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FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
Institute of Political Studies
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**Turkey as a growing regional power?
Strengths and limitations.**

Master's thesis

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Study programme: International Economics and Political Studies

Supervisor: Dr. Slavomir Horak

Year of the defence: 2019

Declaration

1. I hereby declare that I have compiled this thesis using the listed literature and resources only.
2. I hereby declare that my thesis has not been used to gain any other academic title.
3. I fully agree to my work being used for study and scientific purposes.

In Prague on 29 July 2019

Aghayar Aliyev

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Title

Turkey as a growing regional power? Strengths and limitations.

Abstract

This study analyses the strengths and limitations of Turkey on its way to becoming a regional power in the Middle East. Using the major theories of International Relations (Realism and Liberalism), the study presents the definition and main criteria of the term of regional power. The key purpose of this study is to examine if today's Turkey meets the requirements of being a recognized regional leader.

The paper examines the period under the governance of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) which has started in 2002 and continues since then. During these 17 years, Turkey has gone through 3 distinct stages; Recovery from the internal political and economic crisis, ascendancy to a regional power level in the Middle East region and the decline phase which came as a result of failures in internal and external affairs. In order to understand the position of Turkey in the region and its regional influence during this period Turkish economic and military power capabilities are thoroughly analyzed and compared to the same statistical indicators of other Middle East countries. Moreover, the paper also analyses the foreign policy of Turkey towards the regional actors and the level of its recognition as a major power by international players.

The study confirms that Turkey has lost its status as a regional power due to internal and external factors. Even though Turkey is still accepted as one of the major players of the region, the continued failure of democracy under the current regime, a weakened army and the "sick" economy have considerably affected its position. Furthermore, the deterioration of the relations with regional states and the failed foreign policy strategy made it less likely for Turkey to be accepted as a regional power.

Keywords

Turkey, Middle East, Regional Power, Soft Power, Hard Power, Strength, Limitation

Název práce

Turkey as a growing regional power? Strengths and limitations.

Abstrakt

This study analyses the strengths and limitations of Turkey on its way to becoming a regional power in the Middle East. Using the major theories of International Relations (Realism and Liberalism), the study presents the definition and main criteria of the term of regional power. The key purpose of this study is to examine if today's Turkey meets the requirements of being a recognized regional leader.

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Klíčová slova

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Institute of Political Studies
Master thesis proposal

Master Thesis Proposal

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Topic Characteristics:

Passed not more than a century when the successor of Ottoman empire-Turkey started to claim the role of regional power. Whereas the Ottoman Empire was on the verge of collapse at the beginning of the 20th century, Turkey became a strong economic and military power with its steady growing positive international image at the beginning of a new century. End of the Cold War, new political and economic environment caused by deepened globalization and regional integration created favorable condition for Turkey to aspire its new role. This new role was defined by some authors as mediation, by others as historical leadership. No matter how it is defined, Turkey's intention to increase its sphere of influences, having more predominant political and economic relations in post-Ottoman areas is clear behavior of political actor, which strives for acceptance/recognition as a regional power.

Starting since 1980s Turkey moved to a new phase of development. Economic liberalization, increase in export and adaptation of European economic model brought steady economic growth and prosperity to the county. This success became more stable and visible in the very early years of the 21st century when the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power. Reforms initiated by AKP both on economic and political spheres made Turkey recognized as a steady growing power in the region. The country became 16th strongest economy in the world and secured its place in G20. Besides economic growth, AKP managed to bring more democratic value and human rights, which were key conditions for the country on its way to become EU member.

Active foreign policy both on regional and global level made Turkey to be recognized and accepted as an important actor in international politics. Moving to zero problem policy with

neighboring countries, exposing itself more to ongoing regional and global political issues as mediator state and promoter of economic integrity helped Turkey to strengthen ties with regional and international actors. AKP managed to build a strong state in harmony with its conservative religious stance which proved to be successful both in domestic and foreign spheres.

With its democratic stance and growing economy, many started to accept Turkey as a good model for other developing Muslim countries. However, this euphoria did not last long enough. Strict internal policy of the ruling party in the last 10 years badly affected democracy in the country and especially human rights. This led to continuous demonstrations where many civilians were arrested. Turkey faced several considerable problems also in bilateral relations. Deterioration of relations with neighbors, conflict with Israel, Syria and later with big powers such as Russia and recently with the USA brought big doubts to the status of Turkey as growing regional power. Moreover, the attempt for a military coup in 2016 which was followed by arrests of many officials in the Turkish army and the current ongoing economic issues have further weakened Turkey.

This Thesis analyzes the strengths and limitations of Turkey on the way to become a recognized regional power. I will analyze the effectiveness of AKP which led to the strengthening of Turkey's position and drawbacks which pulled it back from its target to become a leading power in the region. The Thesis will further elaborate on conditions or success criteria which are key for Turkey to follow as its mainstream policy to realize its goal.

The research question: Is Turkey recognized regional power in the Middle East? What are the key areas where Turkey has failed on its way to regional leadership?

Hypotheses:

1. Worsening bilateral relations with the regional states and traditional partners –EU and the USA have further worsened the role of Turkey in the region
2. The current undemocratic stance of the AKP government with the steady arrest of civilians and members of mass media make it less attractive for the Middle East countries to follow Turkey as a role model.
3. Failure in the realization of zero-conflicts with neighboring states and political consequences of the Arab Spring further diminished Turkey's sphere of influences.
4. The troubles after the failed military coup within the Turkish Army and the current challenges in the economy are the main threats for Turkey's dominant role.

Methodology:

For my master thesis, I will use both qualitative and quantitative methodology. As a considerable part of the thesis will be devoted to soft power policy of Turkey and its political

relations with great powers and states in the Middle East region qualitative data will essentially be used. Theories of International Relations (IR) and the papers of the IR philosophers will be used to define and systemize the term of regional power. IR theories are the basis for building hypothesis, which will be supported and further elaborated with actual political processes/facts.

While examining economic growth and development of Turkey, quantitative literature will be the key resource to be analyzed. Moreover, in the military and economic parts of this paper statistical data will be predominantly used.

Outline:

1. Introduction
2. Literature review and theoretical framework
3. Economic strength of Turkey in the Middle East region
4. Military power of Turkey.
5. Regional foreign policy of Turkey towards the Middle East.
6. International recognition of Turkey as a regional power?
7. Conclusion

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1. Introduction

Starting from the beginning of the 20th century when AKP came into power, Turkey has started to achieve remarkable results in internal affairs and foreign policy. By overcoming the political and economic crisis the ruling party could bring internal stability to the country. By putting a key focus on the liberalization of the economy and considerably increasing the size of its export Turkey managed to become 16th biggest economy on the globe. Economic success has followed by strong wins in foreign policy. One of the key goals of “new” Turkey was to diminish conflicts with neighboring countries and achieve deeper regional integration. Moreover, Turkey in the early years of AKP government became a more democratic country that put a high value on human rights and freedom. All these factors improved the popularity of Turkey in the international arena. Many started to show Turkey as a role model for other Muslim countries in the Middle East.

Turkey was well aware of its growing influence and popularity in the Middle East region. On contrary to its success in the Middle East, Turkey was still far away from its another key foreign policy goal- to become an EU member state. The long process of membership discussions with the EU lasting for many years made Turkey lose its interest and hope for a successful result. Disappointment with never-ending membership discussions and the intention to have a more independent foreign policy made Turkey keep the distance from its western partners. By doing so Turkey has also set a new foreign policy priority for itself. Now, the main purpose was to become a regional power in the Middle East.

This thesis will focus on the strengths and weaknesses of Turkey on its way to becoming a regional power in the Middle East. This study aims to find an answer to the following research questions: *Is Turkey recognized regional power in the Middle East? What are the key areas where Turkey has failed on its way to regional leadership?* Below stated four hypotheses will be discussed which will facilitate to have answers to the research questions:

- *Worsening bilateral relations with key international powers and traditional partners –the EU and USA have further worsened the role of Turkey in the region*
- *The current undemocratic stance of AKP government with the steady arrest of civilians and members of mass media makes it less attractive for the Middle East countries in the region to follow Turkey as a role model.*
- *Failure in the realization of zero-conflicts with neighboring states and political consequences of the Arab Spring further diminished Turkey’s sphere of influences.*
- *The troubles after the failed military coup within the Turkish Army and the current challenges in the economy are the main threats for Turkey’s dominant role.*

In regard to methodology, both qualitative and quantitative data will be used. By using the theories of International Relations (Realism and Liberalism) the study will define the term of regional power and list its key criteria. The available statistical data will be used to describe the military and economic power of Turkey and to show where it stands in comparison to the other states in the Middle East.

The core structure of the thesis is built in the following way: Chapter II is a literature review and theoretical framework. This chapter will mainly present theoretical definition of regional power and outline the key requirements necessary for a political actor to become a regional leader. Chapter III will give a detailed overview of the economic strength of Turkey in the Middle East region. The chapter does not only describe the key economic indicators of the Turkish economy but also compares it with the economies of other countries in the region. Moreover, the development of economic relations between Turkey and the regional states has also been reviewed. Chapter IV will describe the role of the Turkish Army in society and will mainly focus on the military power of Turkey. Chapter V will analyze Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East region and Chapter VI will explain if Turkey is accepted as a (regional) power by international political actors. The last part of this thesis will discuss the key findings of the study and will summarize the argumentations which support the validity of the hypotheses.

2. Literature Review and theoretical framework

2.1. Definition of regional power. Key features of the term

As was predicted by some scholars of International Relations (IR), the 21st century brought some changes to the general structure of international politics. Two important political events; More extensive globalization which came with the end of the Second World War and collapse of USSR resulted in the formation of new independent states. Many could think that the collapse of USSR would lead the world to Unipolar system with the leadership of the USA or possibly to a more multipolar system with the gradual development of other global powers. However, recent political processes in the world show that with the formation of more new states in different spots of the earth, we are moving to more region- oriented political system.

The creation of new independent states and change in the political structure of the world allowed some political actors to strive for a dominant role in their respective regions. Leading by the successful example of regional integration project especially in Europe, many states have initiated similar foreign policy strategies in order to extend their sphere of influence over respective regions. Brazil in South America, India in South Asia and Turkey in the Middle East region became most discussed examples of regional power understanding.¹

The resulted political structure created a new topic of research for scholars of IR. Starting from the beginning of the new century more and more academic papers were written about regional power. However, despite the growing number of researches, case studies on this topic and the existence of a similar explanation of this political term, there is no single agreed definition of regional power. There are a few open questions regarding the term. However, the most important question stays unchanged; What are the key elements/ requirements of being considered as a regional power?

Despite the fact that there are a number of academic papers written about regional power, there are only a few common features of the term that most experts of IR agree upon. These features are about the superior power of any leading state in a related region and the fact that it has some direct or indirect influence on other regional actors.² Most of the written works on this topic concentrate on a single approach or definition of the term by referring to specific case studies. Whereas some authors refer to power consolidation and capabilities, others tried to draw similarities between international and regional hierarchy while conceptualizing the term. For example, Lemke in his writings defines regional power in terms of the distribution of power among actors in the region. Regional leader state is considered as a key player who regulates the interstate relations in the region and tries to preserve status quo.³ Some other philosophers of IR define regional power as a superior state of the region that is recognized by other actors. Nolte describes this state as hegemon state which tries to promote regional cooperation.

¹ Kliman, D. and Fontaine, R. (2012). Global Swing States Brazil, India, Indonesia, Turkey and the Future of International Order. Policy Paper. The German Marshall Fund of the United States. Policy

² Ustun, C. (2014). Theoretical Analysis of Turkey as a Regional Power. Available at: <http://web.isanet.org/Web/Conferences/FLACSOISA%20BuenosAires%202014/Archive/3bae0df8-d05d-4837-9811-73216a2a95bf.pdf>

³ Lemke, D. (2002), Regions of War and Peace, Cambridge University Press, pp.53-56

Detlef Nolte an author of several well-known papers dedicated to comparisons and definition of regional powers is among the authors who are united around the idea that there is a gap in theoretical clarity of the term. Prof. Nolte claims that even though there are plenty of writings regarding regional power, there is no clear theoretical model which can be applied for a definition of the term and used for comparison of regional powers. According to him, a regional power is a state which is the most influential and important in a specific region. However, this is the only general term which is not elaborated in the detailed analytical concept. While asking the traditional questions which clarifies the term, Nolte is questioning also the current status of the international political system. Ambiguous use of terms in academic papers and in mass media which aim to describe a different range of powers, fail to reach consensus on the unified description of many terms, including regional power⁴

Cigdem Ustun has outlined the main features of regional power by referring to D. Nolte. She says that in general, by regional power one can understand a state which includes the following key features; Being part of the region which locates in any part of the world and includes several states/political institutions with clearly defined political, regional and economic borders differentiating it from other regions. This state should have considerable power for influence and effective tools to impose its own interests in the region. That is why it is key for the state to be considered and accepted as a real power in the region not only by regional states themselves but also from other international actors. Thus, the political actor defining itself as a regional power should play the role of representative of its region in the international political arena. Furthermore, the state is to act as a leading power in regional projects where the terms and conditions of ongoing agreements are accepted or refused under its de-facto supervision.⁵

Considering the mentioned characteristics above, will it be enough for a state to be defined as a regional power solely by means of hard power? Is hard power the key factor determining the role of the state in the political system? Hard power is the necessary factor to make others obey by exerting own national interests. However, even though military capabilities of the state is an important feature, this can be still unsatisfactory to be considered as a consolidated strong regional power. The internal political system, the way of governance, democratic rules, approach to human right, socio-economic conditions, which in general defined as soft power are among other important signs through which political actor can either strengthen or weaken its regional power status⁶. There is no doubt that countries with a democratic system and stable economic policy can be accepted as role-model by other less developed states of the region. As an example, we can mention the first decade (2002-2012) of AKP governance in Turkey. (This will be discussed more in details in upcoming parts). New reforms, democratization, and acceptance of western liberal economic model helped Turkey to attract Arabic countries in the Middle East. Turkey was not only recognized by these states and its western partners but also was showed a successful role model to other Muslim countries. This was a clear indication that Turkey during these years made a step forward to be recognized as an indispensable power in the region.

4 Nolte, D. (2007), How to Compare Regional Powers: Analytical Concepts and Research Topics. GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Hamburg

⁵ Ustun C. (2014)

⁶ Jan, J. (2014) Reflections on the Theory of Regional Soft Power Problems. Cross-Cultural Communication, Canadian Academy of Oriental and Occidental Culture. Available at: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/cc/article/view/4330/5798>

2.2. Limitation of regional power and role definition

While discussing the definition of regional power some scholars argue about the extent of the limitation of power the political actor should possess. The main question is that if a political actor can be accepted as both regional and global power? Some scholars do defend the claim by arguing that the actor can at the same time have key characteristics of both regional and global power. In this case, the power does not only exert its interests on a global level but also is closely integrated with the region where it is geographically located. This political power should have above stated features of regional power and act as leader of the region in international and regional political events. However, the counter-arguments state that regional power is limited to a specific region only. Even though some regional powers are supported and possess a considerable role in international politics they don't have enough possibilities for a bigger sphere of influence on a global level.

