After the AKP gained power in 2002, Turkey’s newly assertive “zero problems with neighbors” foreign policy strategy sparked debate in the Arab Middle East. This grand strategy revealed Ankara’s ambitions as not only a regional player, but also as a democratic “model” for a liberal political system able to incorporate a strong Islamic party. Arab fascination for Turkey reached its peak between 2009 and 2010 after Prime Minister Erdoğan’s condemnation of Israel’s military operation Cast Lead in the Gaza Strip. This, along with the Mavi Marmara incident, sparked admiration across the Arab world. Over the last few months however, Arab fascination has been severely tested and now support for the “Turkish model” appears to be waning. This is the result of apprehension over Turkey’s strategic choices in different areas such as the Syrian crisis and the events in Egypt.

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In the years following Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s rise to power in Ankara, Turkey’s geopolitical inclinations sparked growing interest, if not outright fascination, among Arab intellectuals and scholars. The focus of this interest was mainly on the new Turkish grand strategy, which was designed by Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu; this was initially outlined in his well-known book *Strategic Depth* written in 2001 before the AKP came to power, and expanded on later in numerous speeches. This strategy revealed Ankara’s new ambitions for the Middle East, not only as a regional player but as a “model” for a political system able to combine the rule of a strong Islamic party—the AKP— with democratic process.

Arab fascination for Erdoğan’s Turkey reached its peak in 2009 and 2010. Erdoğan’s condemnation of Israel’s military operation Cast Lead in the Gaza Strip in December 2008 galvanized Arab public opinion; in May 2010, the clash over the Turkish *Mavi Marmara* flotilla, that attempted to reach Gaza but was sieged by Israeli naval commandos in the Mediterranean Sea, led to a major crisis in Turkish-Israeli relations. Many people in the Arab world saw the event as confirmation of Turkey’s support for the Palestinian cause and, by the summer of 2010, Arabic newspapers were hailing Erdoğan as “the new Nasser”.

Over the last few months, however, Arab fascination has been severely tested and now appears to be waning. This is the result of apprehension over Turkey’s strategic choices in different areas. Among these is the Syrian crisis and perceived Turkish interference in recent Egyptian events. The *Gezi* demonstrations this summer have also had repercussions on the voguish “Turkish model” in the Arab world. Still, from a historical point of view, this new phase in the Arab perception of Turkey’s policies toward the Middle East is less of a major turning point, and more of a return to past Turkish-Arab relations, long marked by caution and suspicion.

**Arab Fascination for Turkish Grand Strategy Under Erdoğan and Davutoğlu**

Although Turkey has always been a subject of interest in the Arab political debate, attention to the country grew dramatically after the AKP gained power in 2002 and its newly assertive foreign policy was felt in the Middle East. For instance, although Ahmet Davutoğlu’s seminal book, *Strategic Depth*, had not yet been translated into English, the Al Jazeera Centre for Studies published an Arabic version in 2010. This has been widely read and quoted. Arabic newspapers frequently use Davutoğlu’s terminology and concepts, such as “strategic depth” (*al ‘amik al iistrategyya*) or “zero problems with neighbors” policy (*sifr moushkilaat maa’ dawli al jiwar*). As a result, many books and academic articles published over the
last few years have analyzed Turkey’s grand strategy, its lessons, as well as its role as a “model” (namouzaj) for the Arab world.¹

By the end of the last decade, Erdoğan’s ambition to use Turkey’s geographic position to an advantage in its relations with both Europe and Middle Eastern countries was seen by Arab intellectuals in a positive light, particularly following Turkey’s rapprochement with both Syria and Iran. Turkish-Iranian cooperation grew in earnest in 2004, when both countries signed an agreement on security cooperation, with particular emphasis on counterterrorism, border security, and intelligence sharing. Meanwhile, reconciliation between Turkey and Syria, which developed throughout the 2000s, was epitomized in 2009, by a three-day military exercise involving ground forces from both countries. It exemplified the new level of cooperation between Ankara and Damascus, confirmed a month later by President Gül’s visit to Syria. The improvement in bilateral relations was to symbolize the “zero problems with the neighbors” policy, mentioned above.

In virtue of this, expressions such as “bridge” (jisr) or “pivotal State” (dawlat mahwariya) have been often used by Arabic commentators to describe Turkey’s foreign policy since 2002. Michel Naoufal, Editor in Chief of the Lebanese newspaper Al Mustaqbal and an expert on Turkish-Arab relations, explained how “Turkey represents a safety valve (samam aman) in the Middle East.”² At the time, Naoufal and other Arab intellectuals toned down Arab fears of a new Turkish imperialism and characterized Turkey’s agenda in the region as a manifestation of soft power (quwat na’ima).³ Back in 2010, for instance, Amr Kouch, a Syrian researcher, described Erdoğan’s grand strategy as a way to build an “Ottoman commonwealth”

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and argued that “it is possible to say that this new ‘Ottomanism’ is not geographically oriented, it is not pursuing hegemony and direct control but what Turkey seems rather to express is soft power.”

