

# Turkey's Foreign Policy Towards the Middle East



# Turkey's Foreign Policy Towards the Middle East:

*Under the Shadow  
of the Arab Spring*

Edited by

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The idea of preparing a book on Turkey dates back to my studies at the University of Dundee, Scotland, UK, where I completed my second MSc degree as a Jean Monnet scholar in 2004–2005. There, I acquired many friends from different parts of the world, a great majority of whom were either unaware or not aware enough of the importance of Turkey in both regional and international politics. Recent political movements in the Middle East have changed the political atmosphere both in its immediate neighbourhood and in global politics. Turkey is significant as, on the one hand, a democratic, secular and modern country embedded in Western institutions and, on the other, an influential actor in the Middle East due to its historical legacy and religious identities. The Arab Spring has once again demonstrated the importance of Turkey for ensuring a secure and stable environment in the Middle East. Therefore, I thought that it was the right time to prepare this study of Turkey's foreign policy towards the Middle East under the shadow of the Arab Spring.

Preparing such a book requires tremendous effort. I would like to thank the contributors for their invaluable and exhaustive work. As the editor, I have contacted them late at night and early in the morning, and during weekends and holidays, and have witnessed their professional and proficient work. It has been my pleasure to collaborate with them during the preparation of this book.

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İdris Demir





INTRODUCTION

TURKEY'S FOREIGN POLICY  
TOWARDS THE MIDDLE EAST:  
UNDER THE SHADOW OF THE ARAB SPRING

İDRIS DEMİR

The demands for democracy that began in Tunisia when Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire on 17 December 2010 rapidly spread across the Arab Middle East and Northern Africa. In countries dominated by authoritarian regimes, a freedom and sovereignty movement led by middle class urbanites changed the quality of politics in the region. The response of Arab administrations and the world to these demands for democracy was a very significant matter that would determine the fate of this process. In the event, the regimes responded with counter-revolutionary strategies to limit the Arab Spring's transformative power.

The focus and dynamics of the Arab Spring varied across countries where large-scale demonstrations were held, such as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria, Jordan and Bahrain. While protests in Jordan and Bahrain had few consequences, they brought about changes in governments in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen. After the regime in Syria exerted all its strength to stay in power, the issue gained a regional then an international dimension. The most bloody and complicated struggle caused by the wave of changes continues in Syria, with undoubtedly serious implications for Turkish foreign policy.

As a counter stance against the status quo in the Middle East, the Arab Spring has stimulated many discussions and led to the emergence of new regional actors. Turkey has adopted a clear attitude since the beginning by supporting the people's demands despite facing difficulties due to these events as a country neighbouring the Arabic political geography. This book therefore tries to investigate the effects of the Arab Spring on Turkish foreign policy using a multidimensional approach that draws on a

wide range of disciplines from international relations to sociology and economics from the unique perspectives of each contributor.

In the first chapter, Hüseyin Bağcı and Ali Serdar Erdurmaz visualize how the Middle East is seen from Ankara. They argue that the dynamics of the Arab Spring as it spread across the Middle East has significantly challenged Turkey's desire to establish amicable relations with the region and become a regional power. However, it has been difficult to attain the desired outcomes due to tensions with Israel, problematic relations with Iran, Russia and other Arabic states, and especially the near-collapse of Syria. They argue that relations with the central government in Iraq became strained both because the US military withdrawal in 2010 allowed Iraq to fall under Iranian influence, and because of its opposition to Turkey. After ISIS emerged in Iraq in June 2014, the West was compelled to form a new strategy as ISIS became stronger in Syria while proclaiming an Islamic State and Caliphate, and occupying a significant amount of territory in both states. This forced both Turkey and its Western allies to revise their existing policies to keep up and stay on the right side as the Arab world was dynamically reconstructed.

In scrutinizing Turkey's foreign policy towards the Middle East, Bağcı and Erdurmaz estimate Ankara's policy options by evaluating its relations with Israel, Egypt, Iraq, Syria, the US, Russia and Iran in the light of domestic and external factors. From this analysis, they conclude that Turkey needs to revise its entire Middle Eastern and Russian policies if Ankara wishes to participate in establishing a new order in Syria, a country with which it has deep historical, social, economic, demographic and political ties.

The second chapter deals with Turkey's third-party role as a conflict manager in the Arab Spring, which Muzaffer Ercan Yılmaz describes as one of the greatest challenges facing the Muslim world. Syria has become the country where the most violent clashes occurred between government and rebel forces, as well as among the rebel forces themselves.