Other than the defined key elements of regional power and its theoretical definitions within different schools of IR, it is important to know how the political actor itself defines or names its aspiration for regional domination. According to Stefan Schim, each actor claiming the role of regional power should define its key function in the region. This function can vary depending on the sphere of the project where the actor is actively involved. In the area of regional trade or other economic projects the actor can define its role as 'promoter of liberal trade'. This can be the role of 'peace protector' in case the actor is engaged with a resolution of regional conflict. The same role definition we do observe in the example of Turkey which has claimed more than one role in order to demonstrate and consolidate its dominance.⁷

2.3. Realism paradigm. Definition of regional power by Realist school of thought

When we are speaking about regional power as a political term we should mainly understand theoretical definition and structure of power itself. This is the undeniable fact that power as a tool is the key stimulator behind almost all political processes. That is why, while building the theoretical framework for the explanation of main political events, theorists of IR have first tried to clarify the meaning of power and its importance in international politics.

Two major, traditional schools of IR discipline – Realism and Liberalism paradigms have developed a distinct definition of power. On the core base of arguments from both paradigms stands the nature of human being. According to Realism, human nature is egoistic. Throughout the history human being strived to achieve the best for himself only, which was possible by victimizing interests of others by means of power⁸. On contrary to Realism, liberalist theorists refused to define human nature by limiting it to a single egocentric feature. Even though liberalists accept efforts of a human being to achieve the

⁷ Gurzel, A. (2014), Turkey's Role as a Regional and Global Player and its Power Capacity: Turkey's Engagement with other Emerging States, *Journal of Revista de Sociologia e Política (Rev Soc e Politic)*. Available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/268575152_Turkey_s_Role_as_a_Regional_and_Global_Player_and_its_Power_Capacity_Turkey_s_Engagement_with_other_Emerging_States

⁸ Korab-Karpowicz, W. J. (2017). Political Realism in International Relations, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.). Available at <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/realism-intl-relations/>

best possible value for himself, they do claim that this can be possible through cooperation with other individuals as well. By this, liberalists offer an alternative theory to 'raw power, competition, rivalry', which were set by realists as key means for power accumulation.⁹

For realists, the power is when one party has a potential capacity to make or force another party to accept or do something. According to realist theorists, the power is the indispensable element of international politics which states strive to gain or to preserve in order to secure their national interests. Realism defines power in terms of military capabilities or natural resources and economic wealth. To put it differently, while speaking about power realists refer to physical power which is reflected by military forces and economic strength of a state.

According to realist scholars, a state is a central political unit which is accepted as the only main actor among all political institution. A state is considered as the rational institution which competes with other states for more power. Accumulated power is the required tool for states to protect their national interests. As realists define human nature in a more pessimistic and negative way, similarly they draw parallels between the behavior of the individual and state. Realists claim that as for individual its own well-being is the only key priority, similarly, for each state, its own national interests and security are paramount goals. Thus, states are in constant competition with each other in order to increase their power. As there is no single hierarchic system of international politics, all states act independently, not sticking to any higher form of norms or regulations.¹⁰

In comparison to traditional realism, neorealism paradigm offers a different view regarding the power aspirations of states. Neorealism also accepts that the international system is the system of power without any hierarchy. However, as the power of states is not equal, power aspiration for dominance is not always the main goal of states. As states are rational institutions they have to consider the limitation of their power. That is why for states survival is the most important national goal. This fact brings many states to shape the balance of power in order to preserve their independence.¹¹

A prominent scholar of Realism school of thought Martin Wight has classified different types of powers. While defining the ladder of power Wight differentiates regional power from other types classified as dominant powers, great powers, middle powers, and small powers. Regional powers were described as the leading power of the region with a limited focus on the region. However, as a rank, he placed regional power as an actor with strong possibilities to become a middle power in the future.¹²

⁹ Ozkan, E. and Cetin, H. (2016). The Realist and Liberal Positions on the Role of International Organizations in Maintaining World Order. *European Scientific Journal*. Available at <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/9f75/a8b9dc6c3ad0db26ceea9b1f6ffeeb5e4ef4.pdf>

¹⁰ Morgenthau, H. and Thompson, K. (1985). *Politics Among Nations*, 6th edition, New York.

¹¹ Waltz, K. (1979). *Theory of International Politics*. Addison-Wesley Publishing Company. Available at

https://dl1.cuni.cz/pluginfile.php/486328/mod_resource/content/0/Kenneth%20N.%20Waltz%20Theory%20of%20International%20Politics%20Addison-

[Wesley%20series%20in%20political%20science%20%20%20%201979.pdf](https://dl1.cuni.cz/pluginfile.php/486328/mod_resource/content/0/Kenneth%20N.%20Waltz%20Theory%20of%20International%20Politics%20Addison-Wesley%20series%20in%20political%20science%20%20%20%201979.pdf)

¹² Wight, M. (1978) *Power Politics*. Continuum. Royal Institute of International Affairs

2.4. Liberalism paradigm. Definition of regional power by Liberalist school

Another well-known theory of IR –Liberalism offers a different point of view regarding human nature, the behavior of actors in international politics and the definition of power. Liberalism as a school of thoughts became popular with the end of the Cold War, which brought new argumentations that helped to analyze political processes differently where representatives of traditional realism failed to succeed. Liberalist theorists agree with claims of realist philosophers on a major feature of human nature, which is self- interest. However, contrary to Realism, Liberalism rejects the concept of competition and material power to be the only way for an individual to achieve its goals. According to liberalism point of view, human being, state or any other actor of international relations can act rationally. In case of shared interests, an individual can cooperate with others to reach its final aim. The same idea is also applied to states which are willing to cooperate with each other for mutual benefits.¹³

While speaking about cooperation between states for the shared goals, realists/new realists don't share the same positive attitude as liberalists. Realism denies successful cooperation of two or more states due to the anarchic system of international politics. As there is no higher instance than states, there is no guarantee that the terms and conditions of the cooperation will be followed by party states. Realists claim that lack of hierarchy would lead "partner states" to cheat each other in order to preserve self-interest. However, Liberalism offers counter-argument by highlighting the role of international institutions, which set norms and conditions that are binding for member states.¹⁴

Another important point of argument between the two theories is about the definition of power. As mentioned above, realists while speaking about the term use it within the concept of materialistic or physical power. According to liberalist authors, power as a term cannot be solely associated with military capabilities or economic strengths. By referring especially to the collapse of USSR, liberalists refuse to accept the role of hard power as the only factor behind the success of the United States. As hard power as a tool was not enough to justify the consequences of some political processes, soft –power as a new political term was introduced. Soft power is not about making one party accept something forcefully against its will. Soft power is mainly about the attraction of actors to behave or act accordingly through non-material resources. Cultural stance, democracy, social-economic condition, foreign policy, respective approach to human rights are the main characteristics of soft power. Actors in international politics use their soft power mainly to set the agenda. Agenda setting power allows regional leaders to decide which topics should be included, discussed and which are to be disregarded.¹⁵

While discussing the soft power policies and strategies of regional leading states it is necessary to mention regional cooperation, which includes several parties in the region itself. Theorists of Liberalism school of thoughts concentrate on this key factor defining it as a vital element of being accepted as a regional leader. For liberalism, both security and peace

¹³ Keohane, R.O. (1984). *Power and Governance in a Partially Globalized World*, Princeton University Press, Princeton. , pp 5-17, pp 49-64

¹⁴ Owen, J.M. (1994). *How Liberalism Produces Democratic Peace*. *International Security*, pp 87-102. Available at: <http://users.metu.edu.tr/utuba/Owen.pdf>

¹⁵ Kutlay, M. and Dincer, O.B. (2012) *An Empirical Analysis on Turkey's "Regional Power" Potential in the Middle East*. *Academic Orta Dogu*, Vol 6, N2

agenda of the region, economic and social well-being are predominantly dependent on the successful cooperation of regional states.¹⁶ Thus, the vital role of regional power is to establish a partnership among regional actors and preserve it. This is also worth to mention that during the first years of governance AKP has initiated some regional projects which did involve regional actors. These initiations were mainly targeting to increase and liberalize trade relationship within involved parties. Moreover, Turkey still plays an important role in leading and supporting key energy and new railway projects in the region.

Another theory of IR – Constructivism also does focus on the importance of soft power for the regional leading state. However, in comparison to Liberalism, Constructivism focuses more on the profile of regional power. Key aspects of this profile are related to how the political actors define and pursuists its domestic and foreign policy goals. Among those features, democratic rule, respect of human rights socio-economic stability and cultural fit into regions are most important.

2.5. Similar terms. Hegemony

While speaking about regional power some authors naturally link the term to Hegemony. The term which means ruler in translation from the original mainly associates governance, superiority over inferiors. In IR discipline the term is predominantly used for the dominant state which owns considerable materialistic power which helps him to dominate over subordinate states. On contrary to the anarchic description of some schools of thoughts, hegemony refers to the hierarchic system of power.

As mentioned above, for a political actor to become a hegemon power in a specific region or globally main requirements are economic wealth and military capabilities. That is why superiority over other states in economic and military spheres are the key elements to have control over them. However, there is also discussion among some academicians regarding the importance of these two requirements. Some authors claim that economic wealth is a more important factor than military strength. For example, according to Keohane control over raw materials and markets have more value and impact on dominance. He claims that solely military forces of one state are not able to cope with any financial crisis or economic misfortune. It is true that military troops at some degree can provide stability and suppress demonstrations during the economic crisis, however, this can be only short term solution. Financial crisis can be fought successfully only through a structured economic policy which is led by economically strong states that control key raw materials and have a strong influence on markets. Furthermore, international experience showed that a strong economy is the main basis for building strong military troops and to boost the military industry. However, the military spend, on the contrary, can have a bad impact on the state's economy and become the main burden on its budget.

Besides its traditional meaning, some authors tried to add a different feature to hegemon power. Despite the fact that the term itself mainly refers to materialistic power which is inclined to coercion, some philosophers linked it with ideological supremacy. In this sense, the dominant power tries to attract other political actors by its values and ideas. This point is also about how the dominant actor sees the development of the socio-economic system,

¹⁶ Badie, B. Berk-Schlosser, and Morlino, L. (2011). International Encyclopedia of Political Science - Vol 5. Los Angeles: Sage. Available at: http://www.stefanorecchia.net/1/137/resources/publication_1040_1.pdf

what kind of laws are enacted in different spheres of life concerning today and future of society. Finally, this feature is about the general cultural stance of the hegemon actor, which plays an important role to present to the world/region its own reality and make others to follow this perception. In this sense, hegemony is not only about coercive power, but also about ideological power, which should be used in a balanced way. Thus, one of the major tasks of hegemon state is to create a system of rules according to which subordinate actors will interact with each other and especially in respect to dominant power itself. Hegemon state will use its coercive and ideological power to make sure that these rules set by himself are followed.¹⁷

There is no clear difference between regional hegemony and world hegemony besides its geographical limitation. As in world hegemony, regional hegemony is also generally accepted as a dominant state, which rules and controls other states in the region by using both physical and ideological power. However, the success of being a regional hegemony or to keep its power depends on its relations with international powers. Depending on the foreign policy of regional actor towards international powers it can either strengthen its hegemon role or lose it.

2.6. Regional Power as set of structured foreign policy

Sandra Destradi is one of the few authors who have tried to define some of the terms (such as hegemony leadership, empire) which are in most cases used interchangeably in academic papers. The main goal in the paper of the author is to identify and systemize different political strategies, which leading states of their respective regions try to apply. The author refuses to agree with the formulation of regional power by the majority of scholars in IR. According to Destradi, the term of regional power was perceived as a leading regional state, which uses cooperative foreign policy in regard to other political actors in its region. However, the author argues that the term includes more structured features. In this regard, she is referring to a different range of foreign policy strategies that regional powers apply. Destradi classifies these strategies into three main groups; Empire, hegemony, leadership.

Destradi shares the common opinion regarding the lack of theoretical research around the term of regional power. As the major changes in international politics draw attention to regional leading states, many authors have focused on case studies, where they mainly identified the key characteristic of the leading state itself and built limited models on a single strategy that was identified during their research. However, it is obvious that each region has its own identical characteristics, which was formed through history. The successful strategy applied in one region can easily fail in another. That is why the range of strategies and sub-strategies were identified by the author.

“ I stress the need to study regional powers’ strategies as being placed on a continuum reaching from a unilateral , highly aggressive and coercive strategy , which I call “ imperial”, to an extremely cooperative one, aimed at reaching cooperative goals, which I call leading. In the middle of this continuum, I argue there are different kinds of “hegemonic” strategies.”

¹⁷ Ayman. G (2012) Regional Aspirations and Limits of Power-Turkish-Iranian Relations in the New Middle East. Centre for Hellenic Studies and Research Canada, University of Crete and University of the Aegean, Volume: 20/1

Destradi sees a gap in most of this academic literature, as they primarily focus on to describe regional power as a superior state which has ultimately benevolent aims. Moreover, most of these papers don't explore any different possible foreign policy strategies by considering any possible factors that could cause a leader state to reconsider its strategy.¹⁸

2.7. Definition of “region” in concept of regional power

Quite many academic papers were written regarding regional power where some countries were analyzed as case studies. Most of these papers include a theoretical framework which tries to define the term – Regional power and apply its key features to their case study. Having predominantly focused on the definition of the term from power perspective resulted in ignorance of ‘regional’ part of the term. By relying on common sense most of the authors did not specify what they actually mean by *regional* power.

What is a region in the concept of regional power? One of the very few definitions belongs to William Thompson. According to Thompson, the region in this concept is interconnected geographical area where the actors strongly interact with each other. In the region, any potential change regarding one actor can indirectly influence other regional actors. Furthermore, in order to be considered as a region at least two actors in this geographic area should be aware and accept key shared features of the region which makes it distinctive. All these factors help to form borders of any specific region within the concept of regional power.¹⁹

Considering above mentioned definition of the region with its own accepted borders and also the concept of power in terms of both economic, military capabilities and soft power we can summarize main attributes of actor claiming the role of regional power. The first undeniable factor for being considered as a regional power is the possession of both hard power and soft power tools. Secondly, the actor should define its key role in the region which would match with its political actions and accepted by other regional actors. The actor should not be merely recognized as the leading power of the region by other regional actors, acceptance by global powers is also a major defining requirement. The actor should be capable to demonstrate power which brings results. Thus, it should actively participate in regional projects where he will set the agenda and play the main role in decision making. The actor should also take an active part in international forums as a representative of its region.

¹⁸ Destradi, S (2010). Regional powers and their strategies: empire, hegemony, and leadership. In: Review of International Studies 36, Cambridge University Press: 01

¹⁹ Thompson, W.R. (1973). The regional subsystem: A conceptual explication and a propositional inventory. International Studies Quarterly Vol.17, pp 89-117

3. Economic strength of Turkey in the Middle East

There is a strong link between economic strength of one state and its status as a regional power. A strong economy is a key factor for the states claiming regional leadership (regardless of their soft power or hard power orientations). If to approach the topic from a soft power perspective, the state claiming to be a regional power should have a strong economy in order to be able to attract other regional actors by its wealth and prosperity. It is necessary for a regional power to introduce an economic model, which proved to be successful and resulted in the steady progress of economic growth. This fact would attract regional states to adopt a similar economic model and more closely interact with the superior economic power of the region. The steady growing economy of the state creates many possibilities to initiate new economic projects for the region that can lead to more deeper regional integration. This at the same time would allow a state to be accepted as a superior and leading actor of the region from an economic perspective, which would eventually lead a state to become the major agenda-setter in regional economic forums.

When we analyze economic strength of the state from a hard power perspective, we can easily notice that hard power of economy is more coercive and used as a tool to force other states to accept the will of economically superior actor. Economic power can be as effective as a military power in forceful acceptance of some terms and conditions. Economic sanctions are more effective in case there is a predominantly high level of economic interdependence between conflicting parties. Especially, the state with a weaker economy in the region that exports most of its goods and services to the superior state of the region is more vulnerable to such kind of economic pressures.