“The regional environment in the post-Arab Spring period took the Turkish government by surprise and weakened its decade-long diplomatic positioning.”

But more than Turkey’s strategic and economic rapprochement with Syria and Iran in the late 2000s, it was Ankara’s position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that prompted Arab perceptions of its role in the region. The strategic partnership between Ankara and Jerusalem had been eyed with suspicion by those commentators in the Arab world who view all bilateral relations in the Middle East as a zero-sum game. From that standpoint, cooperating in any domain (economic, military, or political) with Israel was understood as taking a stance against the Arabs. As a result, large sections of the media in the Arab world depicted relations between Turkey and Israel through the conventional narrative lens of a Zionist-Ottoman plot against the Arabs.

This suspicion had largely crumbled by the end of the 2000s, when the AKP government started criticizing Israeli treatment of the Palestinians. In particular, Erdoğan’s condemnation of Israel’s Cast Lead operation during one of the plenary sessions of the Davos Summit, right in front of Israeli President Shimon Peres, turned the Turkish Prime Minister into a hero for the Arab world. In the following months, the more Israeli-Turkish tensions rose, the more Turkey’s image in the Arab world benefited. In addition, the relations between Erdoğan’s Turkey and the Palestinian Hamas in Gaza, along with continued close relations with Fatah, allowed Ankara to play a role as potential mediator between Palestinian factions. Consequently, by the end of 2010, the debate in the opinion pages of the leading Arabic newspapers was not whether Turkey had new imperialistic designs, but what similarities could be seen between Erdoğan and Gamal Abdel Nasser, the Egyptian ruler and perennial champion of Arab nationalism.

Still, the pinnacle of Turkish popularity in the Arab world did not preclude certain concerns. The attention which Arab observers paid to Erdoğan’s and Davutoğlu’s grand strategy focused in part on the so-called “new Ottomanism” that was supposed to characterize it. This reveals both the ambiguity and the confusion surrounding the Arabs’ fascination for Turkish foreign policy. Arabic newspapers widely portrayed Davutoğlu as the official “architect of new Ottomanism” and, in some cases, used false quotes in which Davutoğlu allegedly claimed to be a “neo-Ottoman”. Despite the Turkish Foreign Minister’s public denial, this vision persisted.8

The use of such expressions as “new Ottomans” or “neo-Ottomanism” blurred, rather than clarified Turkish policies. It engendered many controversies and misunderstandings for the observers of Turkish politics who tended to exaggerate Erdoğan’s project for the Middle East, as well as his means of implementing it.9 But in retrospect, this may have foreshadowed Turkey’s current difficulties with its policies for the Middle East.

The Demise of the “Turkish Model”?

At first, the Arab revolutions that started in Tunisia and Egypt seemed to reinforce the “Turkish model” in the Arab world. The Western media, too, saw this as the perfect—and somewhat convenient—way for the revolutions to establish new, stable political systems in the Arab world. True, the new Islamic political forces in these countries looked deliberately at Erdoğan and the AKP as a potential template to access power, but the use of Turkish references in the Arab polity was not welcomed by public opinion. Furthermore, the regional environment in the post-Arab Spring period took the Turkish government by surprise and weakened its decade-long diplomatic positioning.

By the summer of 2011, it had become clear that Arab fascination with Turkey was backfiring. This was no more salient than in the case of Syria. The Syrian

“The simultaneous warming up of Turkish-Israeli relations in March 2013, with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu apologizing to Turkey over the Mavi Marmara crisis, has tempered the positive narrative about Erdoğan as the ‘new Nasser’.”

This latest decision may have signaled the start of the downward turn for Turkish soft power in the Middle East. Syrian officials soon portrayed the deployment of Patriots as tangible evidence of NATO’s hegemonic agenda in the Middle East. Bashar al-Assad repeated this narrative in several interviews and speeches. It is worth taking note of Assad’s terminology when he talks about Erdoğan; in November 2012, he declared: “[Erdoğan] considers himself the new Ottoman sultan and thinks he can control the region the same way the Ottomans did before,” adding that Turkey’s strategy in the Middle East went “from zero problem to zero friends.”

But, even for Arab thinkers who support the revolution against the Syrian ruler, Turkey’s assertiveness has been progressively seen as ill-advised and perilous, leading to an escalation of the conflict. In particular, Turkey’s support for the rebels, including the fringes identified as extremist (e.g. Jabhat al-Nusra), has led many to wonder what exactly Ankara’s political objective is in the Syrian civil war.

11 Jihad al-Zein, “Inhiyar Siyasat al-Kharijiya at Turkiya,” [The Failure of the Turkish Foreign Policy], An Nahar, 7 August 2013.
Besides, the simultaneous warming up of Turkish-Israeli relations in March 2013, with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu apologizing to Turkey over the Mavi Marmara crisis, has tempered the positive narrative about Erdoğan as the “new Nasser”. Because of the “zero-sum game” mentality that drives geopolitical thinking, the ending of the Turkish-Israeli dispute was interpreted as meaning that Ankara was lowering its ambitions for cooperation with Arab Middle Eastern countries. Arab intellectuals started to feel that previous statements were merely short-lived and devoid of any serious effects on Turkey’s fundamental orientation. The resentment over Ankara’s reconciliation with Jerusalem understandably resurrected old conspiracy theories about a “Zionist-Ottoman” plot against the Arabs. The Syrian website Al Jamil, for example, posted an article initially published in an Iranian newspaper, entitled “The influences of masonry and Zionism in new Turkey”.

