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# Turkey in the Post-Arab Uprisings Era: Vacillating between Regional and Domestic Priorities

**Abstract:** This article analyses Turkey's foreign policy concerning the status quo of the post-Arab uprisings through the prism of regional hegemony theory. The aspiring regional hegemon is identified through criteria applied to Turkish foreign policy, recontextualizing soft power initiatives of the previous decades with current hard power policies. The article suggests that while the Arab uprisings played a vital part in the redefinition of Turkish foreign policy, Erdoğan's domestic priorities informed its recalibration to weather political difficulties and maintain power. The objective would be to challenge the status quo shepherded by the West during the twentieth century as articulated by the Mavi Vatan doctrine, the motivation to renegotiate the Lausanne treaty, the conversion of the Hagia Sophia into a mosque, and even the escalating Erdoğan-Macron verbal feud. Turkey's aspirations for regional hegemony are evidenced in policies including military intervention, diplomatic and economic support to state entities, escalation of tensions with other regional powers, and Erdoğan's consolidation of power over Turkish domestic affairs.

**Keywords:** *Turkey, foreign policy, regional hegemony, hard power, Middle East*

## Introduction

Throughout 2020, President Erdoğan repeatedly called for a 'New Turkey' and its 'deserved place in the world order' both domestically and abroad (Aydıntaşbaş, 2020; Coskun & Spicer, 2020). Moreover, in his latest book, Germany's former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, lending credence to these claims, stated that Turkey was now an 'incontrovertible dominant force' (Özcan, 2021). These statements reflect a reevaluation of vital interests and a Turkish foreign policy shift regarding its periphery following the 2011 Arab uprisings. The aspiring regional hegemon can be identified through its relations with neighboring states. As such, it is crucial to establish how the state in question views itself concerning its periphery, how other state entities perceive it, the nature of the cultivated diplomatic and economic ties, and the presence of shared values and history. Moreover, a state's dominion over domestic

affairs is vital in preserving policy and image continuity abroad. These criteria help explain whether a state aspires or can aspire for regional hegemony while also enabling the recontextualization of its foreign policy priorities in light of the new framework for analysis.

The 2008 global economic crisis and ensuing domestic priorities slowly shifted the United States' focus away from the Middle Eastern region, as evidenced by the restrained US involvement regarding the Arab uprisings and the Syrian civil war. As nature abhors a vacuum, Turkey seems to have attempted to seize the opportunity for regional gains and leadership, hence ushering in an era where economic and cultural ties would not solely cultivate Turkish clout as in previous years but where military grandeur and geopolitical power play would be essential. In retrospect, the forced resignation of former Minister of Foreign Affairs and later Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu in 2016 indicated a shift in foreign policy regional priorities (Malsin, 2016). While the Turkish initiatives during the 2000s stood as a testament to Turkey's focus on promoting soft power ties with its periphery, which could be explained by cultural hegemony theory, the subsequent years gave way to a more hands-on approach concerning Turkish regional policy. Turkey moved forward with employing hard power: first, with its boots-on-the-ground approach to the Syrian civil war and the Syrian Kurdish issue; second, the Turkish involvement and support provided to the warring parties in the Libyan civil war; and, most recently, its military aid in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. At the same time, domestic developments such as the Gezi Park protests, the renewed struggle against PKK forces, and the 2016 failed military coup undermined Erdoğan's foothold over Turkish affairs. They signaled a return to a more authoritarian approach against all dissident voices. This approach and hard power policies in the Turkish periphery would strengthen Turkey's image as an aspiring regional hegemon.

The aftermath of the Arab uprisings seemed to have placed Turkish regional aspirations in a deadlock with regional hegemons such as Saudi Arabia or Egypt, as represented by the Turkish support towards the Muslim Brotherhood. However, this paper argues that while tense state relations certainly played an essential part in the redefinition of Turkish foreign policy, the driving factor behind TFP recalibration was directly informed by Erdoğan's political priorities, the rapprochement with Kemalist policies and the return of Western antagonism for rallying domestic support.

The paper proceeds as follows. The first section describes regional hegemony and applies it to Turkish foreign policy. The second section analyses and gives historical context to Turkey's shifting relationship with its periphery during the 2010s. The third and final section of the paper studies how Turkish domestic and regional priorities evolved in conjunction, as evidenced by the country's heavier military and diplomatic involvement within its immediate and extended periphery and by the consolidation of Erdoğan's dominion over Turkish affairs.