Economic strength is also one of the key defining factors for other important spheres. It is almost impossible to imagine strong military power without a strong economic base. In order to create and maintain a superior military power in the region, a political actor has to possess economic resources that would make it possible to supply its troops with the most effective weaponry and other necessary facilities. Moreover, a strong and growing economy means higher life quality in the state, where spheres like education and healthcare are positively affected and endorsed by available government resources.

Taking into the consideration above mentioned and the role of the economy itself in theory part of this thesis, it becomes clear that for being a regional power strong and developing economy is one of the most important factors. Being considered as a regional power means having superior economic power in comparison to other regional states. Thus, in the next parts of this chapter, I will closely analyze the economic power of Turkey. In the first part, I will discuss key facts and figures describing the economic strength and development of Turkey since 2002. In the next part, some of the key economic indicators of the Turkish economy will be compared with the ones related to other states in the Middle East. Then I will discuss economic relations between Turkey and regional states and analyze how it changed under the governance of AKP. In the last part, I will illustrate the current economic situation of the country which will help to make a conclusion about Turkey's aspiration for regional leadership from an economic perspective.

3.1. Economic transition in Turkey during the second half 20th century

First important steps on the way to implement positive reforms in Turkish economy were made in the 80s and 90s of twenty's century. End of the 1970s when Turkey was going through economic instability and increasing domestic inflation made the parliament to introduce the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) at the beginning of the year 1980. The state decided to remove most of the unnecessary regulations on import and started actively supporting export by additional subsidiaries. The next steps were to become a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the EU Customs Union in the middle of 90s. This was the time when Turkey decided to liberalize its economy and move to a large scale of privatization.²⁰

Privatization in Turkey and most of the reforms that changed the economic path of the country is linked with Turgut Ozal who was Prime Minister and later President of the republic. Turgut Ozal was a strong proponent of moderate Islam in the country, which made him a distinct leader differentiating him from his predecessors. During his leadership, a new middle economic class came into being which later played a backbone role in the Turkish economy. Because of this new middle class, Turkey made a big step from being predominantly agricultural economy to the growing industrial state.²¹

However, despite positive trends initiated at the end of the previous century, Turkey could not consolidate its gains in this time frame. Occurred unstable economic situation in 90s led to further political problems. Some incompetent politicians came to power using the resulted political gap in the country. The situation became worse which resulted in two financial crises. All of these created ideal time for AKP to come into power as a result of the parliamentary election held in 2002.²²

3.2. Economic development under AKP government

The financial crisis of 2001 resulted in huge damage to the economy of the country. Due to occurred financial misfortune, the bank system in Turkey suffered one of the biggest hit since the year of independence. Many banks went bankrupt the same year. The country had to experience high inflation due to the loss of value in national currency. However, the crisis did not only affect the economic sphere, but it also changed political life in the country. Not long after the start of the crisis, AKP came into power by the majority of votes. Passed not more than one year the economy of the country started to recover and numbers started to point to economic growth. One the one hand the recovery from the crisis happened due to

²⁰ Ban and Karadag, R. (2012). The Political Economy of Regional Power: Turkey under the AKP. GIGA Working Papers, GIGA Research Unit: Institute of Middle East Studies. Available at https://www.giga-hamburg.de/de/system/files/publications/wp204_bank-karadag.pdf

²¹ Thumann, M. (2010) . Neue Eliten, altes Spiel. Available at: <https://zeitschriftip.dgap.org/de/article/getFullPDF/15219>

²² Jan Senkyr (2010) Turkey on the road to becoming a regional power. Konrad-Adenauer Stiftung. Available at: https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=eeab8421-0054-b844-5f69-fd4f738c98a3&groupId=252038

the loan provided by the IMF, on the other hand, it was because of the successful economic policy initiated by AKP which was effectively followed in upcoming years too.²³

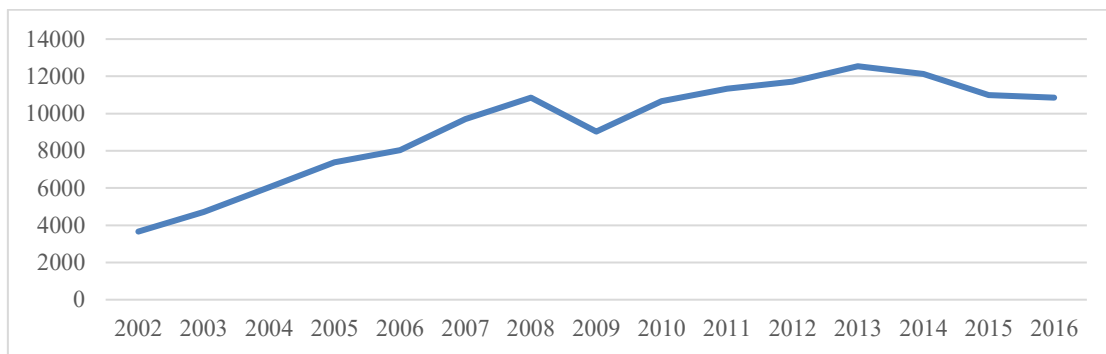
Since 2002 with the start of AKP’s government, Turkey has gone through stable economic growth. Only within 6 years Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has increased more than 3 times. Despite the fact that the financial crisis in the year 2009 had a huge impact on the economy of the country, Turkey managed to recover from turmoil relatively soon. It is also worth to mention that, immediately after the crisis –in 2010 the economy has grown by more than 8 %. In the following years, Turkey’s economy has witnessed a stable increase. Steady growth in most spheres of the economy since 2002 made Turkey secure 17th place among the largest economies of the world.

Table 1: GDP in Turkey since 2002 (current US\$ in billions)²⁴

Years	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
GDP	238.4	311.8	404.8	501.4	552.5	675.8	764.3	644.6	771.9	832.5	874	950.6	934.2	859.8	863.7

Economic increase in the country has naturally positively affected the financial situation of the population. As it is shown in the chart below, GDP per capita has increased constantly since 2002 and went above ten thousand dollars already in 2014. Although, former deputy Prime Minister Ali Babacan claims that this increase happened mainly due to the increase in the value of the national currency, there is no doubt that quality of life has increased considerably.²⁵

Figure 1: Turkey GDP per capita (current US\$)



Source: World Bank national accounts data, and OECD National Accounts data files

Even though the numbers indicate impressive economic growth achieved within a short period of time by the AKP government, there are still quite many critics regarding the distribution of the wealth among the population. Despite the fact that GDP per capita almost doubled within the first 10 years of AKP’s government, only around 20% of the total

²³ Senkyr, J. (2010). see also Worskhop Summary Report

²⁴ Table was build based on data from the World Bank (<https://data.worldbank.org/country/turkey>)

²⁵Workshop Summary Report Turkey: An Emerging Power in a Changing Middle East (2014) Council on Foreign Relations’ (CFR) International Institutions and Global Governance (IIGG) program

population has sufficiently benefited from economic development in the country. Among those who received the most out of financial prosperity were people strongly supporting the conservative religious policy of the ruling party²⁶. In the first years of AKP's government, this fact was not so visible, however, on later stages, this policy and altered economic situation have created different social groups. On the contrary to the religious conservative group of people strongly supporting R. T. Erdogan and his party, proponents of a more secular form of government progressed as a strong opposition group.

Another important economic factor in the country is the level of unemployment. Based on statistical data of the World Bank for Turkey, we can conclude that there is no positive connection between the progressive economy and unemployment rate. Whereas in years between 1995 and 2001 average unemployment rate in the country was 7.22%, it has increased to slightly more than 10% on average during the last 15 years (2002-2017) of AKP government. Even though not long after economic crisis (of 2008 and 2009) there was a visible decline in the unemployment rate, it has reached a record level of 10.9% in 2018, which was the highest level since 1991

Table 2: Unemployment level in Turkey, total (% of total labor force) (modeled ILO estimate)²⁷

2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
10.4	10.5	10.8	10.6	8.72	8.87	9.71	12.6	10.7	8.8	8.15	8.73	9.88	10.2	10.8	10.8

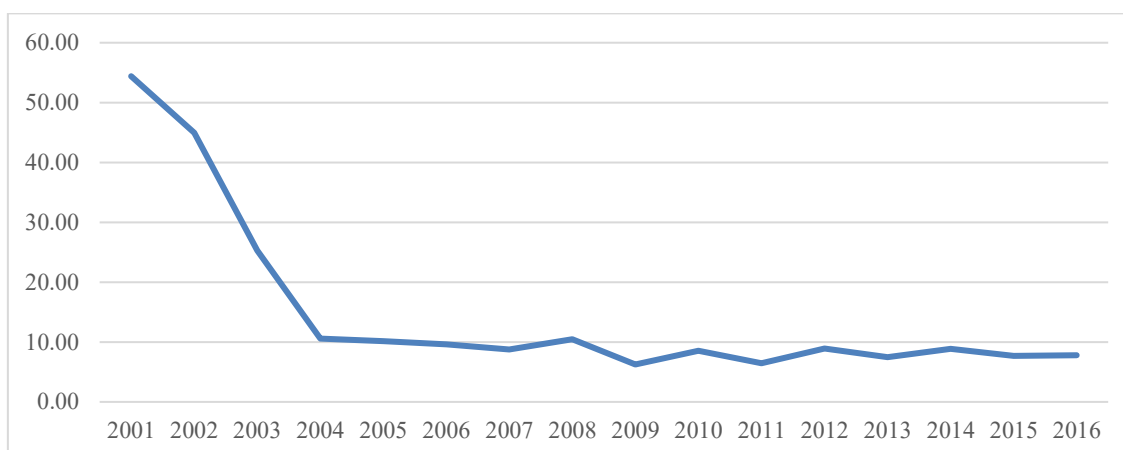
As another important indicator in the country's economy, it is worth to mention the inflation rate, which directly influences the financial condition of the majority. Moreover, the higher inflation rate can become a real threat to the socio-political life in the country as well. Reduction of higher inflation rate within a short period was one of the biggest achievement of AKP²⁸. By increasing the real interest rate, the government managed to increase the value of Turkish Lira. By following the same policy, in a few years, the inflation rate was dragged down below 10%.

²⁶ Senkyr, J. (2010). pp.77-80

²⁷ The table was build based on data from the World Bank
<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.ZS?view=chart>

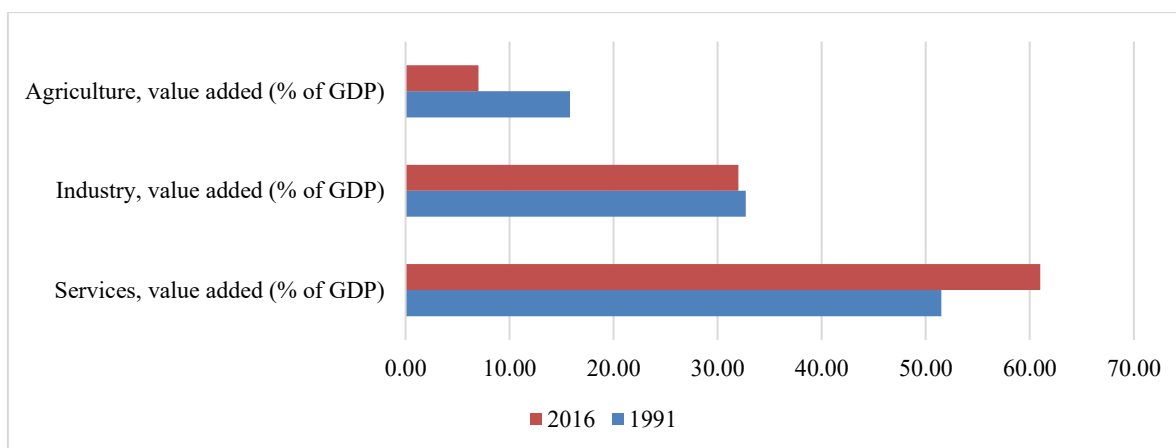
²⁸ Ugur, M. (2008). Turkish economic policy under AKP government: an assessment for 2002-2007. Munich Personal RePEc Archive

Figure 2: Inflation, consumer prices (annual %)-²⁹



When we analyze statistical data regarding the overall situation of the Turkish economy in the last 15 years we see amazing development, which has been achieved in a very short space of time. The improvement did not show itself only in GDP growth, an increase of GDP per capita or a considerable decrease in the overall inflation rate, but also the general structure of the country’s economy has visibly changed. The ratio of different spheres of the economy contributing to GDP has changed recently in comparison to the 90s of the previous century. The overall impact of agriculture in Turkish GDP has decreased more than double. This gap was closed by the increased share of services, which grew by 10% in the last 25 years (see table below). This kind of structural change in the economy of the country once again showed that implemented reforms and followed economic policy were in the correct track. The current structural ratio in Turkish economy (Services- 61%, Industry- 32%, Agriculture- 7%) resembles the economic structure of developed western economies.

Figure 3: Ratio of economic spheres in GDP in years 1991 and 2016³⁰



Another important field that received special attention by the AKP government was foreign trade, which became to be one of the strongest and fast-growing field. As foreign

²⁹ The chart was built according to World Bank data:

<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/fp.cpi.totl.zg>

³⁰ The chart was built according to World Bank data: <https://data.worldbank.org>

trade was used and promoted by the ruling party as one of the main tools of its soft power strategy, it was playing an important role from the economic and political perspective. AKP government was clearly aware of the importance of foreign trade for Turkey's role as a regional power. That is why the government was actively engaged in bilateral and multilateral trade agreements in order to receive the economic benefit and gain more space for exercising its soft power. It is also worth to mention that Turkey did not only focus on the Middle East as a region but also developed trade relations with other regions of Eurasia, North America, North Africa, and Balkans.³¹

3.3. Economic comparison in the Middle East

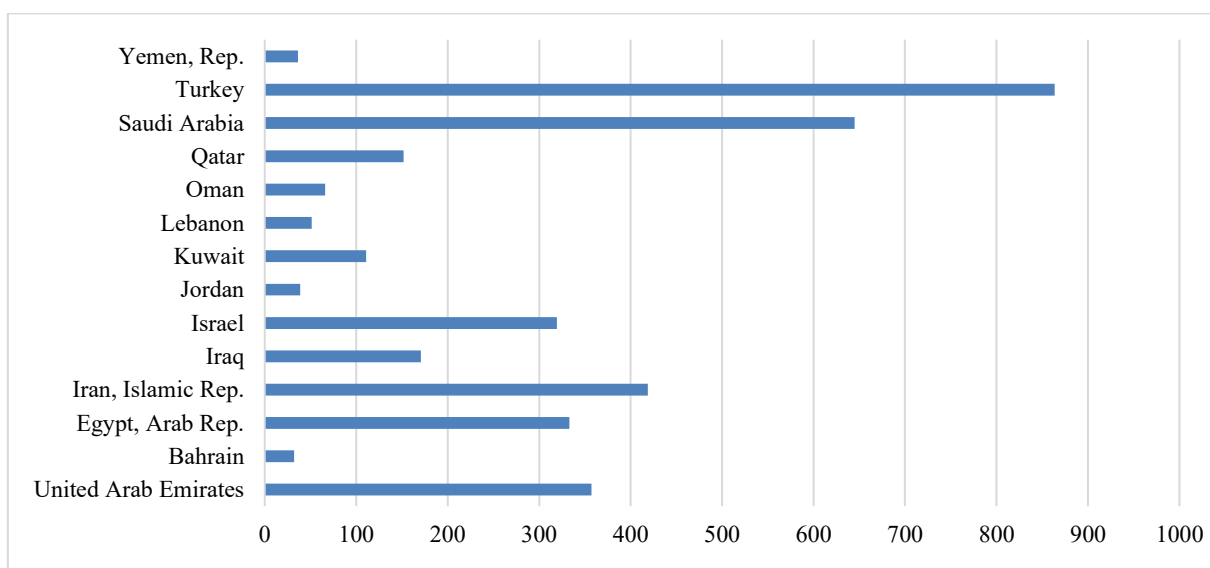
As mentioned above, economic strength is one of the most important requirements for a political actor to become a regional power. In this sense, we have discussed that the economy as a tool can be effectively used to influence other political actors. Moreover, the well-developed economy is the key prerequisite for building and maintenance of strong military. Considering all the features, we have analyzed the development of Turkey's economy in the last 15 years and illustrated the changes in key economic indicators. However, the positive economic trend is not sufficient to be recognized as a regional leader.