Focusing specifically on the violent events in Syria, Yılmaz argues that the Arab Spring has to be managed somehow; otherwise, it may have rather destructive consequences for the Muslim world in general and for Arabs in particular. Third-party help is therefore essential in both making and building peace due to the psychological components of the conflict and the institutional weaknesses of the post-conflict societies. Yılmaz thinks that, as a strong Muslim country in the Middle East, Turkey can offer powerful third-party support, particularly the provision of humanitarian relief, rehabilitation functions, preventive functions through early warning and conflict resolution activities. Using case study methodology and

historical analysis, Yılmaz discusses several constructive third-party roles that Turkey could adopt in the conflict settings. As a hypothesis-generating work, this study aims to provide specific hypotheses regarding constructive third-party roles for Turkey in the Arab Spring that can be tested in further research.

Yılmaz argues that in healing wounds and managing or resolving internal conflicts within the Arab Spring, Turkey can have many positive functions. First, as a mediator, Turkey can contribute to preventing physical violence and conflict escalation. Without controlling immediate violence and introducing a cooling-off period, it is very unlikely that any peace process can be initiated. Further, Turkey can encourage negotiations between conflicting parties by providing secure meeting places while working as an intermediary. Finally, Turkish agencies can open doors that might otherwise remain closed to efforts in peace building to secure lasting peace.

At the same time, however, Yılmaz acknowledges that Turkey's activities remain patchy, *ad hoc* and contingent upon the interests and cooperation of Muslim states. Hence, further cooperation is certainly needed if Turkey is going to play a more constructive third-party role in healing wounds in Muslim countries suffering the Arab Spring.

In the third chapter, Mehmet Şahin and Buğra Sarı deal with the limits of Turkey's foreign policy in the Syrian crisis as a middle power. Seeing the crisis as one of the most urgent problems in international politics, they argue that it has become both a civil war tearing the country apart and an international battlefield involving many countries. Millions of people have lost their lives and become refugees in neighbouring countries, with Turkey, which shares a 911 km border with Syria, being one of the worst affected countries. In response, Turkey has been implementing policies to minimize the harm and prevent a humanitarian disaster. Şahin and Sarı argue that Turkey's policies regarding the crisis in Syria are compatible with middle power behaviours. They seek to understand whether Turkey can be defined as a middle power by comparing two different middle power conceptualizations: realist and liberal. They argue that both conceptualizations should be integrated for complete understanding of the concept. Having concluded that Turkey is a middle power according to these conceptualizations, Şahin and Sarı analyse the limits of Turkey's foreign policy in the Syrian crisis given that any state's foreign policy primarily depends on its national power in international politics. In this regard, the efficacy of Turkey's foreign policy as a middle power depends on the quality of both relationships between the great powers and Turkey's own relationships with them.

Chapter Four deals with the Kurdish question in Turkey's Middle East policy. Nezir Akyeşilmen and Zeynep Gözde Lulacı ask if the Kurdish question is a menace or an opportunity for Turkey. They agree with former President Abdullah Gül that the Kurdish issue is the most crucial problem facing Turkey. Indeed, it has indecisively affected both domestic and international policies since the establishment of the Turkish Republic, including relations with the USA, the EU, the Middle East, Russia and the Caucasus. Akyeşilmen and Lulacı claim that while the Kurdish issue has varied across time and place, it has generally reduced Turkey's room for manoeuvre in foreign policy, and limited its vision and objectives. The region most affected by the Kurdish problem is certainly the Middle East. Both historical and current events show the importance of this issue for Turkey's relations with Middle Eastern countries. Akyeşilmen and Lulacı argue that until Davutoğlu became Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Kurdish problem profoundly influenced foreign policy. With Davutoğlu, however, although the Kurdish issue continued to cause harm, it also became a valuable instrument for resolving relations with the Iraqi Kurds.

The fourth chapter covers the Kurdish issue in Turkey's Middle East policy, and this policy's effects on the resolution of the Kurdish problem. Akyeşilmen and Lulacı simply put the proposition that the Kurdish problem has been the most crucial problem in determining Turkey's Middle Eastern foreign policy for a long time, with sometimes positive but generally negative effects on the resolution of the problem within the country.

In the fifth chapter, İdris Demir argues that energy relations between Ankara and Erbil started before the Arab Spring, although recent events have accelerated and intensified the relationship within the new regional political atmosphere. Demir argues that Ankara and Erbil have their own motives and priorities in developing their energy partnership. Erbil has become an indispensable ally in enabling Ankara to diversify Turkey's energy supplies in the face of difficult relations with its main suppliers, Iran and Russia. Ankara has now acquired a high degree of control and ownership over hydrocarbon resources in its immediate neighbourhood while gaining the opportunity to reduce its dependence on Russia and Iran for energy. This has given Turkey more power to develop new policies to counter Moscow and Tehran, who are both energy suppliers and rivals in regional affairs. Ankara has become a prominent ally for Erbil in resisting pressure from Baghdad while Erbil has found an opportunity to export its energy sources independently of Baghdad to earn the revenues vital to developing the region under its sphere of influence. Demir concludes that Ankara and Erbil's energy partnership has provided mutual benefits.