## **Regional hegemony and the repurposing of Turkish foreign policy**

Hegemony is defined as a political order wherein the hegemon and its worldview are the dominant driving forces on a global or regional level (Gavris, 2019, p. 3). IR literature presents several interpretations concerning the necessary conditions to reach the status of global or regional hegemon (Parlar Dal, 2016, pp. 1–2). The end of the Cold War shifted the structure of the international system to a multipolar one. It gave way to the potential emergence of regional hegemons as protagonists in their respective peripheries. Due to the shifting nature of the multipolar system, the attributes of the hegemon would not be limited to monopolizing military power and providing security. Instead, additional factors related to politics, society, and the economy would come to the fore. As a result, traditional definitions of hegemony would not apply to classifying a state as a regional hegemon. Hence, IR researchers developed several interpretations and tools to correctly identify the newly ascended or aspiring regional hegemons to determine a state's status. Fakiolas distinguished between structural opportunity and structural power in order to differentiate between the power that stems from actual state relations and regional interests and power that originates from a state's actual recognition by other states of its leader status in the region, enjoying at the same time the benefits of this arrangement. With regards to the aspiring regional hegemon, the linkage between structural opportunity and structural power is found in the state's grand strategy, which shapes its interests in the long term (Fakiolas, 1998, pp. 70–73). Ari and Munassar emphasized the difference between role expectation and status-seeking, wherein the former refers to actual policy orientation. At the same time, the latter highlights the relationship and recognition by other entities within the regional vicinity (Ari & Munassar, 2020, p. 8). Moreover, Pedersen articulated the concept of cooperative hegemony to analyze the regional balancing system against hostile states, underlining the advantages of scale, stability, inclusion, and diffusion offered by such a regional arrangement. Additionally, he highlighted power aggregation, power-sharing, and commitment as preconditions that help organize and sustain cooperative hegemony (Pedersen, 2002, pp. 683–689). Furthermore, Destradi stressed the need to differentiate between regional power strategies that can be categorized into imperial (aggressive and coercive), leading (extremely cooperative), and hegemonic. The latter strategy resembles the imperial but relies on subtle means of pressure ranging from providing material incentives to propagating cultural, political, or societal norms and values (Destradi, 2010, pp. 904, 912–913). As such, regional powers can drive different or complementary strategies at various times or when status quo-altering events such as the Arab uprisings occur. In other words, regional hegemons can lead cooperative systems and pursue aggressive regional strategies when they suit their interests and geopolitical priorities.

Prys recognizes four criteria for defining the regional hegemon: first, the state's self-perception; second, how others perceive the state; third, the provision of public goods; and fourth, the projection of values and interests (Prys, 2010, p. 490). The first criterion,

self-perception, is how the hegemon views itself in relation to its region of interests and the duties bestowed upon it as a regional power. Hence, identifying a region as its own and under its protection or representation remains crucial for any aspiring hegemon. As a result, exceptionalism and a sense of special responsibility enter the conversation and act as guiding principles behind any power vying for regional hegemony. The second criterion, outside perception, illustrates the regional hegemon's need to be recognized by other regional actors to gain legitimacy. For instance, other states can ask for or accept the hegemon's assistance in periods of crisis, essentially identifying the hegemon's exclusive ability to support solving or mediating an issue. Moreover, the other actors do not need to be confined geographically to the region. Hence, other regional or global powers can lend credence to a potential hegemon by acknowledging its clout and authority and, in some cases, recognizing its leadership role. The third criterion, the provision of public goods, is usually translated into the economic and market ties with the region's states and is most commonly viewed in the formation of exclusive economic zones and the hegemon's ability to act as a hub for the markets of neighboring states. The final criterion, interest and value projection, stems from the sense of shared values, either historical, traditional, sociological, religious, or linguistic. Furthermore, values and interest projection's structure relationships and create a hierarchy between the hegemon and the other states. As a long-term process, soft power initiatives come in, attempting to create or reinforce the necessary linkage between states and their people (Prys, 2010, pp. 490–495).

Köstem highlights a supplementary element to a state's quest for regional hegemony, which can be identified as consolidating power within its territory. By setting the foundations for unquestionable majoritarian rule within its political system, it is far more feasible for a potential hegemon to promote its power projection policies, soft or hard, within the region it wishes to claim. If the ruling party is not quickly challenged, domestic and foreign policies can be promoted without credible alternatives. As a result, hegemonic tendencies are more likely found in states with stable political systems and foreign policy continuity or periods when a political party stays in power for a long time. Long-running administrations can shape national identity, redefine interests, and state relations with its neighbors (Köstem, 2018, pp. 6–7).