In order to be accepted as a regional power from economic perspectives, there are two key points to be achieved; Firstly, the state claiming the role of regional power should have economic superiority over other political actors in the region. Secondly, the state as an indicator of its soft power should increase its economic activity in the region. In order to achieve this goal, it has to develop strong bilateral and multilateral economic relations with regional actors.

In order to understand the economic superiority of Turkey in the Middle East region, it is good to compare the GDP level of countries. Below the chart shows GDP level of the countries in 2016.

³¹ Durakcay, A. and Canveren, O. (2017). Turkey's Changing Foreign Trade Policy within the Framework of its Regional Power Aspiration: 2002-2012 era. Available at: https://www.academia.edu/34097421/T%C3%BCrkiyenin_B%C3%B6lgesel_G%C3%BC%C3%A7_Olma_Hedefi_%C3%87er%C3%A7evesinde_De%C4%9Fi%C5%9Fen_D%C4%B1%C5%9F_Ticaret_Politikas%C4%B1_2002-2012_D%C3%B6nemi

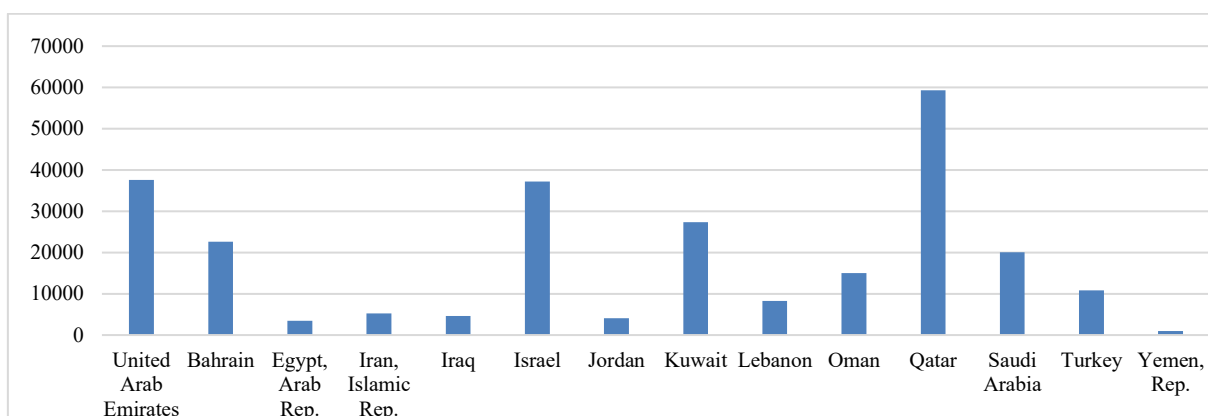
Figure 4: GDP in Middle East countries 2016 (current US\$ in Billion)³²



As it is visible from the chart, Turkey has strong economic superiority over the other states in the region. The difference between Turkey and Saudi Arabia (ranked the second in the region) in GDP was more than 200 billion USD. If we compare, the GDP level of Turkey to another strong economy of the region- the Iran Islam Republic, we can see that Turkey's economy is two times bigger.

When we compare the total GDP of the countries in the region, Turkey's absolute economic advantage is quite clear. However, when we measure GDP per capita of states in the Middle East in order to understand the financial status of the population in each country, we face different economic reality. As it is showed in the below-stated chart, currently Turkey is far from being the strongest country with the highest GDP per capita.

Figure 5: GDP per capita in Middle East in 2016 (current US\$)³³



³² The chart was built according to the World Bank Data.

<https://datacatalog.worldbank.org/dataset/gdp-ranking>

³³ The chart was built according to the World Bank.

<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=AE>

There are mainly two different reasons for relatively lower GDP per capita in Turkey. The first reason is the number of population, which is steadily growing. Currently, the total number of the population in Turkey is around 82 million. This means that Turkey shares second place with Iran Islam Republic for the highest number of population in the Middle East. It is worth to mention that, the number of population in Turkey has grown almost by 20 million people since 2000.³⁴ The second reason for the relatively low GDP per capita is related to the similar economic orientation of many countries in the region. Countries such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia are among the main oil-exporting countries of the world. These states have increased their economic wealth predominantly due to this natural resource.³⁵

Despite the fact that oil-exporting countries of the region have increased their wealth considerably, Turkey is still the biggest economy of the region which increased its GDP by more than 310 billion USD within 10 years between 2006 and 2016. Among other countries, only Egypt and Saudi Arabi could increase their GDP level by more than 200 billion USD within the same time frame. (World Bank)

3.4. Shift in Turkish economic preference towards the Middle East

Turkey has managed to become the strongest economy in the Middle East. The country achieved the highest GDP growth in absolute terms among the states in the region. Relatively stronger development allows Turkey to realize many economic objectives, which would result in more prosperous socio-economic life in the country. Moreover, a stronger economy created favorable position allowing the government to initiate more active foreign policy, which aims to make the country leading power of the region. However, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, the absolute advantage in terms of economic strength is not enough to become a regional power. As an articulation of its soft power, the state should more actively engage and develop regional economic integrity. In order to have more agenda-setting and decision-making power in terms of economic activities in the region, there is a need for a stronger and growing trade relationship between Turkey and the regional states. Therefore, below I will try to analyze and describe how economic involvement of Turkey in the Middle East has developed in the last 15 years.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, Turkey has increased focus on its export. Whereas in 1991 the ratio of export (of goods and services) in Turkish GDP was around 14.3 percent, in 2016 this number reached almost 22% which showed a considerable increase in the last 25 years. (World Bank) Starting from the end of the 90s of the 20th century European Union (EU) became a dominant market for the export of Turkish products. For a long time, more than half of Turkish exports were reaching the European market. Considering the fact that Turkey became a part of European Customs Union and for a long time striving to become an EU member state, this kind of export policy of Turkey seems quite natural. However, when we examine the export policy of AKP after their second election, it is clear that Turkey started to look for alternative markets. This change in the export orientation of Turkey becomes quite clear, as there was a visible decrease in the percentage of exports going to the EU market. During the second term of its governance, AKP adopted different

³⁴ <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/turkey-population/> - Turkey Population

³⁵ Workman, D.(2019) Crude oil export by country. Available at:
<http://www.worldstopexports.com/worlds-top-oil-exports-country/>

trade policy, which has increased its exports mainly to Islamic countries. Among those countries, the region of the Middle East became a key target of Turkish products.³⁶

The trade relationship between Turkey and the states in the Middle East has changed considerably since 2002. This change has reflected itself mainly in absolute terms. It is worth to mention that only within 13-14 years under the government of AKP Turkey has increased its export to the region by more than 30 billion USD. Moreover, the trade relation between Turkey and the regional states has increased not only due to increased export of Turkish product in the Middle East, but also thanks to the growing number of imports. The numbers show that between 2002 and 2015 import of Turkey from the Middle East countries has increased more than 12 billion USD.³⁷ These facts clearly show that Turkey has started to look for alternative markets besides its traditional trade partners. On the one hand, Turkey has tried to decrease its export dependency on the EU, on the other hand, it has tried to increase its influence and involvement in the Middle East. This kind of trade policy would diversify and broaden markets for Turkish products and contribute to the major goal of Turkey on its way to become a regional leader of the Middle East.

3.5. Current economic situation in Turkey

Turkey gained strong economic results since 2002 however, in the last 2 years the Turkish economy is facing several important difficulties. One of the major problems is the fall in the value of the national currency. Turkey has witnessed 25% inflation rate in late 2018 which was several times more than it was anticipated by the Central bank of the country³⁸. The level of debts has also increased to a very high level which makes it very hard for Turkey to pay back. Turkey does not have enough ‘savings’ which could make it less vulnerable against its growing debts.³⁹

Even though the Turkish economy has shown a substantial increase in 2017 it was mainly driven by external credits. By the end of the year 2017, the external debt level of the country reached 453 billion USD.⁴⁰ Turkey currently experiencing negative trade balance as its total exports fall under total level of imports.⁴¹ The numbers indicate that Turkey spends more than it actually earns.

Uneasy political situation of Turkey, undemocratic atmosphere and the current ongoing crisis in Syria which brought more than 3 million refugees to the country further worsens

³⁶ Senkyr, J. (2010). pp. 80

³⁷ Viisimaa, H. (2016). Economic growth and foreign policy of regional powers – a case study of Turkey in the Middle East, p 33

³⁸ Turkey Inflation Rate. Available at: <https://tradingeconomics.com/turkey/inflation-cpi>

³⁹ Lee, Y.N. (2018). What went wrong for Turkey? Its economy is ‘in the midst of a perfect storm’ Available at: <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/08/13/turkey-crisis-economy-faces-weak-lira-inflation-debt-and-tariffs.html>

⁴⁰ Ministry of Treasury and Finance. <https://en.hmb.gov.tr/>

⁴¹ Turkey Trade Statistics. World Integrated Trade Solutions. Available at: <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/TUR>

situation which demotivates investors to make any business actions. This fact naturally badly impacts the level of exports.⁴²

There are 2 other major factors that worsen the economic condition of Turkey. The first factor is about the fact how Erdogan positions himself against interest rates by trying to keep them on the lower level. Central Bank can potentially fight against higher inflation rate by increasing the interest rate. However, recent events show that Erdogan's untraditional view and enmity against higher interest rates creates pressure and does not let Central Bank function independently. This factor further sets apart potential investors that have doubts about economic stability in the near future. The second factor is linked to worsened relations with the USA.⁴³ Due to several different reasons, these two NATO members found themselves in uneasy conflicting situation which has resulted in economic sanctions imposed by Trump's government on Turkey.

Despite the fact that Turkey has increased its economic power dramatically during the first 15 years of AKP government and still holds the position of the biggest economy in the Middle East region, currently, it faces important economic difficulties. Almost 80 percent of the population think that the country is going through an economic crisis.⁴⁴

Increasing external debt, high inflation rate, negative trade balance, and faced economic sanctions show that Turkey is losing its economic strength and attractiveness which it possessed at some point. All these factors make it hard for Turkey to claim the position of regional power.

4. Military power of Turkey

While speaking about the security topics, starting from its independence (1923) throughout the 20th century Turkey has always highlighted the importance of national and collective security from self-defense concept. On contrary to its predecessor, Turkey has pursued self-defense policy in the international arena and in regard to its neighbors. As a result of this policy, Turkey could stay away from major conflicts in the past century and preserved its national security. Turkey could stay loyal to this policy by joining NATO already in mid of 20th century and signing several pacts with regional states that aimed to promote peace and cooperation.

Despite the fact that in the 21st century understanding of security has changed and enlarged, the message given by official channels of Turkey has not changed considerably. However, even though Turkish officials highlight the important role of their country as a promoter of peace and security by stating the importance of collective defense and regional

⁴² Country Report Turkey (2018). Atradius. Available at: <https://atradius.nl/rapport/country-report-cee-turkey-2018.html>

⁴³ Walker, A. (2018). Is Turkey Heading for an economic crisis? BBC. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-45113472>

⁴⁴ Stratfor Worldview (2018) As Turkey Enters 2019, Its Economic Woes Are Never Far Away. Available at: <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/turkey-enters-2019-its-economic-woes-are-never-far-away>

prosperity, they do not hide their intention for regional leadership by stating the key role of Turkey in the region:

“Established in 1923, following a costly war of independence against the occupying powers, the security of the Republic of Turkey has been dictated by two main elements: geography and longstanding ties with the neighboring countries. These two determinants make Turkey a key regional security player in the Europe, the Balkans, the Caucasus, the Middle East, the Mediterranean and the Black Sea regions and beyond. In the last couple of years, Turkey has also demonstrated its capacity to act as a global actor beyond these regions.”⁴⁵

4.1. The role of military power on the way to regional leadership

Besides strong economic resources and effective soft power tools, there is another key indicator for a political actor to be considered as a regional power. This key indicator is the military strength and capability of the state. Traditionally military power was accepted as a decisive tool in regional and international conflicts.⁴⁶ In case it was impossible to achieve a resolution through diplomatic channels, conflicting parties were facing each other in battlefields. Manpower and weaponry of the conflicting parties were the major features defining the outcome of the war. Through history, bigger empires were enlarging their territories and wealth mainly due to strong military troops. Even though in last one hundred years the perception of power has changed considerably, the military capability still remains an inevitable part of it.

Since World War 2, the number of global conflicts that required strong military intervention considerably reduced. Recently, most global ranked conflicts are either handled through diplomatic means or through economic sanctions. However, contrary to international conflicts, the number of military conflicts on regional level did not reduce. Even though there were no major conflicts in the European continent, The Middle East and Post-Soviet regions still remain as hot spots with ongoing military operations or frozen territorial issues.

For the purpose of this thesis, I would differentiate between two types of regional conflicts; the First group of conflicts consider active participation of regional power as a conflicting state. And the second group of conflicts where the regional power is not participating as an active party of the conflict but rather as a mediator between conflicting states. However, no matter in which two kinds of conflicts the regional power is involved, it would naturally, support the position/party that is beneficial for its own political interests in the region. Russian support to Armenian military forces in Nagorno-Karabakh conflict or Turkish support in conflict around Gaza (between Israel and Palestine) can be the clear examples where the states claiming the role of regional power were acting in their own political interest without active involvement in military operations as the party of the conflict. Invasion of Georgian territories in 2008 by Russia or active military operations

⁴⁵ Official webpage of MFA Turkey. Turkey’s Perspectives and Policies on Security Issues. Available at: http://www.mfa.gov.tr/i_turkey_s-security-perspective_-historical-and-conceptual-background_-turkey_s-contributions.en.mfa

⁴⁶Yilmaz, S. (2010). State, Power, and Hegemony. International Journal of Business and Social Science.

Available at: https://ijbssnet.com/journals/Vol.1_No.3_December_2010/20.pdf

conducted by Turkey in Afrin region of Syria are the examples where these states became active parties of the conflict and had a direct impact to secure their own interest in the respective regions. These examples once again prove the importance of military power for the states striving for the role of regional leadership. In some cases, strong military capability of the political actor is the major guarantee of the success in regional conflicts.