In Chapter Six, Arif Bağbaşıoğlu deals with the refugee crisis resulting from the Arab Spring and Turkey's attitude towards it, which he considers as the most significant effect of the Arab Spring. As the conflict in Syria enters its fifth year, Turkey is hosting the world's largest refugee population, with over 2.2 million registered refugees from Syria and approximately 230,000 asylum seekers from other countries. These numbers are still growing fast. Bağbaşıoğlu argues that the Syrian refugee crisis has made Turkey accelerate changes to its asylum and immigration legislation that it had already been making within the framework of EU membership negotiations. Indeed, the crisis has revitalized stalled EU–Turkey relations. Bağbaşıoğlu evaluates Turkey's policy towards Syrian refugees, explaining it from various perspectives. He first traces Turkey's immigration policies since the establishment of the Republic, before demonstrating how these policies have changed and affected EU–Turkey relations due to the Arab Spring's refugee crisis. He then evaluates Turkey's current legal regulations and the legal status of Syrians in Turkey. He concludes that, in addition to security concerns, the discourse of burden sharing has become another determining factor in establishing Turkey's migration and asylum policies.

In Chapter Seven, Şebnem Udum deals with Turkish foreign policy regarding Iran's nuclear programme. She analyses this using the framework of Turkey's stance within the nuclear nonproliferation regime, its plans for nuclear energy generation, the foreign policy changes under former Foreign Minister and current Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu and Ankara's relations with Tehran in the 2000s. She first provides technical information on nuclear weapons and the peaceful use of nuclear energy, before outlining the basic principles of the nuclear nonproliferation regime. She then explains why Iran's nuclear programme has caused international concern, including a brief history of negotiations between Iran and the major powers. Udum next explains the main principles of Turkish foreign policy and its changing features under Davutoğlu, particularly its implications for Turkey's Middle Eastern neighbourhood. Finally, after an overview of relations between Ankara and Tehran, she tackles Turkey's policy towards Iran's nuclear programme in 2009–2015.

The last chapter is about Turkey's leadership in rethinking citizenship and human rights in the Middle East after the Arab Spring. Erif Esendemir examines the major causes of recent collective actions in the Arab world inspired by developments in Turkey in terms of citizenship and human rights. Esendemir explores the socio-cultural background of change in Turkey in order to see its reflections in the Arab world. Since Turkey's experiences in developing rights and new concepts of citizenship have

always had a strong effect on the Arab world, the democratization of Turkey from the 1950s onwards became a model for democratic transition attempts, especially in Tunisia and Egypt. Esendemir therefore argues that democratization in Turkey helps us understand the nature of the Arab Spring, which has unfortunately become a “winter” due to the rise of extremist groups and military intervention.

Esendemir highlights the traditional form of citizenship in Turkey and the Arab world as an important focus for understanding new conceptualizations of citizenship. He presents *Vatandaşlık* and *Muwāṭana* as equivalent territorial concepts of citizenship whereas the development of new concepts, such as constitutional citizenship, reflects changes towards a more inclusive citizenry rights perspective. That is because the traditional form of citizenship has always been associated with a particular nation-state with its exclusive practices. The final chapter aims to determine whether the Arab Spring has helped in rethinking citizenship in the Arab world by learning from the strengths and weaknesses of the Turkish model.

# CHAPTER ONE

## THE MIDDLE EAST SEEN FROM ANKARA

HÜSEYİN BAĞCI, ALI SERDAR ERDURMAZ

### Introduction

The Arab Spring started in Tunisia in 2010 and later emerged in Libya, Egypt and Syria. It caused Turkey to deviate from its proactive (Davutoğlu 2010) foreign policy focused on the principle of zero problems with neighbours (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2011) applied in the Middle East since 2009. The developments in the Middle East, in particular, made it compulsory for Turkey to revise and determine its domestic and foreign policies.

