empower its countries. This vision appeased Arab concerns over Turkey's alliance with the West and military supremacy in light of its pillars: Iraq's stabilization, regional democratization and liberalization, the fight against weapons of mass destruction, the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the promotion of the energy sector (Nurredin 2004; Kawtharani 2011). The AKP created the Iraqi Neighborhood Initiative (2003–07) side by side with the Platform for Cooperation and Solidarity in the Caucasus and the OIC in order to develop ties among neighbors and solve bilateral conflicts based on common cultural, religious, and historical backgrounds.

Arab sources referred to Turkey's introduction of economic interdependence mechanisms such as energy projects that acted as regional confidence-building measures (Khatib 2012; Salim 2009). In light of daily imports of 350,000 barrels of oil from Iraq and the Turkish Petroleum Corporation's

8. Speeches by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan at the Jeddah Economic Forum, Saudi Arabia, 2004; at the Euro-Asian Islamic Council, Istanbul, 2005; and The Danish Cartoon crisis, New York, 2006.

operation rights, Turkey linked natural gas from Iraq, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan to the Nabucco pipeline in order to transport it to Europe. The southern Caucasus and the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil pipelines have operated since 2006 in order to transport natural gas from Shah-Deniz to Turkey through Georgia. In 2007, Turkey and Iran signed a Memorandum of Understanding granting Turkish companies the right to exploit natural gas fields and extract up to 20 billion m³ that would be transported through the Tabriz–Erzurum pipeline.

However, the AKP's inability to sustain a conciliatory psychological milieu with its operational environment during and after the uprisings jeopardized its constructive efforts toward its Arab neighbors. In his interview with the Qatari-based news channel al-Jazeera, former Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs and Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu (Davutoğlu 2011) perceived the Arab uprisings a positive event for the region's political and economic wellbeing. Upon their success, they would promote Turkish foreign policy tenets, such as economic interdependence, common interests, peace and security, political coordination, conflict resolution, and multiculturalism across the region. Respondents in the MFA elaborated that while despotic regimes used borders to impede the development of bilateral and multilateral relations under various security pretexts,⁹ the uprisings would modify Arab countries' mutual perception and turn borders into a source of complementarity and mutual empowerment. Trade, public contact, socioeconomic exchange, and conflict resolution would prosper and ensure collective interstate responsibility within the region. People's will as a source of political authority would restore regional power balance in favor of the Arab countries, Turkey, and Iran, and would alleviate symbiotic relations between despotic regimes and Western powers.

Although the AKP's position on the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt reflected Davutoğlu's endorsement of a positive change, the waves of change in Syria, Libya, Yemen, and Bahrain were not welcomed, which discredited Turkey's regional role (Mu'awwad 2011; Jum'a 2019). Turkey's "ambiguous" policy toward the uprisings instigated Arab concerns over its disturbance of regional status quo for two reasons. First, Turkish policy toward the uprisings reflected the supremacy of its economic and strategic interests over its neighbors' call for urgent sociopolitical reforms. Second, the AKP supported Islamic opponents and radical insurgents in spite of their delegitimization

9. Interview with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ankara, 5 July 2014.

by their countries of origin, a policy that was perceived as a Turkish maneuver for maintaining its interests, regardless of its neighbors' stability.

Unlike Libya, Syria, and Gulf countries, the Mubarak regime did not welcome Turkey's initiatives of rapprochement.¹⁰ Also, both Tunisia and Egypt had Islamic opposition groups that were likely to rule after the toppling of the Mubarak and Zin-Al-'Abidin Ben 'Ali regimes. Both regimes' resilience and repression of the Islamists incited the AKP to support the departure of Ben Ali and Mubarak. For this aim, the party organized field visits for Egyptian revolutionaries to Turkey in 2011, and paid official visits to Tunisia and Egypt. According to an AKP member, the arrival of al-Nahda and the Muslim Brothers' Freedom and Justice Party to power would empower Turkey's vision of regional integration in compliance with Necmettin Erbakan's "Milli Görüş" views.¹¹ Having strong communitarian and religious ties since the 1980s, the Muslim Brothers and the leading figures of the AKP shared similar worldviews in terms of increasing socioeconomic interdependence among Muslim countries and limiting clientelist relations with Western allies. Unlike al-Nahda, which succeeded in politically survive its opponents' campaigns, the ousting of former Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi in 2013 ignited strong reactions among the AKP leaders, notably Erdoğan. Being outlawed in Egypt under charges of terrorism, the Muslim Brothers received financial and political support from Turkey that hosted their television channels in Istanbul and accused Egypt of breaching democratization and leading a military coup against the first democratically elected leadership (Mu'awwad 2014; Adib 2014). Turkey's aggressive tone against the Egyptian regime and support for the Brothers was perceived as a means for destabilizing Egypt and promoting terrorism across the region. It resulted in the reduction of mutual diplomatic representation to the level of chargé d'affaires together with calls for boycotting Turkish products.