There are several different components that are key to a strong military. These components are strong economy or money spend on building and maintenance of the military troops and military industry, sufficient manpower, weaponry that involves modern technology are the most important factors defining the level of the military strength of any specific country. Considering these key features, in the next parts of this chapter, I will first try to understand the role of the Turkish Army in the society, its sphere of influence and historical development. Then I will analyze the current level of strength and capability of the Turkish Armed Forces. I will also try to understand the position of Turkish military power in the region by comparing it with other states in the Middle East. In the following part of this chapter, I will try to show the change in military and foreign policy of Turkey with the start of its active involvement in the Syrian conflict. In the final part, I will try to draw a conclusion if Turkey possesses enough strong military power, which allows it to claim the role of regional power.⁴⁷

4.2. The role of the Turkish Army in society. Historical Background

Turkish military forces are both associated with its successful fight against external enemies, and also with its historical role in the internal political life of the country. The active role of the army in internal affairs of the country was because of reorientation of the military in the last stage of Ottomans, which remained as a key in the history of its successor from first years of its independence. The other reason was due to the fact that the Turkish Army played a key role in the formation and independence of Turkey as a republic which was achieved in 1923. Turkish Army managed to regain major territories in Anatolia, which was lost during the First World War. Due to this success, Mustafa Kemal could establish a new secular and democratic state, where the army became a key protector of these two values- Secularism and Democracy.⁴⁸

Having played one of the most important roles in the independence process and formation of the new state Turkish Army became a symbol of heroism in society. As a military leader during the years of the independence war, Mustafa Kemal became also the leader and first president of the country. This factor made positions of Turkish Army and its role in society much stronger. The new government of the newly established state under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal has started the implementation of new reforms, which aimed to create a modern and democratic country as in the western world. Among the key reforms introduced by Mustafa Kemal, Republicanism, Statism, and Secularism were the major directions that targeted to destroy old social-political life, which was dominant during Ottomans. These new reforms were matching with the ideals of the Turkish Army. This was

⁴⁷ Viisimaa, H. (2016). Economic growth and foreign policy of regional powers – a case study of Turkey in the Middle East. Available at: <http://dspace.ut.ee/handle/10062/52067?locale-attribute=en>

⁴⁸ Kerem, O.S.(2017). Civil-Military Relations and Authoritarianism in Turkey (2007-2017) Available at: <https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/handle/1887/53168>

mainly due to the fact that most of the military officials in the Turkish Army got a Western education and were preferring democracy to the old authoritarian regime. As the majority of Turkish military officials mostly welcomed the new reforms, at a later stage the Army started to claim the role of protector of the reforms in the country. Starting from the second half of the 20th century, the Army started more actively using its “protector right” in order to intervene and redirect the political life in Turkey.⁴⁹

During the first half of the 20th century, the Turkish Army was not interfering to the internal political life of the country. However, as mentioned earlier, the army was getting a strong reputation throughout the century, which allowed them to get actively involved in the political life of the country, which has changed its course dramatically. As there were almost no external conflicts, where Turkey could deploy directly its military forces the Army was concentrated on internal stabilization. The minimization of external threats was part of Turkish state policy starting since its independence. By following this policy, Turkey managed to stay away from the Second World War. Lack of external conflicts and more active engagement with internal issues was increasing the reputation of the Turkish Army in the society. Being well aware of the growing internal status, the military officials have started to use this accumulated power.⁵⁰

Turkey has witnessed several internal issues that were causing dangers to the reforms that were initiated by Mustafa Kemal. Existence of Soviet Union on its border, which was constantly trying to extend its communist ideology to the world, was causing strong danger to the stability and democracy in the country. There was no open military conflict between Turkey and the Soviet Union. Especially since 1952 when Turkey became part of NATO it became more secure against any possible conflict that could occur by its strong neighbor. However, as the ideological war was strong enough, Turkey was taking serious actions against its own citizens who have tried to spread communist ideology in the country.⁵¹

Besides the threat of communist ideology, which was losing its importance since the 1980s, there were two other major issues which triggered active internal military actions. Separatist movement by Kurdish minority on southeast regions of Turkey which followed by terrorist attacks on one side and increased influence of religious (Islamic) groups from the other side were threatening the integrity and secularity in Turkey. Considering all the above mentioned as strong internal threats for the country, the Turkish Army was more actively participating in the political life of the society in order to preserve the stability. In 1960 this active movement of military officials moved to a different level when for the first time Turkey has witnessed a coup which was organized by Army. After the coup, former politicians in overthrown government were executed by military officials. The reason for the coup was stated as misgovernment, which was threatening democracy and the stability in the country.

⁴⁹ Metin Heper (2005) The European Union, the Turkish Military and Democracy, South European Society and Politics, 10:1, 33-44, DOI: 10.1080/13608740500037924. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13608740500037924>

⁵⁰ Akca, I. and Paker, E.B. (2013). Beyond Military Tutelage. Turkish Military Politics and the AKP Government. Debating Security in Turkey. Lexington Books. Available at: http://www.academia.edu/8258754/%C4%B0smet_Ak%C3%A7a_and_Evren_Balta_Paker_Beyond_Military_Tutelage_Turkish_Military_Politics_and_the_AKP_Government

⁵¹ Gonlubol, M. (1971). NATO and Turkey. An overall appraisal. The Turkish Yearbook of International Relations

Since 1960 there were four more military coups happened in 1971, 1980, 1997 and 2016. Except the last attempt of the military coup, other 3 coups were successful, where the governments were dismissed by the Army. All these coups have dramatically changed life in the country by creating strong fear in society. Considering the possibility of next coup AKP government under the leadership of Erdogan initiated legislation, which targeted to limit independence and control Turkish Army since 2002. However, in 2016 some high ranked military officials attempted to realize coup. However, this time people did not support the Army and went to the streets to prevent military actions. The organized coup failed and this was a turning point in Turkish history. Many military officials involved in the coup were arrested and failed coup followed by more legislation, which aimed to change the structure of the army.⁵²

Turkish Armed Forces until recent events have played a crucial role in the political life of the country. Even though, with the several realized coups the military institution has considerably changed the political course of the country and caused more problems to democratic stability rather than its protection, its reputation among the Turkish nation was still high throughout last century. However, the efforts taken by Erdogan and its government has considerably reduced the role of Armed Forces in the country and its reputation. The research (Pew Research Centre) conducted in 2014 has shown a considerable decrease in the number of people who believe that the Turkish Armed Forces has a positive impact on the political life of Turkey⁵³. After the last coup in 2016, the reputation of Armed forces has further diminished. This was mainly due to strong opposition by Turkish society that has openly demonstrated against the coup.⁵⁴ Besides diminishing reputation among Turkish society, Turkish Armed Forces also lost faith in NATO. This was partially due to dismissed and arrested high-rank military officials and partially due to foreign policy in the country led by Erdogan, which considerably damaged relations with its western partners.

4.3. Where does the Turkish military force stand?

In order to better understand the strength of the Turkish Armed Forces, we have to analyze its military capabilities and resources that it possess. According to Global Firepower⁵⁵, Turkey has the 9th strongest military power in the world. Solely this fact makes it clear to understand the range of military power of the country not only in the Middle East but also on the global level.

As an active member of NATO Turkey has to have a strong manpower base. Currently, available manpower in Turkey is 41.6 mln. Considering the fact that in Turkey military service is obligatory and starts from age 21, it gives us around 35 mln men who are eligible and fit for military forces in the country. Total estimated number of military personnel in

⁵² Viisimaa, H. (2016)

⁵³ Pew Research Center (2014). Turks Divided on Erdogan and the Country's Direction. Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes and Trends. Available at: <http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/07/30/turks-divided-on-erdogan-and-the-countrys-direction/>

⁵⁴ Ruth, A.P. (2017). Between East and West: Strategic Potential Analysis of Turkey & Debating Turkey's Rising Power Status.

⁵⁵ Globalfirepower (2019). Turkey Military Strength. Available at https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.asp?country_id=turkey

Turkey is slightly more than 710 thousand. Almost 50% of this number are part of active personnel.⁵⁶

As traditionally the number of troops was the important factor in wars, it was playing almost a decisive role in the outcome of the military conflicts. However, starting from the second half of the 20th century as the most important factor military technology has replaced manpower. While mentioning about technical advancement of the weaponry, it is worth to mention strong Air force of Turkey. According to data from GlobalFirepower total aircraft force of Turkey is 1056 out of which there are 207 Fighters and 475 helicopters.

Having experienced strong terroristic attacks since the 80s of last centuries especially from the regions bordering with Iraq and Syria made Turkey build not only strong air forces but also increase its land strength. Moreover, having access to the Aegean Sea, The Black Sea and the Mediterranean Sea made Turkey build and maintain naval forces as well. Below chart shows the naval and land strength of Turkey in more details.

Table 3: Turkish Land Power and Naval Strength

Land Strength		Naval Strength	
Combat tanks	2446	Frigates	16
Armored Fighting Vehicles	9031	Corvettes	10
Self-Propelled Artillery	1108	Submarines	12
Towed Artillery	872	Patrol Vessels	34
Rocket Projectors	418	Mine Warfare	11

While speaking about advanced weaponry and necessary high technology needed for armed forces, it is important to highlight two key elements that are vital for the Turkish Army to supply its military forces. One of them is foreign import, which is playing an important role in building a strong and modern weaponry base for the Turkish Army. In this regard, Turkey was traditionally importing the majority of its weapons and other military assets from its western partners in NATO. Undoubtedly, this fact was costing Turkey massive financial resources and was keeping it depended on other countries⁵⁷. However, in recent years Turkey is changing this approach by building its own military industry. Having a strong investment commitment in this sphere, Turkey could achieve some impressive results, which reduced its dependency on import from other countries. The ultimate aim of the Turkish Armed Forces is to eliminate dependency on import fully and to produce enough high technology weapons that would suffice internal demand. The second important element is financial resources⁵⁸. It is hard to imagine a strong army and advanced weaponry base without strong financial means. Currently (in 2018), Turkey is spending 2.5% of GDP on its military forces⁵⁹. Even though it is lower than to what it has committed to as a member of NATO, Turkey is still preserving its place among most military spending countries both globally and within the alliance.

⁵⁶ Globalfirepower

⁵⁷ Ruth, A.P. (2017).

⁵⁸ Global Security. Turkey Domestic Arm Industry. Available at: <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/europe/tu-industry.htm>

⁵⁹ World Bank. Military expenditure (% of GDP). Available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS>

In order to understand the position of Turkey in the Middle East from a military perspective, we have to compare its military power with the power of other countries in the region. It is almost impossible to determine the exact power capabilities of any state due to national security interests. No country would be interested to fully share detailed information regarding its armed forces or weaponry. However, in order to understand the scope of power each country possess and where they stand in comparison to each other we have to look at key military indicators and rank them accordingly. This would allow me to draw a conclusion regarding Turkey’s military strengths or limitations that can either lead or prevent it to become a leading regional power.

According to recent military comparison shared by Global Firepower, Turkey possesses the strongest military power in the Middle East. The comparison was conducted on 55 different indicators, which made Turkey gain highest Power Index.

Table 4: Power Index by countries in Middle East⁶⁰

Ranking	Country	Power Index
1	Turkey	0.2216
2	Egypt	0.2751
3	Iran	0.3131
4	Israel	0.3444
5	Saudi Arabia	0.4636
6	Iraq	0.8234
7	Syria	0.8276
8	UAE	1.0157
9	Yemen	1.0434
10	Jordan	1.4414
11	Oman	1.5676
12	Kuwait	1.7213
13	Bahrain	2.0764
14	Qatar	2.1132

Even though Turkey has been defined as the strongest military power of the region according to GFP, it is still worth to have a closer look into key military indicators in order to better understand the current standing of Turkey and recent development.

One of the most important but at the same time, the controversial key military indicator is military spend. The controversial part of this key factor is about the efficiency level of money spent on the military sphere.⁶¹ As it is quite challenging to identify the best outcome from the amount spent by each country on their military base, we will need to solely look at statistical numbers. Considering the level of corruption in countries of the Middle

⁶⁰ The table was built according to statistical data provided in Available at: <https://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-listing-middle-east.asp>

⁶¹ Viisimaa, H. (2016). Economic growth and foreign policy of regional powers – a case study of Turkey in the Middle East. Available at: <http://dspace.ut.ee/handle/10062/52067?locale-attribute=en>

East region it is even harder to predict how much percent of total “military budget” is actually spent on the military sphere.

According to World Bank data, Saudi Arabia is certainly the country with the highest military budget in the region. The military spend of Saudi Arabia in 2017 was slightly more than 69.4 billion USD. Considering the income of the country from oil export this amount should not be considered relatively high. However, for the Middle East region, this amount is very high making it less likely for other regional countries to achieve. The military budget of Turkey in the same year was around 18.2 billion USD, which is almost 4 times less than the military budget of Saudi Arabia. Despite the fact that there is a considerable difference in spend between Saudi Arabia and Turkey, the latter preserves its 3rd place in the region according to the size of the military budget. Turkey is followed by Israel (16.5 bln USD) and Iran (14.5 bln USD)⁶²

More interesting results appear when we ask how much percentage of total GDP do countries in the Middle East spend on the military sphere. According to World Bank data, for the year 2017 Turkey was the second country in the ranking list that spent the smallest portion of its GDP on its military. Whereas Turkey has spent only 2.07% of its GDP on the military sphere in 2017, Saudi Arabia has spent more than 10%. Turkey is also one of the leading countries in the region according to the number of military personnel. In 2016, the number of military personnel in Turkey was around 512 thousand. Only Iran and Egypt have greater military personnel in the region.⁶³

4.4. Change in traditional policy

Despite the fact that Turkey had relatively stronger military power in the region, it has almost never used its hard power to solve any existing conflict in the region. Most of the active military operations were limited to fight terrorist groups on its borders with Iraq and Syria. However, recent events happening around Syria shows that Turkey decided to use its military strength for its own national interests in the region. Recent military operations of Turkey in Afrin region of Syria is a clear fact about active military involvement in the region.⁶⁴

There is no doubt that with intervention to Afrin region Turkey has opted for the non-traditional measure. This situation is completely contradicting the soft-power foreign policy Turkey was implementing in the first decade of the 21st century. The interesting fact is that there are different views about the key objective of Turkey in its military operation in Syria. The official announced objective by the Turkish government is the fight against Kurdish terrorist groups that threaten the stability and integrity of the country. According to the official version, this operation should be accepted as part of a continuous fight against terrorism that Turkey is having for many years. However, there are also different views. One of the views is directly linked with Erdogan’s ambitions to gain more support internally and move to a more presidential form of a republic, which allow him to gather more power in

⁶² World Bank. Military expenditure (% of GDP). Available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS>

⁶³ World Bank. Armed Forces personnel, total. Available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.TOTL.P1>

⁶⁴ Manhoff, T. (2017). Turkey's Foreign Policy Towards Syria. Konrad Adenauer Stiftung. Available at: http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_51193-1522-1-30.pdf?171221182017

his own hands. The other view suggests the regional interests of Turkey as a key driving factor behind its hard-power policy in Syria.⁶⁵

The intervention of Turkey in Syria caused another wave of discussion. How successful and efficient was the operation led by Turkey in Afrin? Was it a success at all? Even though Turkey gained total control over Afrin, experts still question the military effectiveness of Turkish Armed Forces in this operation.⁶⁶ According to some experts, operations was also proof of advanced military industry of Turkey, which allowed testing several different weapons.⁶⁷

Even though intervention in Syria is the only active military operations where Turkish Armed Forces are deeply involved, it is not the single hot spot where Turkey has a conflict. Recently the relationship between Turkey and Greece became worse especially due to the last confrontation of both sides in The Aegean Sea.⁶⁸

4.5. Concluding thoughts

Turkey possesses strong military power. This makes it be one of the most important political actors in the region. Considering the importance of military strength as one of the key requirement for being a regional power, we can conclude that Turkey has strong potential to achieve this goal. However, it is also a fact that after the Coup attempt in 2016 many high- rank military officials got either arrested or dismissed. This has naturally weakened the Turkish Armed Forces. Another important point is about difficult military relations of Turkey with its traditional partners from the West. Recent conflicts and disagreements with the USA and key members of the EU (especially in the period shortly before the presidential elections in Turkey), put the country in a difficult situation. Due to this reason, Turkey has started making an agreement with other interested parties and important actors such as Iran and Russia in order to solve Syrian conflict according to its national interests. However, it is unlikely that Turkey can achieve a strong absolute gain in the region without the support of NATO states. Having similar interests such as Iran, Russia and Saudi Arabia in the region would make it hardly possible for Turkey to achieve considerable gains in the region. Also ignoring NATO can possibly cause Turkey to lose its role as a *key alliance state of the region*.