During the period between 2007, when the Justice and Development Party (JDP) came to power for the second term, and 2011, when the Arab Spring broke out, Turkey's foreign policy toward Middle Eastern countries gained importance. It included the resolution of problems through face-to-face negotiations, cooperation, common action, close friendship, and forming and executing high advisory boards. Ankara, by this means, became a role model for mediation, with the awareness of the role of political, economic and social cooperation in terms of ensuring peace and stability in its near neighbours, especially in the Middle East pivot. In this environment of trust, Ankara was given observer status in the Arab League and in the African Union. In addition, Turkey gained the position of a potential regional power, by the election of a Turkish national as the Secretary General of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, by acting as mediator in the peace talks between Israel and Syria, by the initiatives for Syria, Iraq, Iran and Palestine, and by being elected as a Non-Permanent Member in the United Nations Security Council with the support of the Arab countries (Falk 2014).<sup>1</sup> In fact, although the case of Turkish

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<sup>1</sup> In December 2009, 51 cooperation agreements and memorandums of understanding on various issues were signed between Turkey and Syria. Additionally, on 16

democracy was reacted against as a model in the first half of 2011, the neoliberal ideology that the Justice and Development Party (JDP, or AKP) employed, its stable politics and approach to the parliamentary system based on constitutional free elections and Islamic values were the envy of Egypt and Tunisia, where the Arab Spring was mostly effective (Falk 2014). In this period, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was the most widely recognized and respected political leader by the peoples of the countries in the region (*Timeturk* 2010).

This policy was significant in terms of implementing an independent policy, in order for Turkey to develop friendly relations with the countries in its neighbourhood, leaving the US- and NATO-dependent politics behind. This led the US and the West to be concerned about whether the axis of Turkish foreign policy was shifting (Jones 2010). The policy of “zero problems with neighbours” that Ankara was implementing lost its function in the unsettled environment due to the dynamics brought along by the wind of the Arab Spring. In consequence of the demonstrations and uprisings, regime changes took place in Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt, while the uprisings evolved into a civil war in Syria and Libya.

The Arab Spring breeze that originated in Tunisia with great expectations and a rosy scenario did not turn out as expected in the Middle East – especially in Syria, where it turned into a civil war with tremendously destructive impacts, making the region a playground for the foreign powers. The West got interested in the popular uprisings with the hope that regimes based on democratic institutions and respectful of human rights and the supremacy of law would replace authoritarian regimes. Yet, their reflections had different results in Arab countries such as Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Syria.

While Tunisia was advancing towards a democratic structuring, uprisings in Libya, specifically in the Benghazi region, overthrew Gaddafi with the assistance of a military operation by NATO. Subsequently, as the clash between tribes turned into a civil war, Libya was dragged into an environment away from political stability.

As for Egypt, in the military-controlled democratic environment provided by the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak, the first free elections were held in 2012, in which a wide range of political parties from the Liberals to the Islamic wing participated. Nonetheless, the US and the West did not

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September 2009, an agreement for the “Senior Strategic Cooperation Council” was signed and the visa exemption was put into effect. In September 2009, more than 40 agreements were signed in the first meeting of the “Senior Strategic Cooperation Council”. In the same year, agreements, including visa exemption, were signed with Lebanon and Jordan.



acknowledge Mohamed Morsi as the President (he is supported by the Muslim Brotherhood). In 2013, even before completing his first year as President, Morsi was overthrown by the Egyptian Armed Forces, although he had come into power by the elections. Once again, a military-ruled system was established, and Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces, took over as President. This rapid change in Egypt was observed with varied reactions by the US, the Western allies and Turkey.

In Syria, the uprisings demanding reform transformed into a civil war as President Bashar al-Assad, who is of Shia origin, decided to use the armed forces and violence. The conflicts changed into sectarian violence, following the unification of the radical Islamic groups of Sunni origin among the opposition.

These developments and the accompanied instability posed significant obstacles for the Turkish policies related to establishing better relations with the Middle East and being a regional power. After the tension with Israel, the relations with Egypt, Libya, Iraq and Syria, in particular, and with Iran and Russia in this context, deteriorated and reached a point far from that desired, due to the policies implemented in the region. As the central government in Iraq, which was established after the US had withdrawn in 2010, pursued sectarian policies and adopted a negative attitude towards Turkey, relations became more tense. The good relations with the new government that was established in 2014 became tense again in December 2015 because of the downing of a Russian jet. It became necessary for the US and the West to formulate a new strategy especially against the IS, which emerged in Iraq after June 2014, having gained power in Syria. The IS declared itself an Islamic State and a Caliphate, and captured significant amounts of territory in both countries, besides its terrorist activities in the US and Europe. A shift in the strategies and policies applied in Syria to overthrow the Assad regime is required, so that the elimination of the IS's activities in the region can be prioritized. In this respect, the discord with the US, whilst not being stated explicitly, gives the impression that Turkey has been isolated by its closest ally. It was inevitable that Turkey revise its regional politics when Russia and Iran got involved in the issue in support of Assad. The efforts by Turkey and its Western allies to take their places on the right side of the reconstruction in the Arab world have brought forward oblige them to continuously revise their current policies and follow a dynamic process.