In the case of Turkey, dominion over domestic and foreign affairs was often the mantra of Kemalist interests throughout the twentieth century, as evidenced by the recurring military coup attempts aiming to restore Kemalist secular acquis. The characteristics of the Turkish secular state dictated a policy direction to the West at first, and more specifically to the United States following the end of the Second World War. The drawback of this particular Western-oriented policy was that it placed Turkey at odds with most of the Arab world, as led by Egyptian President Nasser. Nevertheless, the Middle East was not considered a high-priority region during this period. Turkey's self-perception limited its relations with its Middle Eastern periphery in favor of closer ties with the Western world. The states

within the region perceived Turkey as a country allied with the West and tied with foreign interests (Murinson, 2006, p. 945).

To shift its perceived image and open its economy to other potential markets, during the 1980s and more prominently after the downfall of the Soviet Union, Turkey attempted to reach out to Balkan countries, former Soviet Republics, and South Asian countries. This policy aimed both at promoting Turkey's Ottoman past in terms of shared identity, history, customs, traditions, and religion and putting forward the many advantages of tying foreign markets with the Turkish economy. The prospective relations with the other countries in Turkey's wider region would, at first, take a soft power approach and was expected to present the possibility in the future of turning into close political and economic ties, hence establishing an image of Turkey as a provider of goods and as caretaker of the region (Kirişçi, 2009, pp. 37–38; Nye Jr, 2004).

It should come as no surprise that the above endeavor was called out by the Turkish press and the political world as an attempt to 'Americanize' Turkey, or, as Mufti puts it, to morph it into an 'a little America.' The term 'little America' originates from how the American economic and cultural influence grew, first around its immediate periphery and later on a global scale. This influence, which Turkey aimed to replicate, could be distinguished as political, economic, cultural, religious, and social (Mufti, 2011, p. 1; Sözen, 2010, pp. 103–123). The first aspect was promoting economic ties with the former Soviet Republics, the Balkans, and Middle Eastern countries, effectively jumpstarting the hegemony criterion related to providing goods to the periphery. Turkey engaged in opening up its foreign trade, facilitating immigration, and pushing for agreements to remove visa procedures. The goal was to boost people's mobility and expand the service industry's reach to increase capital flows between the Turkish and other markets. From 1990 to 2008, this policy bore fruit as trade balance and transactions grew exponentially. As a result, a prime example of the policy's success was the rapid expansion of the activities of Turkish Airlines to the former Soviet Republics and the Middle East, when comparatively, up until 1989, they were mainly focused on the Western European region. In other words, and lending legitimacy to its regional aspirations, Turkey slowly became an essential economic partner to the regional states (Evin et al., 2010, pp. 19–20).

Additionally, the fourth criterion of shared value and interest projection was in effect by promoting Turkish cultural values, coupled with an emphasis on Islam, the Ottoman past, and the modern aspects of Turkish society. This effort began in the 1980s through the work of Gülen. The latter was the founder of the 'Gülen Movement' or 'hizmet' (service), which established schools and religious and cultural centers in Turkey and abroad to showcase the Turkish and Muslim way of life. Although this endeavor started to strengthen the cultural aspect of the Muslim communities residing in foreign countries, it eventually became a decisive factor regarding soft power cultural ties between Turkey and its periphery (Akyol, 2014; Kestler-D'Amours, 2016).

Turkish modern lifestyle and society and its elite were further promoted via soap operas and the expansion of Turkish television networks throughout the 1990s and 2000s. The television shows were very successful and sold cheaply to make them easily accessible abroad, especially in the former Soviet Republics, the Balkans, and Middle East countries. As a result, high-production shows were made available to a broad Middle Eastern audience. Turkish television and cinema managed to attract both domestic and foreign audiences. The shows had a dual purpose: first, to promote the shared conservative religious values, history, and traditions, as well as the image of Turkish economic wealth; and second, to emphasize issues of interest to their domestic and Middle Eastern audience. A prime example of this phenomenon is the massive commercial success of the television show 'In the Valley of the Wolves,' which spawned, almost every year, many spinoffs and a movie franchise. The franchise's themes seem to have been selected according to the needs of the times, ranging from dealing with the 'deep state' in Turkish politics, the Kurdish issue, and the 2003 US invasion, to the Mavi Marmara incident of 2010 (Arsu, 2010; Ayata, 2015, pp. 95–99; Yörük & Vatikiotis, 2013, pp. 2361–2385).