⁶⁵ Astorino-Courtois, A. (2017). Turkish Interest in Syria and Iraq .Available at: <https://nsiteam.com/sma-reachback-r2ql6-turkish-interests-and-albab/>

⁶⁶ Rogan, T. (2018). Turkey's operation in Syria shows its military limitations. Available at: <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/turkeys-operation-in-syria-shows-its-military-limitations>

⁶⁷ Hafizoglu, R. (2018). Turkey turning into regional military power. Trend News Agency. Available at: <https://en.trend.az/other/commentary/2868366.html>

⁶⁸ Baboulias, Y. (2018). Greece and Turkey are Inching Towards War. Foreign Policy. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/04/18/greece-and-turkey-are-inching-toward-war/>

5. Regional foreign policy of Turkey towards the Middle East

Previous two chapters of this thesis were devoted to the description of the economic and military power of Turkey in the region. Besides the description of strengths of Turkey with facts and figures from available resources, we have mainly focused to understand the position of the country within the region where it aspires to be a regional power. Thus, both chapters were built upon a statistical comparison between Turkey and other states in the region. The key purpose was to understand if Turkey possesses a superior role in the region from military and economic perspectives.

Another key defining indicator for regional power is its acceptance as a regional leader state by neighbor political actors. The regional states should not only accept the leadership of the state in the region but also recognize and accept the role that a leader state defines for itself and promotes it on the regional and international level⁶⁹. While speaking about the recognition of one country as a regional leader, it is important to note that there is one more level of *recognition/acceptance* besides regional recognition. The state claiming the role of the regional leader has to be accepted by international/global powers as well. Acceptance by international powers as a regional leader is equally important as acceptance by neighbor states.

There are two different levels of resources that are quite important for a regional leader to possess; material resources and ideational resources. The latter is key at the regional level of recognition. Material resources purely consist of military strengths and economic power of the state, which realist scholars accept as the most important indicator for being considered as a regional power. Ideational resources as a term have a relatively broader definition. Ideational resources are based on trust and legitimacy that help regional power to make its role to be accepted by regional states. On contrary to forceful acceptance of authority, ideational resources represent cultural and moral values. In this regard, ideational resources represent the soft power of states that are among key indicators for being considered as a regional power by other regional actors.⁷⁰

In this chapter of my thesis, I will try to analyze the foreign policy of Turkey in regard to regional states in the Middle East. I will mainly focus on the description of soft power tools used by AKP government in last 10-12 years in respect to states in the region and how Turkey gave up its soft power policy by gradually moving to hard power. The chapter will start with an overview of historical ties between Turkey and the region. I will further proceed to analyze the reasons behind Turkish engagement in the Middle East. The next parts will describe the policy implemented by the Turkish government with respect to the ongoing political process in the region and their outcome on regional power aspirations of Turkey. This would allow me to draw a conclusion about the success level of Turkish foreign policy and its acceptance (or non-acceptance) by regional actors.

⁶⁹ Kutlay, M. and Dincher, O.B. (2012). An Empirical Analysis on Turkey's "Regional Power" Potential in the Middle East. International Strategic Research Organization (USAK), Academic Ortadogu, Volume 6, No 2

⁷⁰ Flems, D. (2007). Conceptualizing Regional Power in International Relations: Lessons from the South African Case (p. 12-18). GIGA Working Papers, pp 12-18

5.1. Historical ties and foreign policy of Turkey towards the Middle East during the 20th century

Turkey has strong historical ties and shares a common culture with the Middle East region. For almost 400 years the region was ruled by the predecessor of Turkey- Ottoman Empire. Starting from the beginning of the 16th century Ottomans got involved in several conflicts with key powers of that time in order to gain full control over the region. Despite the fact that the main purpose of conducted wars was to enlarge the territory of the empire and increase its wealth, there was another equally important reason for the occupation of these territories. The aim was to gain the leadership status of the Islamic world through the occupation of holy lands. As the religious factor was quite important in the Ottoman Empire, it was ideological war, which in case of success could become a strong political tool in the hands of sultans⁷¹. Ottomans ruled the region almost until the last days of the empire. Even though 4-century history ended already one hundred years ago, it left strong cultural ties behind which could be potentially used by the new state.

During the first years of newborn state –Turkey, the government did not engage with the Middle East region. The focus was mainly put on internal stabilization. Active Turkish engagement with the region started in the second half of the 20th century. Starting from the 1950s until the end of 80s Turkey had a traditional foreign policy towards the Middle East region. The region was accepted as a threat by Turkish officials and the key goal was not to get involved in regional conflicts by keeping neutrality and status-quo in relations with regional actors. In 1950s Turkish government was actively trying to build an image which was completely different from the one in the Middle East. Turkey was trying to show that it does not belong to the region and is part of the modernized western world. In this regard, Turkey was taking joint steps with its Western partners in shaping and implementation of foreign policy toward states in the region. In comparison to the hard power policy that Turkey was actively using in respect to its Middle Eastern neighbors during 1950s, starting from 1960s until 1980s the country moved to more isolationist regional policy. The major objectives of this policy were to keep the balance of power in the region, acceptance of established state borders and prevent the emergence of any powerful actor that could potentially endanger the status quo.⁷²

5.2. Change in foreign policy towards the Middle East under AKP government and reasons behind it

From the political aspect, the Middle East is very diverse and complicated region. Turkey has attempted to accumulate its power counting on common history and Islamic culture that it shares with states in the region. However, considering the fact that in the region there are already several states such as Israel, Saudi Arabia and Iran claiming the role of

⁷¹ M Alkan, M. (2016). Islamic Unity” Policy of the Ottoman Empire: Ottomanization of the Middle East. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/303955015_Osmanli_Devletinin_Islam_Birligi_Siyaseti_Ortadogu'nun_Osmanlilasmasi

⁷² Altunisik, B.M. (2009). Worldviews and Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East, pp 171-180. New Perspectives on Turkey. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/260407581_Worldviews_and_Turkish_foreign_policy_in_the_Middle_East

regional power and interest of global powers such as Russia and the USA, it is not an easy task to become a leading state of the region. Considering authoritarian structure of regional states, the existence of hot conflict between Shi'a and Sunni communities and the independent policy that Turkey has adopted in order to achieve its goals, the situation on the political chessboard gets more complicated.⁷³

The traditional foreign policy of Turkey towards the Middle East region has changed considerably since 2002 once AKP came into power. Taking into account historical ties with the region, Turkey has started to initiate more active foreign policy by emphasizing its new role of mediator or big brother. The first key goal was to eliminate all existing problems with neighboring countries. The liberalist approach in the foreign policy of Turkey was taking a lead. This policy was based on thoughts and publications of Ahmet Davutoglu who was a Minister of Foreign Affairs and later Prime Minister in Turkey.

The new approach of Turkey in the region was described as neo-Ottoman policy and triggered the question to which different scholars of IR tried to answer: What are the main drivers behind Turkey's active involvement in the region? Some scholars argue that Turkey's disappointment with never-ending membership discussion with the EU and its aspirations for more independent foreign policy made it change its foreign policy strategy. The other scholars argue that the Middle East is very attractive and a big market for the growing export-oriented economy of Turkey. The increase of Turkish exports into the region starting from 2002 that we have seen in chapter 2 at some extent proves this theory. However, besides economic aspirations, the AKP government had another more important target to reach: To become a regional leader which is recognized by regional and global players.⁷⁴

One should not forget about the security goals that Turkey was targeting to achieve through active engagement with the region. Facing terroristic attacks conducted by PKK was threatening the internal stability of the country. Considering the fact that terroristic groups were active also in different countries bordering Turkey, it was beneficial for the AKP government to build strong cooperation with the regional states in order to prevent and control any further terror attacks⁷⁵. The other factor that has contributed to the engagement of Turkey with the region was the change in the political structure of the country and in Turkish society itself. Turkish society changed from western-oriented secular system to more liberal religious system. The country did not become a pure Islamic state as in Iran or Saudi Arabia. However, due to the nature and policy of AKP government Islamic values regained its importance in society. This factor helped Turkey to be accepted by Arabic countries.⁷⁶

Many experts argue that Turkey as some other countries gained the opportunity to assert its role in the region as a consequence of natural factor which was the domination of regionalism in the international system. As the dominant role of the United States as a global player started to diminish, some states gained the opportunity to become a leading power of

⁷³ Ayoob, M. (2017). *The Arab Spring: Its Geostrategic Significance*. Middle East Policy Council. Available at: <https://www.mepc.org/arab-spring-its-geostrategic-significance>

⁷⁴ Barkey, J. H (2011). *Turkish Foreign Policy and the Middle East*. CERJ Strategy papers.

⁷⁵ Onish, Z. (2014). *Turkey and the Arab Revolutions: Boundaries of Regional Power Influence in a Turbulent Middle East*. *Mediterranean Politics*, pp 205-207

⁷⁶ White, J. (2012). *Muslim Nationalism and New Turks*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

their regions. In this regard, Turkey has started to extend its influence on post-Ottoman territories. However, André Bank and Roy Karadag argue that, the reason behind Turkey's success during the first decade of 21st century was not only systematical change in the international system but also strong socio-economic situation and internal stabilization in the country under the AKP government. The authors claim that effective switch from pure secular republic to more liberal religious model and consolidation of democracy made Turkey stronger internally and increased its reputation in the region.⁷⁷

Within two decades, Turkey has changed its foreign policy approach towards the Middle East region three times. During the 90s of the 20th century, Turkey has tried to achieve some gains in the region by showing the strengths of its military power. The political gap that was formed with the end of the Cold War created an opportunity for Turkey to make such attempts. Even though Turkey gave the strong fight against Kurdish military groups, it did not confront any neighboring state on the battlefield, despite the fact that it had quite tense relations in the region.

Unexpectedly, the new government (AKP) has completely changed its approach towards the region. The country that was threatening its neighbor and showing teeth in the 90s became soft power state at the beginning of the new era. It was obviously hard for the region to get adopted to "new Turkey" which for many years was accusing Arabic nations in betrayal during First World War and keeping hostile policy towards the regional countries due to historical events. However, huge diplomatic, cultural and economic efforts and investments allowed AKP to change the traditional image of Turkey in the region. Good combination of Islamic and democratic values, better human rights and domestic stability, the stable and increasing economic situation in the country and Turkey's relations with key western players were the major elements that made it be welcomed by Arabic society.⁷⁸

With the change of traditional policy towards the region in 2002, AKP also decided to keep the distance with the USA and have a more independent policy. At some point, this was a good strategy in order to build trust with the regional states. At the same time, Turkey also changed its focus from the European region to the Middle East.⁷⁹ AKP changed Turkey's top priority of becoming an EU member state to become a regional power in the Middle East. This change also affected Turkey's relations with the EU. These kinds of decisions in Turkey's foreign policy could cost it a lot in the future. By keeping the distance with the USA and EU Turkey was risking to the loose vital support of its NATO partners.

AKP had to invest a lot in bilateral relations, economic cooperation and as a mediator in order to gain and build trust among regional states. Undoubtedly, this was possible only through a soft-power policy which was based on the internal democratic system, socio-economic thrive with the combination of Islamic values that attracted Middle Eastern states.

⁷⁷ Bank, A. and Karadag, R. (2012). *The Political Economy of Regional Power: Turkey under the AKP*. GIGA Research Unit: Institute of Middle East Studies

⁷⁸ Tol, G. and Baskan, B. (2018). From "hard power" to "soft power" and back again: Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East. Middle East Institute. Available at: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/hard-power-soft-power-and-back-again-turkish-foreign-policy-middle-east>

⁷⁹ Onish, Z. (2014). Turkey and the Arab Revolutions. pp 203-219

Starting from 2007 Turkey made important steps, which was driving it forward to its goal as a regional power. Not surprisingly, during this time, Turkey, as a country was very popular among the Arab population and Erdogan, was the most famous leader in the region.⁸⁰

During the second governance period of AKP, the role of Turkey as a mediator state in the region was in large extent accepted. Mediation between Syria and Israel, active participation during conflict around the nuclear program of Iran are among facts proving that Turkey could successfully realize its major goal during these years. Turkey became a role model for other Muslim countries in the region with its strong and stable stance both in internal and external affairs.⁸¹

Closer engagement of AKP government with the Middle East region has been welcomed by Turkish society as well. Local business owners have started to benefit from increased economic interaction with regional states. Turkey started more actively introduce its goods and services in the region. Turkish soap operas became very popular making Turkey and its culture more attractive for Arab society. In order to promote better integration with the region and promote regional economic relations, Turkey has initiated the idea to remove the visa regime with neighbor countries. The efforts of the Turkish government has further improved Turkey's relations with the region and increased the number of tourists visiting the country from Arabic states.

By 2010 Turkey has achieved visible results and its investment in relations with the regional states started to pay off. Turkey could convince the regional players that it is acting independently from its western allies and relations with the region is one of Turkey's top priorities. Turkey was the promoter of economic integration in the region, it was strengthening diplomatic ties with the local actors and at the same time was getting more involved in the political life of the region. As was mentioned earlier Turkey was actively participating as a moderator in regional conflicts and was promoting peace and stability in the region. Going one step further Turkey was advocating for human rights and asking regional states to bring more democracy and freedom to their societies. Turkey was also actively supporting Islamic parties in several Middle Eastern countries. The ultimate goal was to support these parties to come into power, which could help Turkey to strengthen its position in the region to a higher extent.⁸²

During these years, many already were accepting Turkey as a regional power. However, the meetings and demonstrations (so-called Arab Spring) that started in late 2010 in several countries in the region and resulted in huge instability proved that Turkey was not ready for this kind of political scenario. During this political process, Turkey has failed almost in all fronts and considerably damaged its status as a regional power.

⁸⁰ Kutlay, M. and Dincher, O.B. (2012)

⁸¹ Demir, I. (2017). Turkey's Foreign Policy towards the Middle East under shadow of the Arab Spring p.15-17. Turkey's Foreign Policy towards the Middle East. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

⁸²Bechev, D. and Hiltermann, J. (2017). Turkey's Forays Into the Middle East. Turkish Policy Quarterly. Available at: http://turkishpolicy.com/article/879/turkeys-forays-into-the-middle-east#_ftn1

5.3. Existing conflicts prior to Arab Spring

Before starting with the analysis of Turkish foreign policy strategy during Arab revolutions it is worth to investigate existing conflicts prior to the Arab Spring. Even though Turkey was actively focusing to diminish existing internal and external conflicts upon zero problem policy, it was not always successful to achieve this goal. Soon AKP government has realized that existing internal problem is more challenging to overcome rather than improvement of bilateral relations with the regional states. Moreover, the Turkish government had to face the fact that, in order to strengthen its position in the region among Arabic societies it has to make a choice among conflicting parties of the region.