Unlike Tunisia and Egypt, the AKP did not overtly oppose the al-'Assad or Gaddafi regimes but showed "reluctance," "caution," and "hesitance" in light of intense Turkish investment in both countries. According to

10. Interviews with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ankara, 11 January 2011 and 7 July 2014.

11. Milli Görüş, or the National Outlook, is an Islamic movement created by former Turkish Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan in the 1960s. It aimed to revive the Ottoman past and criticized the global order. It consisted of a shared feeling of pride with Ottoman heritage and Turkish identity among intellectual figures with connections to the Anatolian middle-sized conservative capitalists and projected a developmentalist discourse based on a traditional version of Sunni Islam and Sufi worldview. Interview with an AKP member, Ankara, 3 August 2013.

respondents in the Ministry of Economy, Turkey witnessed a significant drop in its exports to Libya and Syria by forty-three and five percent, respectively, and the interruption of its construction companies in Libya, its second largest market.¹² This drop was doubled by an increase in oil prices that multiplied the value of Turkish imports and raised the trade deficit from US\$5.5 billion in 2010 to US\$9 billion in 2011. As a result, Turkey has “cautiously” supported the Syrian revolution but provided a safe haven for Syrian refugees, and hosted the Islamic opposition meetings in Istanbul, Ankara, and Antalya since 2011.¹³ This move was negatively perceived by Syria, Egypt, and the Gulf countries which accused the AKP of supporting mercenaries affiliated to the Islamic State (Jum‘a 2019; The Emirates Policy Center 2020).

As for Libya, the AKP was also “reluctant” to overtly support the revolution in Libya at the beginning. It took part in humanitarian relief efforts and mediated between opposition parties (Mu‘awwad 2011). The AKP’s reluctance in opposing Gaddafi and its participation in NATO operations was suspiciously perceived by the Libyan army, especially with Erdoğan’s support of the Islamic-oriented National Accord Government in Tripoli (Sawani 2012; ‘Ali 2020). Egypt, alongside the UAE, accused the AKP of destabilizing Egypt’s western borders by sending Islamic fighters to Libya. In response, it supported Gen. Khalifa Hafter and his attempts to take over Tripoli in April 2020 against the Turkish alliance with the National Accord Government and concluded economic agreements and investment projects in the eastern parts of Libya.

Concerning Bahrain and Yemen, the AKP sided with the Gulf Sheikdoms against the uprising in Yemen, a move that discredited Turkish intentions among Arab countries, notably Egypt, Iraq, and Syria (al-Desuqī 2020; al Shurbagy and Mansur 2017; Ilyās 2017). In coordination with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, Erdoğan refrained from opposing the royal regimes, and urged Bahrainis to accept reform initiatives proposed by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), warning against the emergence of a Sunni–Shiite conflict.¹⁴ The AKP, in coordination with the UN, the GCC, and the OIC, avoided direct intervention, supported the Gulf countries’ initiative for peaceful transfer of authority in coordination with the Yemeni president, and the opposition, and initiated the Yemen Contact Group in 2015 in order

12. Interview with the Ministry of Economy, Ankara, 10 January 2011.

13. Interview with the Prime Ministry, Ankara, 7 July 2014.

14. Interview with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ankara, 5 July 2014.

to oversee the situation in the country. However, it did not condemn the Saudi and Emirati's military involvement in Yemen that resulted in a large death toll among civilians.