Soft power initiatives were further emphasized by Turkish efforts to claim leadership of the region, as well as to act as its caretaker or protector. Throughout the 2000s, Turkey searched for ways to replicate Nasser's clout in the Arab world during the 1950–1970 period. The objective was to antagonize the West in a way that would echo the Suez Canal crisis 1956, which would, as a result, greatly enhance Turkey's image in the eyes of the Middle Eastern people. As such, the refusal to assist the NATO coalition in 2003 to topple Saddam Hussein and the diplomatic rift with Israel over the Mavi Marmara incident of 2010 were most certainly steps in this direction (Human Rights Watch, 2009). What is more, the bid to lead the efforts regarding the Palestinian issue, both through indirect mediation as well as via establishing close relations with Hamas, bore fruit as the issue remains a heated subject of discussion both domestically and abroad. Essentially, by affirming Turkey's mediating role in the Middle East and its opposition to Western policies, Ankara sought to be acknowledged as a reliable and robust player in regional affairs (Aras, 2009, pp. 5–7; Drakoularakos, 2021, p. 27; Yeşilada, 2016, pp. 19–24).

### **The aftereffects of the Arab uprisings**

The Turkish strategy concerning the Middle East as well as the European Union after the rise to power of the AKP in 2002 can be split into two phases: the first ends with the Arab uprisings and their immediate repercussions, while the second originates from the need to re-evaluate domestic and foreign policy priorities and to move from a soft power approach to a more 'boots on the ground' one. The period until 2011 can be described as the decade when the AKP governments flirted with the Turkish European accession. The latter was viewed as a necessary step to pre-emptively counter a future military coup against the staying power of Erdoğan's AKP. A repeat of the Turkish military coup history of 1960,

1971, 1980, and 1997 – against what was considered as straying away from Kemalist state and societal tenets – seemed to have been sidestepped for as long as the Turkish accession process remained ongoing. At the same time, soft power initiatives were encouraged, and Turkey's image as a model state was heavily promoted in an attempt to assume leadership in the region; the period following the Arab uprisings forced Turkey to examine the repercussions of the revolts closely and to adapt the guidelines of its foreign policy to match the constantly shifting developments. While efforts during previous years focused on economic relations, the promotion of shared history, culture, and traditions, and with the targeting of Israel regarding the Palestinian matter as the force de frappe, the Arab uprisings created issues that demanded a more hands-on approach from Turkey, in order to sustain its active presence in Arab affairs and its image as a regional power.

Turkey, faced with the developments of the Arab uprisings, attempted to seize the opportunity and present itself as a model country where political Islam and a secular state could cohabitate successfully in harmony. The model country argument was rooted in the hegemony criteria of exceptionalism, as Turkey viewed its political system as one that should be promoted and emulated for the seismic changes of 2011-2012 to take hold (Erdem, 2012, p. 435).

Attempting to present itself as a caretaker and leader of the region, Turkey was one of the first countries that called for democratic elections in Tunisia in 2011 and, a year later, in Egypt. It followed up by recognizing the Muslim Brotherhood chapter that emerged from future elections. Concurrently, Turkey promoted its example to replicate the democratic presence and rule of a conservative Islamic party in power, as well as the respect of the different religious communities within the country. However, the further spread of the Arab Spring phenomenon would present the Turkish ruling party with a conundrum. At first, Turkey did not support the uprising in Libya against Gaddafi in February 2011. Instead, Turkey held a neutral position and attempted to play a mediating role regarding the promotion of reforms. In other words, Turkey – contradicting its policy in Tunisia and Egypt – moved forward with maintaining instead of changing the status quo. Turkey's political stance concerning Bashar al-Assad and the Syrian civil war is not different, at least in its early months. The reasons behind the Turkish policy directions regarding Libya and Syria were based on the healthy economic, political, and strategic ties that it maintained with its leadership. On the one hand, Gaddafi's Libya offered Turkey the opportunity to connect with the countries of North and, especially, Central Africa. On the other hand, the ties with Assad's Syria were founded on territorial proximity (since Turkey and Syria share borders of 900 km) and the fact that normalization ensured closer relations with Iran and an improvement of Turkey's standing within the region. During the 1980-1990 decades and until the 1998 Adana memorandum, relations with Syria were strained due to its tolerance of the presence of PKK forces within its territory. Hence, Turkey encouraged gestures of good faith, calling for reforms to de-escalate the situation. Nonetheless, Ankara's initial support of the Assad regime was not viewed favorably by its Arab neighbors and affected



the country's global standing (Ayata, 2015, pp. 101–102; Aydin, 2020, p. 218; Grigoriadis, 2014, pp. 166–167; Parlar Dal, 2016, p. 18; Tocci et al., 2011).