5.3.1. Kurdish Problem

Turkey is struggling with the so-called “Kurdish problem” almost for 40 years. Kurds as a nation are the biggest minority group within Turkey. They live mainly in the South-Eastern regions of Turkey. There is also a big population of Kurds living in Syria, Iraq, and Iran⁸³. Starting from 1980s Turkey is fighting against Kurdistan’s Workers Party (PKK) which is officially accepted as a terroristic group. PKK as a separatist group is operating not only in Turkey but is very active also in the regions of Syria and Iraq, which are bordering with Turkey. Despite the fact that at some point conflicting parties could achieve a ceasefire and initiated peace talks, recent political events in the region have intensified the tension. Even though the conflict is accepted as an internal problem of Turkey, there are several factors that make the “Kurdish problem” to be considered on a regional level: 1. Kurds are one of the biggest population group in the Middle East being populated in different countries. 2. Kurds are not only one of the biggest minority group within Turkey, but also within other countries mentioned above. 3. Kurds have active political and military groups operating in all these four countries demanding more freedom, rights, and sovereignty with one of the key aim to build their own independent state. 4. Turkey often initiates military attacks on PKK within territories of Syria and Iraq. All these factors show the significance of the problem keeping it actual on the regional level and being part of the agenda in interstate meetings.⁸⁴

5.3.2. Conflict with Israel

“Zero problems” policy with neighbors soon proved to be not for every state in the region. Turkey for a long time had strong relations with Israel. Considering the fact that both countries were accepted strong supporters and partners of the Western block, it was not expectable to have a conflict between these two states. However, Turkish support to Hamas as part of its Muslim Brotherhood policy and closer relations of AKP with Iran has badly affected the relations with Israel. Regional leadership aspiration of Turkey did not align with the role of Israel in the region. Turkey was ready to sacrifice its strong partnership relations with Israel in order to gain more power and influence among Arab states. Starting from second governance period of AKP in Turkey the relations between two worsened considerably. Military operations of Israel in Gaza was openly criticized by Turkey. AKP

⁸³ Bengio, O. (2014). *Kurdish Awakening: Nation Building in a Fragmented Homeland*, Austin, University of Texas Press,

⁸⁴ Bechev, D. and Hiltermann, J. (2017).

government has started openly supporting Palestinians in the ongoing conflict. The events followed afterward: conflict on Prime Minister level and “Mavi Marmara” incident almost fully destroyed the relations between old partner states.⁸⁵

5.3.3. Bilateral relations with Iraq

Turkey could not build strong relations with Iraq during the first 2 governance period of AKP. The situation did not improve after Arab revolutions either. During the first 2 years of AKP government in Turkey, when Saddam Hussein was ruling Iraq, the political situation was partially beneficial for Turkey. In order to preserve the integrity of Iraq Saddam was fighting against Shia groups and Kurdish minorities on the north. AKP was favoring this kind of political scenario on its border, as Turkey was aiming to weaken Kurdish minority and their activity in the region. Sunni Iraq was also in favor of Turkey as it was preventing Shia Iran to accumulate power and its influence in the region. However, things have changed with the occupation of Iraq by USA forces in 2003. Using the opportunity of weakened Iraqi state both Iran and Kurdish groups have strengthened their positions in the country. Later in 2010 Turkey has tried to bring to end Shia governance in Iraq by aligning with Qatar. However, Turkish support to Sunni political forces did not succeed and Shia leader- Nouri Al Maliki came into power for the second time. This event further deteriorated the bilateral relations between the neighbor states.⁸⁶

5.4. Arab spring and failure of Turkey in the Middle East

“Arab Spring” played the key role in the formation of new Turkish foreign policy towards the region which we can observe nowadays. The events started with “Arab Spring” brought the end of Turkish success history in the Middle East.

Starting from the first years of active Turkish engagement in the region AKP was trying to be recognized as a country that tries to develop economic ties with the region. On the other hand, AKP leadership was trying to deepen relations with the regional states by emphasizing common history and culture, which was positively received by regional actors. Even though Turkey was acting as democracy advocator, this was not the key part of its regional policy. However, things have changed with the start of the Arabic revolutions.⁸⁷

As the Turkish government could not foresee Arabic revolutions, it did not have any defined policy to follow in such kind of circumstances. In order to keep the popularity of Turkey in the region and preserve its ambitions for being a regional power AKP government choice to act as an active promoter of democracy by calling the regimes to go for dialog with protestors and take actions for improvement of human rights. The Turkish government was well aware that any kind of passive policy or indecisiveness could dismantle Turkish status

⁸⁵Arbell,D.(2014).The US- Turkey-Israel Triangle. Brooking. Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/USTurkeyIsrael-TriangleFINAL.pdf>

⁸⁶ Bechev, D. and Hiltermann, J. (2017).

⁸⁷ Onish, Z. (2014). pp 207

and image in the region. That is why Turkey had to make a decision without any further delay in such an uneasy situation.⁸⁸

The political events that happened at the beginning of the revolutions or immediately afterward created the political illusion that Turkey has succeeded and that the policy which was implemented by the AKP government for many years finally brought fruits. Muslim Brotherhood parties that the AKP government was actively supporting in the region one after another came to power. In Tunisia, Egypt and Libya political parties resembling AKP succeeded to become victors after political turmoil. Many have thought that all these “victories” are part of “Turkish victory in the Middle East”. However, these parties did not last long in power. The successful military coup in Egypt brought the end of Muslim brothers in the country. In Tunisia on contrary, the party left their seats on their own.⁸⁹

Turkey has also failed in Syria and subsequently found itself in the middle of a much bigger crisis. Efforts of the AKP government to persuade Bashar al-Assad to implement democratic reforms did not pay off and Assad has taken more aggressive steps against rebellions. With the hope that rebels will force Assad to leave its post, Turkey has started actively supporting them. Despite all efforts taken by the Turkish government Assad managed to stay in power with strong support received from Iran and later from Russia. The war in Syria developed in such a way that Turkey could not even predict its outcome. The war brought two big enemies of Turkey closer to its Syrian border. ISIS and PKK both could strengthen their positions using the political gap which was formed due to continuous war. The outcome of the war in the neighboring country now was threatening the security and stability of Turkey itself. Occurred unfavorable situation forced Turkey to reconsider its policy and regional approach.

There were several reasons why Turkey has failed in Syria. Already at the beginning of the Syrian revolution, Turkey could not clearly analyze its own influence on Assad and the influence of other regional players such as Iran and Russia. AKP government was convinced that they will be able to persuade Assad to go for a compromise and initiate some actions for democratic changes. Turkey also failed to judge the scope of power that Syrian rebels possessed at that time. Moreover, AKP leadership believed that, even if the Assad regime will survive the war with the opposition, it will eventually lose with the intervention or under pressure by Western political actors. However, further development of political events showed that the Turkish government had misleading assumptions.⁹⁰

Besides the above stated ‘political miscalculations’ that resulted in an undesirable situation for the AKP government, there was a different strategic mistake that further worsened the status of Turkey. In order to fight Shi’a regimes in the region (especially against Assad’s government) Turkey has decided to support Sunni groups. This political maneuver did not only bring Turkey to a more conflicting situation with the regional states

⁸⁸ Dincer, B. and Kutlay, M. (2013) .The Arab Spring: A Game Changer in Turkey-EU Relations?, Perspectives on European Politics and Society, 14:4, 418-430, DOI: 10.1080/15705854.2012.753701

⁸⁹ Bechev, D. and Hiltermann, J. (2017).

⁹⁰ International Crisis Group (2016). Turkey and Iran: Bitter Friends, Bosom Rivals (2016). Available at:<https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iran/b051-turkey-and-iran-bitter-friends-bosom-rivals>

such as Syria, Iran and Iraq but also strongly damaged its Soft-power status and regional power role which was “aiming” to promote democracy in the Middle East.⁹¹

Another political decision that Turkey took during its soft power policy period and failed shortly after Arab revolutions was to build and support political parties, which were strong proponents of moderate Islam like AKP. As was mentioned earlier, the main goal was to bring these parties to power via democratic elections. By achieving this goal, Turkey could build a strong partnership with the governments in the region and further strengthen its position. However, even though in some countries like Egypt Turkey could achieve its goal, this success was not longstanding. After a short period in the power, parties had to leave their ruling chairs. Some parties even could not gain considerable support in their countries and failed already in the beginning. By supporting this kind of parties in opposition and helping rebellions, minorities and different religious groups Turkey worsened its relations with the governments of several countries in the region.

Turkey’s attempt to improve relations with Iran –its historical competitor in the region did not bring any effective results either. At some point, Turkey even did support the right of Iran for building its nuclear program for peaceful reasons. This kind of approach also allowed Turkey to offer its support as a mediator in a nuclear conflict, which was ongoing between Iran and the West. The major goal behind this kind of mediation efforts was to strengthen Turkey’s image and power status in the world. However, despite the efforts of Turkey to build relations with Iran in the region, the latter was not showing strong interest in the improvement of relations with its historic competitor. The active foreign policy of Iran in Syria by supplying Assad’s regime with military support and helping the Iraqi government and Shii population of the region are clear facts of indirect enmity and competition with Turkey.⁹²

5.5. Current situation

During the last 16-17 years under the AKP government, Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East and its political influence in the region went through three different stages. The first stage was the initiation of soft power policy which brought active engagement with the region. During the second stage (by 2010) Turkey managed to enlarge its influence in the region and was accepted as a regional power in the Middle East. The third stage was remembered as a failure of Turkish regional (Soft-power) policy during and after the Arab revolution.

Failure of soft power policy during the Arab revolution made Turkey change to hard power policy concentrating more on military activities in the region. Due to the occurred political situation in Syria and north Iraq Turkey had to initiate and increase its military activities in both countries. Moreover, the AKP government had established its military base in Somalia and went into a military agreement with Kuwait. However, the most important military support was given to Qatar during its conflict with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which is currently hosting the Turkish military base within its territory.⁹³

⁹¹ Onish, Z. (2014). pp 210

⁹² Moghaddam, A.A. (2018). After the “Middle East”: Turkey and Iran in a new region. Available at: https://www.ide.go.jp/library/Japanese/Publish/Periodicals/Me_review/pdf/201808_01.pdf

⁹³ Tol, G. and Baskan, B. (2018).

There were two major reasons why Turkey made a switch from soft power policy to hard power. The first reason was the failure of implemented soft power policy during Arab revolutions, which made the AKP government reconsider its traditional approach. The second reason was an undemocratic and authoritarian regime of Turkey itself. On contrary to the first 10 years of AKP government, starting from 2012-2013 democratic situation in Turkey has considerably worsened and has triggered strong protests by civilians. Under such circumstances, all efforts by AKP and its leader calling for democracy in the region were sounding ironic and insincere. The country, which was showed as a role model for the region with its democratic stance, started to look like Arabic country going through protests and demonstrations, which was calling for more freedom and human rights.⁹⁴

When we compare the political situation of Turkey today and the one 8-10 years ago, we can clearly see considerable drawbacks that put Turkey apart from its goal to be the regional power. Today's Turkey does not attract its neighbors with its "democratic stance". Today's Turkey is far from its "zero problem" goal and struggles with several problems in the region. Today's Turkey is not a Soft-power anymore that was promoting peace and stability in the region. Today's Turkey can't call for regional integrity any further. Today's Turkey is hardly considered as a regional power in the Middle East.

6. International recognition of Turkey as a regional power?

One of the common notion about regional power as a term is that recognition by political actors is the required factor to be accepted as a regional leader. As was described in the theoretical part of the thesis there are 2 levels of recognition/acceptance: Regional and international. The level of recognition of Turkey and its integration with the regional actors were analyzed in the previous chapters. International level of recognition stands for the acceptance by global/international powers that have a strong and determinant position in international politics. In the following chapter of the thesis, I will analyze the level of recognition of Turkey by international political actors. Even though the relations of Turkey with some major international actors will be briefly described below, for the purpose of this thesis main focus will be given to the relations of Turkey with its NATO partners: EU and the USA.

6.1. Russia

Russia and Turkey are two historical enemies that were fighting for centuries. However, things have changed during the first years of Turkish independence. It is not a secret that USSR was supporting a new state under Mustafa Kemal with necessary resources. Despite the fact that Turkey has shifted to the side of the western block during the Cold War the things started changing slowly during the AKP government.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Onish, Z. (2014). pp 216-217

⁹⁵ Official webpage of Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Relations between Turkey and the Russian Federation. Available at: <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkey-and-the-russian-federation.en.mfa>

There were no major incidents between the two countries until 2015. The relations worsened with the crisis period when Turkey hit Russian aircraft claiming that it has violated its border. Russia has responded with economic sanctions and imposed visa regime for Turkish citizens. However, the mutual relations started to improve after R.T. Erdogan has apologized over the happened incident.⁹⁶

Today both countries benefit from increasing trade where the goal is to reach 100 billion USD in the very near future. Moreover, Russia is a very big and vital destination for Turkish products. It is also worth to mention that Turkey generates the biggest portion of its tourism revenue thanks to Russian tourists. Both countries also cooperate in the energy field. It is not a secret that Russia is one of the biggest energy suppliers of Turkey.⁹⁷

Considering the decision of Turkey to purchase s-400 missiles from Russia and insisting on its decision despite the pressure from Trump's government once again shows the high level of cooperation between two states. However, not everything is perfect in Turkey-Russian relations. There is a clear conflict of interest and competition around Syria. Even though both parties concentrate on further improvement of relations and increase mutual benefits none of them is willing to compromise their positions in the region.

Russia does accept Turkey as one of the key players in the region. However, not as a regional leader as it would contradict its own interest. Russia is geographically close to the region and has its own interest in the Middle East. In order to realize its own goals, Russia has to either cooperate or compete with Turkey (and with other important political actors) in the region. In any case, Turkey remains as a strategic player in the region which cannot be easily ignored by Russia.

6.2. China

Undoubtedly China is one of the very few countries whose support is quite important for Turkey. The relationship between the two countries moved from ordinary cooperation to a strategic partnership in 2010 when both sides signed several agreements. There are two main reasons why Turkey has decided to approach China. The first is the current global role and power of China and the second is a strategic change in the foreign policy of Turkey. As Turkey wants to switch from west to east in order to reduce its dependency on its western "partners" and look for alternative markets, China becomes one of the most important countries in the eastern world to be considered.

Even though there were few official visits from both sides which clearly showed the interest of the parties in mutual cooperation the relations between two were not so smooth. On the economic sphere, countries could not achieve strong results. Even though there was some increase in trade between two states the size has not changed significantly since 2015. Whereas Chinas was upset by not winning the project over the nuclear plant in Turkey, AKP

⁹⁶ Karaalioglu, B.E. (2019). Relations between Turkey and the Russian Federation, Middle East Eye news. Available at: www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/dangers-turkeys-deepening-relations-russia

⁹⁷ Ciddi, S. (2018). Relations between Turkey and the Russian Federation, Straftor Worldview. Available at <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/turkey-and-russia-new-alignment>

leadership was disappointed by misbalance of trade activities. On the political sphere, the situation was not ideal either. The fact that China does not recognize PKK as a terroristic group and Turkey supports Uyghur minorities in China doesn't contribute to bilateral relations.⁹⁸

Recently there were a few positive signs that could potentially bring two countries closer to each other. Construction of Silk road, some considerable investments from China in the Turkish economy, increased number of Chinese tourists and the willingness of Turkey to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization are the ones to be considered.

Despite the fact that there is an existence of mutual willingness to increase the overall size of the trade and to work on new projects together, the reality is that the parties are far from being two strong partner states. Besides the geographical factors, there is a reality that today there are no many mutual economic interests that both sides could benefit from. The vast majority of trade activities happen due to the exports of China. If today is the overall turnover in bilateral trade amounts to 28 billion USD the portion of Turkish export is only 3 billion USD.⁹⁹

In the political field, the picture is not clear either. On the one hand, Turkish chaotic foreign policy makes it unclear to understand the place of China in Turkish foreign policy priorities, on the other hand, China does not initiate any clear steps showing the importance of Turkey as a strategic partner.