Regional domination and territorial occupation

Since 2002, the AKP's neighborhood policy allayed Arab concerns over Turkey's regional domination and territorial occupation. This policy was based on market growth, the opening of borders with neighbors, the promotion of regional contact among people, and the creation of multilateral structures that dealt with common threats. According to respondents in the Arab League Delegation in Ankara, the AKP adopted a balanced policy that extended the scope of its relations beyond its Western allies as a means for achieving regional security and stability.¹⁵ They added that Turkey developed equidistant relations with Western allies and Arab neighbors and adopted an inclusive vision with the latter with the aim of ensuring security and freedom, economic interdependence, multiculturalism, and political dialogue in the Middle East. It went beyond its limited vision of national interests and formulated a broader policy based on common interests and economic exchanges with Arab countries. Diplomats at the MFA Middle East Department indicated that Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Libya trusted Turkey as a regional broker in solving regional conflicts through dialogue and mediation, multilateralism, and the multiplication of communication channels on economic, political, and cultural levels.¹⁶

From 2004 to 2009, Arab scholars addressed changes in Turkish regional policy by according a special reference to the AKP's Iraqi and Syrian policies. Syrian and Egyptian scholars praised Turkish initiatives in creating a High Level Council of Strategic Cooperation with Syria (2004) and Iraq (2008) as a medium for political coordination (Mu'awwad 2011; Dawūdi 2013; 'Abul-Faḍl 2013). These councils used to meet annually at the prime ministerial level, three times at the ministerial level, and four times at committee level in order to discuss technical cooperation in water management, free trade agreements, and visa elimination. This initiative bypassed bilateral conflicts, overcame concerns relating to intentions of territorial occupation, and developed a prospective vision for a regional integration scheme. Diplomats at the MFA Iraqi department asserted that these bilateral and

15. Interview with Mohamed Al-Nassiri, 10 December 2010.

16. Interviews with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ankara, 11 January 2011 and 7 July 2014.

multilateral instances improved relations between Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan.¹⁷ Respondents emphasized the efficiency of these structures in establishing dialogue and cooperation, based on mutual gains with different Iraqi groups, multiplying business ties with Iraqi Kurds, enabling the entry of Kurdish and Turkish airlines in both parties' airspace, and concluding contracts between civil society and business organizations. Arab businessmen affiliated to MÜSIAD underlined that, in 2005, eighty-six Turkish companies had a total of US\$1.5 billion invested in Iraq in 109 construction projects such as the US embassy, highways, the University of Süleymaniye, and Erbil airport.¹⁸ They indicated that Turkey's trade volume with Syria increased from US\$773 million to US\$1.752 billion between 2002 and 2009 and investments reached US\$800 million in 2008, notably with the Turkish oil company and natural gas pipeline that were planned to link Turkey and Syria with a US\$400 million investment.

However, the AKP adopted an adventurous and confrontational policy in Syria through recourse to military raids and field operations instead of soft power strategies in 2012 and 2014, respectively. This shift triggered Arab countries' concerns over regional domination and territorial occupation, notably with Erdoğan's declaration of the pre-emptive security doctrine in prevention of regional threats in 2014 (Center of Strategic and Diplomatic Studies 2019). The increase of massacres and military operations against civilians, the exacerbation of security threats on common borders, and ideological divisions among the Syrian opposition groups incited the AKP to launch military raids against the al-'Assad regime and Islamic State positions providing logistical support to the Islamic opposition that deflected to the al-Nusra Front, an offspring movement of al-Qa'ida in Syria (Maḥfūz 2012; Zahran 2020). However, Arab countries perceived this policy as a tactic to dominate unstable countries through terrorist groups. This perception exacerbated fear over a possible occupation of Arab territories in light of persistent Turkish military raids in northern Syria (2012), Operation Shah Euphrates (2015), the Euphrates Shield Operations (2016), the Olive Branch Operation (2018), and the Operation Peace Spring in the Kurdish populated border area of Rojava (2019) along with the Free Syrian Army against al-'Assad. Turkey justified these operations by indicating that they were maneuvers undertaken by Turkish troops against Islamic State insurgents and

17. Interviews with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ankara, 7 July 2014 and 9 September 2016.

18. Interview with Ghazwan Masri, The MÜSIAD headquarters, Istanbul, 1 December 2010.

Syrian Kurdish groups in order to drive them away from borders in northern Syria that Turkey referred to as “sovereign Turkish territory” (al-Jazeera 2017).