As the Syrian civil war reached closer to the Turkish borders and the Syrian Kurds emerged as a central player, Turkey was forced to opt for a more active stance, moving forward with readjustments to its policies. While Ankara came out in support of the Syrian opposition and against the Assad regime in the hopes of developing its regional clout, it would eventually focus on the Syrian Kurdish momentum as it was considered a national security and territorial sovereignty issue. The possibility of an autonomous Kurdish state near its southern borders prompted Turkish foreign policy to recalibrate and eventually re-evaluate its position regarding the future of Syria. In other words, Turkish priorities would shift from supporting the Sunni-led opposition to the Assad regime in favor of hampering the Syrian Kurdish state-building process. The objective was to weaken Syrian Kurdish momentum and irredentism, as the Rojava Kurds were believed to maintain strong ties with the fighters of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) in Turkey. As a result, priorities of national security and territorial integrity took precedence over diplomatic initiatives and enabled Turkey to apply hard power to its aspirations for regional hegemony (Kristianasen, 2013).

Moreover, in 2013, a military coup overthrew the elected government of the Muslim Brotherhood led by President Morsi. Previously, Turkey had immediately recognized the Morsi government and had inaugurated a diplomatic relationship with Egypt. The military coup was condemned by Ankara, in turn making future political and economic ties strenuous, to say the least (Özpek & Demirağ, 2014, pp. 328–329; 339–340). Turkish expectations for the promotion of close relations with Egypt collapsed after 2013. The hopes were founded on the idea that an Egyptian government that supported Turkish policies would enhance Turkish influence and approval in Arab matters. Egyptian support would be sought out due to Egypt's historic role during the twentieth century as the leader of pan-Arabism and due to the international clout of the Islamic University of al-Azhar in Cairo (Nir, 2013).

Additionally, in 2015, the fighting between the forces of the PKK and the Turkish military was reignited three years after the ceasefire was established and talks were promoted, resulting in turning the southeastern region into a battlefield once again. The impasse concerning the talks seems to have resulted from two factors: the first was the Turkish initiative to take up military action against the Syrian Kurds near the Syrian-Turkish border for matters of national security and territorial integrity – albeit claiming to target the fighters of the Islamic State also active in the area; the second seems to originate from the electoral results of 2015 and the parliamentary representation of the HDP (People's Democratic Party), a left-wing party which stood for Kurdish minority recognition and the promotion of Kurdish minority rights. The party was eventually accused of alleged ties with the PKK, and HDP Co-chairman Selahattin Demirtaş was imprisoned in 2016. The HDP's electoral success had prevented the AKP (Justice and Development Party) from obtaining the absolute majority it needed to realize President Erdoğan's ambitions regarding holding a referendum on revising the Turkish constitution and strengthening his executive powers (Akyol, 2015; Uras, 2015). The



re-ignition of the struggle against the PKK, coupled with Islamic State attacks on Turkish territory, created a volatile situation within Turkish territory that security forces were unable to control (International Crisis Group, 2020; Soliev, 2017, pp. 24–25). This predicament called for a re-evaluation of the relations with neighboring states in an attempt to address the security situation (Pierini).

## **The ‘second independence war’ and the remastered bid for regional hegemony**

A regional hegemon tends to be defined by the economic, political, cultural, or military influence he holds over other countries. The aspiring hegemon’s main characteristic is its willingness to clash with the previously established status quo. Other hegemons usually propagate the latter as it serves their interests. Hence, the aspiring hegemon attempts to create and promote its network of interests with himself as the primary recipient. As a result, the above argument can be made for Turkey through, first, the use of soft power in the 2000s related to economic, political, and cultural ties with the region; second, Turkish military involvement and aid abroad; third, diplomatic disputes with western leaders; and fourth, efforts to challenge previously established treaties and agreements in the region. More specifically, the 1923 Lausanne treaty regarding the post-first World War status quo, US military personnel and equipment presence in the Incirlik air base, and even the nuclear non-proliferation treaty of 1968.