6.3. Brazil

The similarity between Turkey and Brazil raised due to the same political goals. Both countries are mainly accepted as a middle-sized power. However, both Brazil and Turkey have attempted to gain more power and international recognition not only on a regional level but also on a global stage too. That is why at some point these two states have actioned together and initiated some projects. The aim was to prove that new powers are more effective in conflict resolutions than traditional/old powers. Consequently, both countries started supporting each other and had similar positions regarding international political issues. Nuclear program of Iran and the conflict around it is a clear example of this.

If we look at the total size of the trade between the two countries (which is slightly below 3 billion USD)¹⁰⁰ it is clear that Brazil is far away from being a key economic partner of Turkey. This means that bilateral trade relations between the two states are several times weaker than economic ties Turkey has with Russia or China. However, it is quite clear that economic relation is not the top priority in bilateral relations. The key target here (which has started since 2010)¹⁰¹ is to achieve international recognition by acting together as two

⁹⁸ Colakoglu, S. (2018). Turkey-China Relations: From strategic corporation to strategic partnership? Middle East Institute. Available at: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/turkey-china-relations-strategic-cooperation-strategic-partnership>

⁹⁹ Turkish Statistical Institute. Available at: <http://www.turkstat.gov.tr>.

¹⁰⁰ Turkey global edge. Turkey Trade Statistics Available at <https://globaledge.msu.edu/countries/turkey/tradestats>

¹⁰¹ Official webpage of Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Relations between Turkey and Brazil. Available at: <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkey-and-brazil.en.mfa>

important political partners. Joint action is aiming to prove the political independence of both states through which they try to gain a word in the international political arena. Taking this into the consideration there is no doubt that both political players recognize each other as leading states of their respective regions.

6.4. USA

Turkey and the USA did not have any considerable interactions until the end of the Second World War. The relationship between these two states started to evolve with the beginning of the Cold War era. The reason for cooperation between the countries was the necessity that made them join powers against the same threat- USSR. It has to be mentioned that neither the USA nor Turkey did have serious issues with the Soviet Union until the end of the Second World War. However, the political scene has changed when the Soviet Union as a winner of the war has started to spread its sphere of influence over Turkey and European countries.

Turkey was an important political actor for the USA in its confrontation against the USSR. The role of Turkey was essential as it had a direct border with the USSR and had a strong geostrategic position in the region. The real danger coming from the USSR was so serious that not long after the foundation of NATO Turkey has become its member. This was a historical and changing moment in the USA-Turkey relationship. With its acceptance to NATO Turkey has started to benefit from military and economic support coming from the US government. This kind of financial support was vital for Turkey as at that time the country still did not have a strong economy.

Undoubtedly the military point was the key aspect of the bilateral relations during the whole Cold War era. This factor was so strong that made Turkey secure even when its domestic and foreign policy decisions were not aligned with key principles and interests of its western partner. It is worth to mention that Turkey did not face any serious issue with the US after each and every coup in the country as its NATO ally was still willing to continue its cooperation with the new governments. Even when Turkey has invaded part of Cyprus in 1974 the US government has almost ignored the case. Even though there were sanctions put on Turkey initially, soon they were lifted.¹⁰²

With the collapse of the USSR in 1991, the danger that was keeping Turkey and the USA together has disappeared. Now both states started to look for alternative common interests that would preserve the decades-long partnership. In the 1990s the USA government defined a new role for Turkey. In the new era, Turkey was supposed to build strong relations with Turkic states that recently got their independence. Turkey was also considered to be a strategic energy route that had to link the Caspian region with Europe. The key target was to further isolate and weaken a new Russian state.

Turkey was still quite important for the USA due to its important geographic location and historical roots which were linking it with the Middle East region where the USA had its own political interests. For the USA it was quite important to have a loyal partner in the

¹⁰² Aras, B. and Aliriza, B. (2012). U.S.-Turkish Relations a review at the beginning of the third decade of the post-cold war era. SAM, center for strategic research, CSIS- Center for Strategic and International Studies.

region. Furthermore, Turkey is a location which is linking Europe and Asia. This factor makes its role more important as a strategic partner.

Even though The USA could define the role of Turkey as its partner in the new era, there was still a big gap in the bilateral relationship after the collapse of the USSR. For Turkey, this was a new opportunity to gain more power and spheres of influence in some Post-Soviet and Post-Ottoman territories. Naturally, Turkey did not want to lose its strategic partner which was a leading state of the world. However, the willingness to have a more independent foreign policy and struggle for more power were not matching with the interest of the USA in the region.¹⁰³ Turkey was gradually building relations with Iran and Russia that was hard for the USA to digest.

Soon it became clear that “partners” have conflicting interests in the region. The first major disappointment of Turkey happened once the USA government has decided to create a no-fly zone immediately after the Gulf war. This was done in order to protect the Kurdish minority in the regions of Iraq. This was a good opportunity for Kurdish people to attempt to create their own state on the border with Turkey.¹⁰⁴ Another case that has further deepened the mistrust between those two states happened once Turkey refused to let the US Army use its territory to attack Iraq in 2003.

During the first years of the presidency of Barack Obama, the relations with Turkey became more important for the US government than it was before. Obama administration was well aware of the increasing status of Turkey in the Middle East and its considerable economic development during these years. Thus, it was quite important for Obama to build strong relations with its NATO ally. Not surprisingly Turkey was described by US officials as a role model for other Muslim countries in the region and a key country with the potential to build a link between Muslim states and the West.

Despite the fact that there were some conflicts between two countries also during Obama’s presidency (especially around “Armenian Genocide”)¹⁰⁵ countries could overcome these issues and work together during the Arab Spring to bring democracy to the regional states.

Today the relations between Turkey and the USA are much worse than it has ever been. More than 70 percent of Turks consider the USA as the main danger. There are several existing issues between the two states that keep the tension high. The first point is about the US support to Kurdish fighters in Syria. In order to fight against ISIS, the US government has chosen People’s Protection Units (YPG) as its main “friend” in the region. Turkey officially accepts YPG as a terroristic group and claims that it has strong links with PKK. Many in Turkey believe that for the USA the interest of Kurdish minority is more important

¹⁰³ Ward, A. (2019). How America’s relationship with Turkey fell apart. Available at: <https://www.vox.com/world/2019/4/11/18292070/usa-turkey-trump-erdogan-s400>

¹⁰⁴ S. Sazak (2018). The U.S.-Turkey Relationship Is Worse Off Than You Think. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/09/11/the-u-s-turkey-relationship-is-worse-off-than-you-think/>

¹⁰⁵ Cornwell, S. and Mohammed, A. (2010). U.S vows bid to halt Armenian genocide measure. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-usa-idUSTRE6244I220100305>

than its relations with Turkey. It is also claimed that the USA favors the building of an independent Kurdish state in this region.¹⁰⁶

Another issue is linked with the current regime in Turkey which is becoming more authoritarian and losing its democratic values. The recent detention of an American pastor by accusing him in a military coup (2016) and arrest of employees that work for the State Department further deteriorated the bilateral relations. Turkey has several times refused to release the pastor hoping to exchange him with Fatullah Gulan - the religious leader accused by Erdogan's government as the main organizer of the military coup. The reluctance of the Turkish government to release the pastor made the US government impose economic sanctions against Turkey. Sanctions have strongly hit the Turkish economy. Turkish Lira has considerably lost value versus US dollars.¹⁰⁷

S-400 missile that Turkey has purchased from Russia has been already delivered to Turkey. Despite the fact that the USA was warning Turkey many times regarding the serious consequences the latter did not step back.¹⁰⁸ Turkey has declared that it has full right to defend itself and cannot wait forever for the USA to supply Turkey with the alternative weaponry. So far, the US government has not taken any countermeasures against Turkey. However, the delivery of S-400 systems to Turkey is obviously another big damage to the already worsened bilateral relations.

6.5. EU

If we also take into account the history of the Ottoman empire it becomes clear that Turkey and the European community has a few century-long relations. Despite the fact that the relationship of the Ottomans with European countries can't be accepted as positive interaction, Turkey as a successor of this empire could considerably change it. As mentioned earlier since its independence Turkey was striving to integrate into Europe and was considering itself as part of European culture. This endeavor from Turkey got weakened under the AKP government. However, this does not mean that AKP deliberately moved the country away from the integration to the European Union. It is worth to mention that EU accession discussions/negotiations with Turkey have started during the governance of the AKP in 2005.

One of the major reason behind Turkey's turn to the Middle East was "never-ending" accession discussions with the EU. However, it should not be understood in a way that Turkey itself gave up striving for EU membership. Besides the fact that Turkey was not able to meet some accession requirements (such as democracy, rule of law, human rights and freedom) there are other factors making it impossible for Turkey to be part of the EU. Firstly,

¹⁰⁶ Hoffman, M. Makovsky, A. and M, Werz. (2018). What Turkey's Political Changes Mean for U.S -Turkish Relations. Available at: <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2018/07/31/454214/turkeys-political-changes-mean-u-s-turkish-relations/>

¹⁰⁷ Zanolli, J. and Clayton, T. (2018). Turkey: Background and U.S Relations. Congressional Research Service

¹⁰⁸ Lister, T. (2019). Turkey bought Russian S-400 missiles designed to down NATO planes. For the US, that's a problem. CNN News. Available at <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/07/13/europe/turkey-russia-missiles-nato-analysis-intl/index.html>

the European community itself is not willing to see Turkey as part of this organization. Secondly the current priority of the EU which is obviously not accession of a new member. The main concern of the EU today is to stabilize the organization within its current borders. The intention of the EU became much clear with the messages on ‘privileged partnership’ rather than full membership. Moreover, the prolongation of the membership discussions has also badly affected public opinion in Turkey. More than 50% of Turks have unfavorable view regarding the EU.¹⁰⁹

When we do speak about the accession of Turkey as a member state to the EU we should not forget cultural differences between these two communities. This fact has never been so clear as it is now under the AKP government. The reason is that previous governments were very inclined to integrate Turkey into EU and believed that Turkey is part of European culture. On contrary to other Turkish governments, AKP with its political roots in Islam was more willing to build relations with Muslim countries rather than with EU¹¹⁰. By doing so AKP was intending/hoping to attract Muslim countries in the Middle East.

If during the first few years after the start of the accession negotiations there were some chances for positive results, today there is almost no positive sign in bilateral relations. The recent approval of the suggestion to suspend the discussions on Turkey’s accession by the European Parliament has further worsened the situation. Moreover, the refusal of acceptance of election results in big cities such as Ankara and Istanbul by the ruling party generated a wave of critics by the institutions of the EU.¹¹¹

Despite the current difficulties in bilateral relations between Turkey and the EU, both political players are very well aware of the mutual interdependence. The EU is undoubtedly one of the biggest markets for Turkish export. Turkey cannot afford any economic sanctions imposed by the EU under such difficult economic circumstances. Furthermore, strong relations with the EU can potentially increase the popularity of Turkey as soft power that it lost in the last couple of years¹¹². There are also factors that would deter the EU to further deteriorate the bilateral relations. EU is depending on Turkey due to the refugee crisis. The EU can’t afford to jeopardize the mutual (refugee) agreement which was signed in 2016.¹¹³ Moreover, Turkey is the strong power having influence in the Middle East, Balkans, South Caucasus, and Central Asia. This fact makes it more important for EU countries. Having as

¹⁰⁹ Cirlig, C. (2013). Turkey's regional power aspirations. Library Briefing Library of the European Parliament. Available at: [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/bibliotheque/briefing/2013/120425/LDM_BRI\(2013\)120425_REV1_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/bibliotheque/briefing/2013/120425/LDM_BRI(2013)120425_REV1_EN.pdf)

¹¹⁰ Selcuk, K.E. How do Turkey-EU relations influence Turkey’s Middle East Policy? Karadeniz Teknik Üniversitesi İletişim Araştırmaları Dergisi. Available at: http://www.ktu.edu.tr/dosyalar/iletisimarastirmalari_2360a.pdf

¹¹¹ Pierini, M. (2019). Options for EU-Turkey Relationship. Carnegie Europe. Available at: <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2019/05/03/options-for-eu-turkey-relationship-pub-79061>

¹¹² Arikan, H. (2012). European Union -Turkey Relations in the Context of Multidimensional and Pro-Active Turkish Foreign Policy, SDU Faculty of Arts and Sciences Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi Journal of Social Sciences. Available at: <https://dergipark.org.tr/download/article-file/117841>

¹¹³ Fnfnorthamerica (2015), Turkey – A Rising Regional Power – Strategic Challenges and Prospects. Available at: <https://fnf-northamerica.org/2015/10/21/turkey-a-rising-regional-power-strategic-challenges-and-prospects/>

a strong partner in these regions would mean that the EU can potentially have indirect influence over them.¹¹⁴

7. Conclusion

Within ten years the AKP government has managed to build a strong state which was recognized as a regional power in the Middle East region. By consolidation of democracy in the country and by improving the economy Turkey has gained strong popularity in the international political arena. The switch from traditional foreign policy approach to soft power policy in regard to the regional states allowed Turkey to change the old image of the country. Strong achievements both in internal and foreign affairs soon led Turkey to its goal of regional leadership.

Despite the fact that Turkey managed to become a regional power soon it failed to preserve its position. Turkey has lost most of its achievements and failed in several different spheres. One of the biggest failures was in democracy and the rule of law. The arrest of civilians and journalists, the restriction of freedom of speech and recent refusal to accept the result of the elections are the very few examples showing the real picture of the AKP government. At some point, Turkey was a role model for Arab states with its respective approach to human rights and freedoms. However, today Turkey is one of the major countries highly criticized due to the worsening democratic conditions. This fact makes Turkey obviously less attractive for the regional states.

Turkey has also failed to realize its zero-problem policy with its neighbors and regional actors. Recently Turkey became a country with many different problems. The situation got worse after the Arab Spring. Turkey was not prepared for such a kind political scenario in the region. Consequently, the foreign strategy chosen by the AKP government has ultimately failed. Turkey has almost left without any friend in the Middle East region with the exception of Qatar. By abandoning its soft power policy, deteriorating the relations with the western powers and by limiting the democracy in the country Turkey has further separated the regional countries from itself.

Currently, Turkey is going through economic difficulties. The increased number of debts and huge depreciation of the local currency are the major burdens on the Turkish economy. The sanctions imposed by the US government has further worsened the situation. The current condition on the military sphere is not ideal either. After the military coup, many high ranked officers have either been dismissed or got arrested. Erdogan's intention to further reduce the power and popularity of the army in society has also influenced the situation. Moreover, it has to be mentioned that with its current approach the AKP government risk ruining its relations with NATO.

¹¹⁴ Fischer, J. (2010). "Who Lost Turkey?" available at: <http://beta.todayszaman.com/news-214831-wholost-turkey-by-joschka-fischer.htm>

For regional power, it is vital to have support from international/global powers. It is not a secret that Turkey has strongly damaged its relations with its old (western) partners. Today the bilateral relations with the USA is becoming more critical. There is also no significant improvement seen with the key states of the EU. By criticizing the western powers in each possible opportunity, the AKP leadership prevents the normalization of the relations. The current situation can leave Turkey alone without any strong partner in a highly complicated region.

The findings of this study and the summary of the factors mentioned above proved the validity of the presented hypotheses. This allows me to make a statement that Turkey has lost its status of regional leadership. This study has shown that the weaknesses of Turkey have outweighed its strengths on its way to becoming a regional power.

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