Three years after Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu came to power and launched Turkey’s ‘zero problems with neighbors’ policy, Turkey’s neighborhood is beset with problematic neighbors. This policy brief analyzes Turkey’s position in the new Middle East illustrating the tension between ambitions and challenges from an international, a regional and a national perspective. It asks, “How will the effects of the Arab spring impact Turkey’s role in the Middle East?” In particular, the policy brief focuses on Syria and the limitations posed by the Kurdish issue on Turkey’s foreign policy ambitions.

The Arab Awakening and Turkish Foreign Policy

Davutoğlu, the architect of Turkey’s “zero-problems” foreign policy, reset the course of Turkey’s foreign policy by focusing on the country’s “civil-economic power” as the foundation for its soft power in the region. Using the term “strategic depth”, he argued that Turkey’s geostrategic location – its historical heritage, cultural ties and democratic reforms - determined its value in international relations. Davutoğlu articulated a vision for Turkey’s relations with the Middle East that was engaged, pro-active and focused on building economic and social networks. Turkey emerged as a regional power player, utilising its ‘soft power’ potential and driven, to a large extent, by the Turkish need for new markets for its growing segment of Muslim entrepreneurs. The benefits of this strategy have been both diplomatic and not least economic. Turkey’s GDP rose by 8.5% in 2011 after a 9% increase in 2010, drawing Turkey into the group of rising middle powers described by Goldman Sachs by the acronym MIST (Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea and Turkey). Regional political and economic power was the stepping stone towards greater international prominence.

The new era in Turkish foreign policy prospered until the coming of the Arab Spring. This was the moment when the rhetoric of regional leadership met the reality of a region in turmoil. While Turkey’s pro-active position on Egypt was consistent with expectations in the Arab World, branding Prime Minister Erdoğan a political star, its policies came under pressure with Libya and Syria. Despite committing itself to the cause of the Egyptian revolutionaries early on, Turkey stood against the NATO plan on Libya. The AKP’s policy faltered, due in large part to the difficulties of ‘squaring the circle’: taking an active stance while advocating ‘zero problems’ with neighbors. The AKP’s initial resistance was a result of diplomatic caution reinforced by Turkish business interests in Libya. Once the Arab League supported a no-fly zone, Turkey had to follow suite. Domestically, popular debate on the uprisings further limited the AKP’s room for maneuver: Particularly after the intervention in Libya, the discourse on the Arab Spring has been framed as a Western hegemonic game of control in the new Middle East. This made it imperative for the AKP’s actions to be grounded in a multilateral frame-
work. The international role that Turkey en-
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by developments on both the regional and the
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The regional perspective: The Kurds in
Syria and Iraq

From a regional perspective, Kurdish aspira-
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recently was the crown jewel in the AKP’s new
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However, since the outbreak of civil
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dle East has returned to its guiding concern:
the existential fear of Kurdish separatism. This
threat is exacerbated by a security vacuum in
Syria, coupled with the mass influx of refugees
(100 000 at present) and not least, the involve-
ment of Iraqi Kurds with their Syrian brethren.

There are parallels with the situation
in the aftermath of the Iraq War. Kurdish as-
pirations in Northern Iraq were fulfilled due
to the active engagement of the Kurdish peab-
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Kurds had established an autonomous struc-
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oil rich and multiethnic city of Kirkuk. Given
the economic foundation it would provide for
a nascent Kurdish state, and the inspiration it
would provide for Turkey’s own Kurds, Kuri-
dish control over Kirkuk (and Mosul) was one of
the red lines of the Turkish military in the Iraq
War. Even so, according to a senior AKP politi-
cian, the AKP was already looking for a more
pragmatic modus vivendi with the regime in
Northern Iraq. Turkey is today Iraq’s largest
trading partner with exports near tripling since
2007 and trade up from $2.8 billion in 2007
to $8.3 in 2011. The AKP recognizes that the
de facto state structure established in Northern
Iraq may also be repeated in Syria.