While Erdoğan’s foothold over domestic politics mainly remained unchallenged throughout the 2000s, the following decade saw several issues rise to the forefront. Since 2015, Turkey has been dealing with the renewed struggle against the forces of the PKK, the Kemalist supporters of the previous status quo, as well as the problems created by the rift with Erdoğan’s former allies within the Gülen movement. The failed military coup of July 2016 led to the declaration of a ‘second war of independence’ in 2019 as a direct follow-up to the 1919–1923 war. Deemed an affront to Turkish sovereignty and national integrity, Ankara’s reaction materialized in stricter security measures and the crackdown on academics, activists, journalists, minorities, foreigners, and religious officials (Hammargren, 2018). Although Greek-Orthodox, Jewish, and Armenian religious leaders were considered co-conspirators, the Gülen movement and its leader, Fethullah Gülen, were primarily designated as the orchestrators behind the coup. Moreover, Gülen’s self-exile in the US provided necessary fodder for the sustenance and growth of conspiracy theories regarding Western interference in Turkey and the Middle East (Arango & Yeginsu, 2016).

To re-establish his dominion over Turkish domestic affairs, Erdoğan moved forward with corrective policies throughout the late 2010s. Hence, the genesis of a ‘second war of independence’ dates to as early as 2013 and the Gezi Park protests, when Erdoğan considered the demonstrations against his administration as an attack against Turkey. This correlation

personified Turkey with its President (Weise, 2016). What is more, the starting point from which the 'second independence war' is waged is considered to be the date of the 2016 failed military coup. The ramifications regarding foreign policy were felt through the crackdown on the fighters of the PKK within Turkey, as well as with the boots-on-the-ground approach and the Turkish military operations (such as Operation Olive Branch) in the northern Syrian borders (Güler, 2018; Gultasli, 2014).

The 2013 Gezi Park protests signaled the beginning of an era when the AKP – the ruling party in Turkish politics – would find itself challenged within the Turkish political sphere. The protests were the first significant and heavily publicized contestation of both Erdoğan's political aspirations and Turkey's image as a democratic and pluralistic political system. This wave of protests was followed three years later by the failed military coup attempt, which gave way to strict security measures that further emphasized the country's shift to a more authoritarian approach in dealing with the will of the people and with political detractors to the dominant party line. While heavily decried by non-partisan domestic and international media, new security measures and reforms were implemented in the following years. The aftermath of this predicament for Erdoğan was that it restrained his efforts to assert his persona and his vision of Turkey as the predominant ones, as evidenced by the results of the electoral procedures that followed (Bostan-Ünsal, 2013, p. 21; Zihnioğlu, 2019).

To develop the narrative of the Second War of Independence, during a speech in December 2016 regarding the Turkish military intervention in northern Syria, Erdoğan stipulated that Turkey was facing a Sèvres-comparable predicament, referencing directly the First War of Independence and the 1920 Sèvres treaty. Initially, it certainly seemed that the concept was based on linking the two wars of independence and on presenting the second as the one that would correct the failings of the first, especially about the territories lost as a result of the 1923 Lausanne treaty (Ahval News, 2019; Kayaoglu, 2016).

One of the tenets of the regional hegemon is that it pursues or maintains a tight hold over the domestic political sphere, preventing the rise of voices from the opposition and from finding their footing and followers. This enables the hegemon to enact its foreign policy unhindered, presenting a narrative of strength, unity, and, more importantly, stability to the periphery. As such, the Gezi Park protests and the state's reaction to them showed a facet of Turkey that was seldom apparent after 2002 and the AKP's electoral success. This turnaround put Erdoğan's domestic and foreign policies to the test, effectively determining the need for reshaping the course of action. Although the international impact of the Gezi Park protests and the failed coup challenged Turkey's image as a model democratic country in the region, at the same time, the domestic developments ushered a renewed era striving to redefine Turkish identity under the banner of Islam and neo-Ottomanism and in other words, shifting the focus away from Mustafa Kemal's secular and Western-oriented reforms with regards to 1920s modern Turkey and restructuring twenty-first-century Turkish identity towards reconnecting with Ottoman history, conservative religious traditions, and the glory days of the former Empire. This endeavor aimed to place dissident voices on the fringes of society,

essentially rendering them ineffective when contrasted with the will of the Muslim majority. The latter – in theory – gave Erdoğan *carte blanche* since, through this narrative process, it gave the AKP government the legitimacy it required as the representative of the Turkish people, now defined by its heavily promoted religious-conservative image. In other words, even though the 2013 demonstrations and the aftermath of the 2016 failed coup initially impeded Turkish regional hegemony aspirations, they were eventually assimilated via the ongoing discourse related to Turkish identity and the establishment of a narrative of ‘us versus them.’ In the end, the demonstrations enabled Turkey to reconfigure its domestic and foreign policy and to restart its bid for regional hegemony in its extended periphery (Moudouros, 2014, pp. 183–184; Nefes, 2017, p. 10; Özen, 2020, pp. 2–3).