The concerns over Turkey’s policy in the Middle East were further exacerbated in the summer of 2013, following the destitution of Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi by the military in Cairo. The Turkish government has been one of the most vocal critics of these latest developments, calling the toppling an “unacceptable coup” and urging the UN Security Council to act accordingly.

Whether or not the Egyptian protests that led to the removal of Morsi turned into a military coup, Turkey’s positioning on the international stage was perceived in the Arabic press as a direct interference in Egyptian domestic affairs. Tariq Al Hamid, a columnist for Asharq Al Awsat, writes that “Turkey reacted to the developments in Egypt as if the country was like Lebanon (...) the Turkish position vis-à-vis Egypt is by all means passionate and unacceptable.” Emphasizing the ideological ties between Erdoğan and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, Al Hamid concludes by asking, “When are the Turks going to understand that they can no longer behave like patrons screaming and agitating in Egypt the way they did during the Ottoman era?”

Similarly, Said El Lawindi, Director of the Centre for Euro-Mediterranean Studies

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12 See the editorial in the academic journal: “Turkiya wa Israel: Chirakat Abdya,” [Turkey and Israel: Eternal Partnership], Shu’un al-Awsat, No.144 (Winter 2013), pp. 2-6.
in Cairo, writes in the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Ahram* that “Turkey forgot that it is no longer the Topkapi Palace and Egypt is no longer one of its cities!” Lawindi goes as far as to call for a boycott of Turkish products as a result of Ankara’s position on Egyptian developments.

Finally, the late-May demonstrations in Turkey itself, in protest at a planned demolition of Istanbul’s Gezi Park, severely undermined the appeal of the “Turkish model” in the Arab world. For some observers, it epitomized the internal struggle between secular forces and Islamists, while others used simple, and sometimes simplistic, analogies such as a “Turkish Spring”. If the events did not directly impact Turkish foreign policy in the Arab world, they surely exacerbated the worries and emboldened those who are most resentful of Ankara’s ambitions in the Middle East. Clearly, the footage of police forces using tear gas to disperse protesters tarnished the sheen of Turkish soft power in the region.

**Turkey and the Arab World: Back to the Future**

After a first look at Turkey’s recent fortunes and setbacks in the Middle East, one may be tempted to argue that Erdoğan’s ambitions for his country, particularly the rapprochement with Arab neighbors, has ended in dramatic failure. This is the impression one gets from reading Arabic newspapers and academic articles. Historically, however, this assessment is skewed, since it overlooks the state of Turkish-Arab relations prior to Erdoğan’s premiership. For decades, Turkey’s image in the Arab world was shaped by vivid memories of the Arab nationalistic struggle against the Ottomans. In Lebanon, for instance, the latest edition of the high school history textbook, published in 2010, details at length the severe treatment dealt to the Lebanese people under Ottoman rule, in particular the torture of dissenters and food deprivation during the First World War. Just as the legacy of European colonialism in the Middle East has influenced the understanding of Western policies in the region, the experience of Ottoman rule has left its mark. This is associated with the image of “the terrible Turk” used by the anthropologist Ernest Gellner, an expression that

encapsulates the traditional Arab view of Turkey as the inheritor of Ottoman ruthlessness. Until Erdoğan’s enterprise in the Middle East, the “terrible Turk” narrative was common among intellectuals and politicians in the Arab world, and despite its fading during the brief period of Arab fascination for Erdoğan’s Turkey, it has remained a staple of the Arab world’s vision of Turkish policies.

This calls for a sobering reappraisal of the “Turkish model”, or of soft power in the Middle East. Arabs still view Turkey’s contemporary grand strategy as being shaped by their Ottoman legacy. This distorts the understanding of Erdoğan and Davutoğlu’s options, when it comes to issues like Turkey’s Muslim identity, or its Middle Eastern ambitions. Arab intellectuals frequently summarize Erdoğan’s strategy as an effort to “Islamize” the country and to sever it from Europe, following EU’s apparent rebuff of Turkey’s desire to join the Union. According to this narrative, Ankara’s Middle Eastern policy is primarily a consequence of the failed European dream of Turkey. Commentators also tend to assume that Erdoğan and Davutoğlu crafted a long-term stratagem that they are now meticulously implementing. This uncompromising Arab view of Turkey, however, allows no margin for appreciating the developments, hesitations and changes in Turkish foreign policy, in particular since the beginning of the Arab Spring. Turkey’s venture into soft power was a double-edged sword from the outset: the fascination it created within the Arab world was not associated with enthusiasm within the Middle Eastern audience, nor is it likely to be so in the future.