The AKP lost its connecting role between the north and south in light of its mediocre human rights record and loss of its ties with Western powers. Arab countries accused the AKP of committing crimes against civilians in Kurdish cities in Syria like Kobani, Afrin, and Rojava. They criticized the AKP’s security-driven policy and “aggressive” attitude in light of its shifting alliances towards Russia with the aim of creating safe-zones on borders (*Al-Ahram* 2019; The Emirates Policy Center 2020). Although Turkey has institutional ties with the United States and the EU, the rise of regional security concerns drove them apart. Repression and human rights violations following the Gezi Park protests and the failed 2016 military coup have exacerbated Turkish–EU relations as well. Although the accession negotiations were already suspended before 2013, the AKP’s persecution of academics and officials in political and legal institutions, the destruction of Kurdish towns, and closure of opposition newspapers halted any progress in its EU accession and the development of security agreements with European leaders (Khāqānī 2017). Turkey signed an EU refugee agreement in 2016 promising financial and visa-related concessions in return for containing refugee flows away from Europe. Nicolas Sarkozy, former French President, referred to Turkey as a country that is “trading” with the refugees’ souls in its attempt to pressure the EU to move forward with the accession process (*Al-Ahram* 2016). Also, the AKP’s unfulfilled request for the extradition of Fethullah Gülen, the leader of the Gülen movement, US inertia vis-à-vis the rise of Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish militant groups in border towns with Turkey, and the reliance on Russia in the provision of military equipment all added tension to Turkish–American relations.

Libya was another front where Turkey’s confrontational attitude evoked Arab concerns over territorial occupation, notably with the Turkish Parliament’s approval of a draft resolution which allowed the incursions of Turkish National Forces in Tripoli in support of Fayz al-Sarrag, the head of the National Accord Government, who was threatened by Haftar’s forces. Having US\$15 billion unpaid obligations in Libya that were harmed by the instabilities following Gaddafi’s ousting and the failed attempts at stabilization, in addition to the AKP’s support of al-Sarrag stirred up Egyptian fears of instability on its western borders (‘Ali 2020). Erdoğan supported the National Accord Government with military equipment, insurgents, and

trained fighters against the Egyptian–Emirati–Russian intervention in support of Haftar. However, the spokesman of the Libyan National Army perceived such a move as a “Turkish invasion” that will be countered by military raids against Turkish boats in territorial waters, soldiers, and equipment (Al-Ṣalābī 2020). In defiance of the contested maritime borders involving Egypt and Greece, in light of the presence of oil and gas reserves, the AKP signed a Memorandum of Understanding on sovereignty over maritime borders in the East Mediterranean with al-Sarrag in late 2019 that threatened Egyptian interests (Mazlum 2020; Imam 2019). This memorandum was followed by another one for security cooperation allowing Turkey to provide military training, planning, and expertise to Libya. While Turkey rallied support from Libya’s neighboring countries such as Algeria and Tunisia, both were reserved declaring intentions for joining an official alliance with Turkey in Libya. Egypt alongside the UAE did not recognize the Turkish–Libyan alliance, stigmatized the head of the National Accord Government by referring to him as “prisoner of the Armed Forces,” and threatened to intervene in case of an inability to reach a cease fire agreement by June 2020 (al-Jarīh 2020).

CONCLUSIONS

This study borrowed the psychological approach’s operational environment in order to examine the reasons behind Arab countries’ perception of negative changes in Turkish policy in the Middle East from 2010 to 2020, an issue that is often overlooked by the Turkish foreign policy scholarship. In order to answer this question, the author conducted twenty-five open-ended and semi-structured interviews with Arab respondents and Turkish officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Economy, and the Prime Ministry from 2010 until 2016. Also, the study relied on a Critical Discourse Analysis method of Arab writings addressing Turkish regional policy. Unlike Turkish and Western literature arguing that changes in Turkish regional policy are due to identity–security combinations, Arab scholars asserted that deeply rooted psychological factors are behind these changes. Based on the FPA concept of operational environment, the study asserted that the Arab uprisings and the resulting regional transformations have broadened the gap between the AKP’s psychological milieu and operational environment, which ignited conflicts and paved the way for the reemergence of Arab concerns in the continuing history of Turkish Arab relations. Changing regional

alliances, the transformation of Arab countries' geopolitics with the toppling of old regimes, and the emergence of radical non-state actors have modified the AKP's code of conduct and instigated Arab concerns over Turkish regional domination, territorial occupation, and disturbance of regional status quo. The AKP's ambiguous position toward the Arab uprisings, support of outlawed Islamic groups, and military incursions in Syria, Iraq, and Libya constituted the main reasons behind the revival of psychological barriers in bilateral relations since 2010.

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SHAIMAA MAGUED is Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Economics and Political Sciences, Cairo University, Cairo, Egypt. Email: shaimaamagued@yahoo.com

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