The linkage between the post-coup situation in Turkey and the original war of independence presented many positive side effects for Erdoğan: first, the Turkish people’s historical memory was reignited, especially when taking into account the Kemal-centric version of events that until recently was the cornerstone of the schools’ curriculum; second, it triggered the historical memory of the 1923 Lausanne treaty – which concluded the original war of independence – as an international document that needs to be revised in light of the new emerging Turkish status quo as well as its centennial anniversary in 2023; and, third, it presented several possibilities – in disregard of international law – regarding both Turkey’s long-established national borders, as well as potentially reenergizing relations with former Ottoman dominions by refuting the will of foreign powers. This linkage underlined Erdoğan’s efforts to reshape Turkish national identity and to move it away from the Kemalist one of the twentieth century. Under the Islamic-conservative umbrella, the objective was to present a united and monolithic Turkey, able to provide the AKP government with the legitimacy to sidestep its domestic opposition, consolidate power, and promote its domestic and foreign policies unchallenged (Köstem, 2018, p. 17; Özen, 2020, p. 12).

Furthermore, the ‘second independence war’ led to the formation of a narrative for a renewed Turkish engagement with its periphery, once again in a bid to emerge as a regional hegemon. While initially, the 2016 coup triggered a recalibration of domestic policy, it also impacted Turkish foreign policy. Security priorities guided Turkey’s closer entanglement in the Syrian civil war, inaugurating its military engagement in the region. The latter would set an inclination for hard power policies that would materialize outside its immediate periphery. Although not driven by security priorities as in the Syrian case, Turkey’s involvement in Libya and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict would set the tone for Turkish foreign policy, both as a show of strength and a demonstration of its aspiring role in the region. Hence, the Turkish entanglement in Syria is expected to last, in addition to Ankara’s involvement in Libya. Funds, mercenaries from the Syrian civil war, and military support were sent out in aid to the Government of National Accord against the push led by General Haftar of the Libyan National Army. As such, the criterion related to military support to states in need is effectively highlighted and underlined further through Turkish aid to Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (Cagaptay, 2019; Feuer & Lindenstrauss, 2020).

Turkish power projection within the region is also found in Greek-Turkish relations and – to an extent – Turkish-European negotiations. During his first official visit to Athens in December 2017, Erdoğan referred to the Lausanne Treaty as not being applied fairly and needing revisions (Moudouros, 2014, pp. 182–183; Papachelas, 2017). This statement, predictively, was considered a cause for concern by the Greek government since it directly affected Greek national sovereignty, in addition to the already prominent Greek-Turkish issues and the ongoing Cyprus question from previous decades. Moreover, the idea of the *Mavi Vatan* (Blue Homeland) naval doctrine made a comeback within the Turkish political sphere and is often commonly referred to when discussing Turkish national interests nowadays. The doctrine's reach is not restricted or bound solely to Greek-Turkish or natural gas matters. Moreover, it is a product of a potential rapprochement between Kemalists and Erdoğan concerning foreign policy, where interests and priorities converge, specifically in the cases of Syria, Libya, and, most recently, Azerbaijan (Kucera, 2020). As a result, the Turkish entanglement in these cases is not viewed unfavorably. Instead, it is perceived as a policy of power projection where the CHP (Republican People's Party) and the AKP can find common ground and collaborate in unison (Casapoglu, 2019; Uzgl, 2020).

Furthermore, the 2008 global financial crisis turned the attention of the United States away from the Middle East and allowed Turkey to move forward with more independent initiatives. The latter led to verbal confrontations with European leaders, as with Macron, for instance, regarding the treatment of Muslim communities in France and Turkey's entanglement in Libya. Moreover, there has been an ongoing discussion among American security experts related to the presence of part of the US nuclear arsenal in the Incirlik airbase in Turkey, in conjunction with Erdoğan's statements regarding the country's right to acquire its nuclear weapons. Some statements even include the willingness to close down the Incirlik airbase in response to the threat of US sanctions. It is worth noting that throughout the twentieth century, Turkey signed some treaties related to nuclear non-proliferation. While regional powers did not acknowledge Turkey's hegemon aspirations, their disposition to negotiate with Ankara regarding regional issues indicates a shift in the balance of power in contrast to Turkey's previous standing (Al-Jazeera, 2019; France24, 2020; Lynch, 2019).