Kurdish groups have kept a lower pro-
file in Syria, avoiding confrontation with the re-
gime. However, Kurds in northeast Syria living in
the political vacuum brought on by the con-
lict are already assuming state functions. Tur-
key fears that local Kurdish groups will allow
the PKK to operate from northeastern Syria
and intensify attacks on Turkey. The two pri-
mary Syrian Kurdish groups – the PYD (Demo-
cratic Union of Kurdistan) and the KNC (Kur-
dish National Congress) – have historically been
in opposition to one another. The former has
had support from the Syrian regime (as well as
from Iran) and is commonly considered the
PKK’s Syrian arm. The latter, meanwhile, has
been closer to the Iraqi Kurdish Regional Gov-
ernment (KRG). However, efforts by Mesud
Barzani, the KRG president, have brought the
groups together, raising concerns in Turkey.
To further aggravate matters, Barzani confirmed
in July 2012 that Iraqi Kurds were
training Syrian Kurds in camps in Iraq. Kurds
recognize that Syria slides towards a sectari-
ian war, they may play a critical role as a bal-
ancing power.

While a pragmatic relationship has
grown between Turkey and the KRG in North-
ern Iraq, there are still fears that Barzani, in
courting the PYD, may become more sympa-
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pragmatism of Turkish policy, the AKP decided
in July 2012 to import oil directly from north-
ern Iraq bypassing the Iraqi central govern-
ment. This is an aspect of Turkey’s longstanding
policy which sought to prevent Iraqi Kurds from attaining sole authority over the
region’s energy resources. Ironically, it is a soft
power move – tying Kurdish economic inter-
ests to Turkish political ambitions – that has
increased problems with its neighbor, the Iraqi
central authorities.

National challenges: No Kurdish spring

Perhaps the greatest limitation to Turkey’s
opposition to Kurdish control over the disputed
level. Since the onset of the Syrian crisis, PKK-
related violence in Turkey has increased dra-
matically. According to an International Crisis
Group report from September 2012, PKK-re-
lated violence has killed 700 people since the
summer of 2011. This has resulted in a public
outcry and the rise of nationalist sentiment
(significant prior to the 2014 presidential elec-
tion). Ironically, when the AKP first came to
power in 2002, there was hope among Kurds
that a new party would be able to address their
grievances, not least due to Turkey’s EU aspira-
tions. However, little progress has been made
in the past two periods of AKP power despite
both sides paying lip service to the need for a
political process.

The unresolved Kurdish issue is par-
ticularly damaging in the context of the Arab
spring. Advocating the rights of the Arab street
while circumventing Kurdish political partici-
pation at home weakens the AKP’s soft power
argument. There are presently six parliament-
arians of the Kurdish Peace and Democracy
Party (BDP) in prison facing charges of mem-
bership in the illegal Kurdistan Communities
Union (KCK). A further 100 Kurds have been
imprisoned as alleged members of the KCK.
Disappointment with the ruling party has also
led to a hardened Kurdish position with little
latitude for a bilateral ceasefire from the PKK.
Without a cessation of hostilities, there is
little room for the AKP to maneuver. On a
more general level, Turkish soft power is tar-
ner’s in the vain numbers of oppositional civil
society actors - journalists, intellectuals, busi-
ness leaders – (as well as military officers) held
for long periods in pre-trial detention for alleg-
egations made by investigators in the anti-
PKK’s Syrian arm. The latter, meanwhile, has
confirmed by Iran) and is commonly considered the
PKK to operate from northeastern Syria
because of its democratic model as it is about its
economic success.

Conclusion

Turkish ambitions in the Middle East have
been shaped and constrained by regional and
national concerns revived by the Arab awaken-
ing. An additional factor is the role of other regional
powers. Will they be regarded as competitors or
supporters of Turkish ambitions? Erdogan’s decision to make
Egypt the first stop on his successful tour of the
region in 2011 pays tribute to Egypt’s role as a
natural leader of the Arab world - and a poten-
tial competitor. A billion dollar loan agreement
intended to support the export of goods and
services from Turkey to Egypt, signed between
Erdoğan and Egyptian President Muhammad
Mursi at the end of September, indicates the
beginning of ‘a beautiful friendship’. For Mursi,
the AKP provides an example of how a conserva-
tive Muslim party coming to power through
the ballot box sustains its position by dramatic-
cally improving the economy and diplomati-
ically raising its regional and international profile.
That being said, the Syrian conflict has exposed
the difficulties of maintaining two very diffi-
cult positions – leading with a normative ‘soft
power agenda when faced with the challenges of
regional realpolitik.

Recommendations

• Norway should include in its dialogue with
Turkey the discussion of ‘soft power’. How
does Turkey understand and project soft
power given Turkey’s internal democratic
challenges?
• Norway should seek closer trilateral discus-
sions with Turkey and Egypt which would
give greater insight into the challenges of
the new Middle East and the possibilities for
Norwegian engagement.
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