Regarding the shared values and history criterion, Erdoğan moved forward with converting the Hagia Sophia museum into a mosque in July 2020. The decision had ramifications both within the Turkish political forum and abroad. Essentially, it consisted of a way for Erdoğan to underline that despite the results of previous elections, he solely remained the guiding force in Turkish politics. One could even go as far as to question the timing of the Hagia Sophia conversion, as it coincided with the fourth anniversary of the 2016 failed coup attempt (Burhanettin, 2020; New York Times, 2020). On the other hand, reverting the Hagia Sophia into a mosque brought a secondary aspect to Erdoğan's decision: it could be considered a renewed bid for the leadership of the Muslim world. Hence, by switching back to the status of the mosque and bringing back memories of the Ottoman times, the audience is both Turkish, as well as people of the Muslim faith. In the same way that Egypt hosts the

al-Azhar University and Mecca is located in Saudi Arabia, the Hagia Sophia can be shone as a beacon for Muslim followers and can strengthen the attempt to remake Turkey into the religious center of the Muslim world (Gall, 2020). Interestingly, state leaders such as Egypt's al-Sisi maintain strained relations with Turkey, while most of the Egyptian population likes Erdoğan's persona and favors his policies. Where Turkey is seen as a rival – as in the case of Egypt and Saudi Arabia – it is instead usually viewed as the protector of Palestinian and Muslim interests with a charismatic leader to follow on social media (Ceyhun, 2018).

## **Conclusion**

This article analyzed the evolution of Turkey's regional hegemony aspirations in light of the developments following the Arab uprisings during the 2010s. In doing this, I first presented the tenets of the aspiring regional hegemon and explored previous Turkish foreign policy within this framework. Second, I analyzed and provided context to Turkey's policies concerning the Arab uprisings and their aftereffects in the mid-2010s. Lastly, I articulated how domestic Turkish priorities informed regional hegemony policy, leading to a more direct entanglement in Turkey's immediate and expanded periphery, in contrast to previous decades.

An aspiring regional hegemon is defined by its self-perception as the region's leader, how other states view it, its ability as a provider of goods and as caretaker of the periphery, as well as the presence of shared values, history, tradition, and religion between states in the region. The aspiring hegemon's policy continuity and domestic political stability are also an additional element. Throughout the 2000s and 2010s, this definition slowly started to apply to Turkey, as demonstrated by the evolution of economic, religious, and political ties with neighboring states and by the promotion of Ankara as a mediating player in regional affairs. Moreover, while Erdoğan's dominion over domestic affairs failed to remain uncontested, especially considering the 2013 Gezi Park protests and the 2016 coup attempt, corrective policies such as the narrative of the 'second independence war' enabled Erdoğan to consolidate power and to present the image of a monolithic and strong Turkey, at least regarding its foreign policy priorities.

Until the Arab uprisings, Turkish foreign policy had pushed for the reestablishment of ties with neighboring countries and European integration. The 2011 status quo seismic shift and the 2010s domestic political turbulence in Turkey led to necessary adjustments to Turkish foreign policy. As such, previous soft power initiatives would be followed by hard power ones, as evidenced by Ankara's entanglement in the Syrian and Libyan crises and the Nagorno-Karabakh issue in the late 2010s. While Turkey's Syrian entanglement would be informed by territorial integrity priorities and the Kurdish issue, it would pave the way for more substantial involvement in matters in the region that did not directly affect Turkish interests. By providing direct economic, military, and diplomatic support outside of its immediate periphery, Turkey widened its reach and clout, attempting to establish its

interests as a regional hegemon that should not be ignored. The objective would be to challenge the status quo shepherded by the West during the twentieth century as articulated by the Mavi Vatan doctrine, the motivation to renegotiate the Lausanne treaty, the conversion of the Hagia Sophia into a mosque, and even the escalating Erdoğan-Macron verbal feud. During the coming years, it remains to be seen whether the previously established status quo will prove too rigid for Turkey's regional hegemony aspirations to bear fruit. In any case, Erdoğan's foreign policy approach is a testament to the country's continuous bid for regional hegemony.

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