In consideration of these developments, the issues that affect and guide Turkey's Middle East policy can be assessed as follows:

- 1 Reflecting the Middle East policy implemented by Ankara between 2002 and the middle of 2011.
- 2 The internal dynamics in Israel, Libya, Egypt and Iraq change rapidly, and the implemented strategy and policy seem different from that of the US and the West.
- 3 The policies implemented by the Ankara government, owing to the tension with Israel, led to the isolation process.
- 4 The civil war in Syria got complicated when the IS and the Kurdish forces in Syria (PYD) got involved, whereas, in the beginning, the only actors were the Assad regime and its opponents.
- 5 The US and European countries that intervened to end the civil war in Syria are reluctant to get involved in a military ground operation.
- 6 The political aims and strategic priorities of the US and the Western allies shifted as the IS gained power in the region, and despite Ankara's strong objections they support PYD for the ground operation.
- 7 Russia and Iran are de facto parties in the civil war to support the Assad regime, and Russia's expansionist behaviour is unstoppable.

This study, considering the points stated above, is an attempt to examine the impacts of Ankara's Middle East policy from the Turkish perspective; to evaluate the internal and external dynamics of the relations with Israel, Egypt, Iraq, Syria and, in this context, with the US, Russia and Iran, respectively, and to draw a conclusion on how Ankara should take action.

### **Turkey's Middle East Policies between 2002 and 2011**

In 2002, when the Justice and Development Party (JDP) came to power, its domestic policy based on democratic principles and independent of military tutelage, and its proactive multi-faceted foreign policy prioritizing cooperation with the US and European countries provided Turkey with the opportunity to be a role model in the region (Shkolnik 2012; Altunisik 2004). Leaving aside the Islamic characteristic of the JDP government, its democratic and secular attitude, liberal economy strategy, endeavour to be a full member of the EU and its policy of forming close relations with the West made Turkey an attractive ally. In the global arena, discussions began on whether Turkey was a "regional leader" and a "rising power". In this respect, Brzezinski claimed that Turkey was a geo-strategic actor in the global sense (Brzezinski n.d.) and underlining the significance of being integrated in the Western world, he judged that Turkey would play an important role in the Middle East in the future (Brzezinski n.d.). It

facilitated the JDP government's work that the US considered Turkey a stabilizing actor in the deteriorating environment of the Middle East, following the US intervention in Iraq in 2003. Accordingly, Turkey, in search of new markets, got into the Middle East and formed close political, economic and social relations (Özel and Özkan 2015). On one hand, the Ankara government was improving its relations with Syria and Iran, and on the other, it was trying to keep Iran's influence in the Middle East under control (Larrabee and Nader 2013). The diminishing influence of the US in the post-2003 structuring of the Middle East created a strategic gap in the region. Turkey, with its democratic structure, came to be recognized as a regional power to influence and receive support from the Arab countries, and as a stabilizing actor against Iran's efforts to be a rising power (Altunışık 2014).

The mediation talks in 2007 to resolve the Golan Heights issue between Syria and Israel were chaired by Ahmet Davutoğlu, the foreign policy advisor to the Prime Minister, and continued until the Israeli intervention in Gaza in 2008 (Falk 2014). However, Turkey's attempts to be involved in the political process of the Palestinian problem and inviting Khaled Mashal, in spite of the objections by Washington and Tel Aviv, were perceived as a divergence from the US's regional priorities (Cagaptay 2006; Aras 2009). In 2009, when Ahmet Davutoğlu was made Minister of Foreign Affairs, the proactive foreign policy toward neighbours was introduced, and it lasted up to the first months of the Arab Spring. Davutoğlu stated that Turkey's position was built on four main principles and listed these as "general security for the whole region, dialogue for crisis resolution, economic interdependence, and pluralism and common cultural existence". He thought that Turkey could be a "soft power actor" with its democracy (Bağcı 2009). In this phase, which happened to be the second term of the JDP, Ankara applied a more independent policy, and declared that it would be active in all the issues that involved Turkey's interests in the Middle East, and administer a foreign policy of an "order instituting country" (Hale 2009; Çevik & Seib 2015). Ahmet Davutoğlu explained his approach:

We aim for the Middle Eastern region to transform into a security area for everyone, for all the societies and countries, regardless of ethnic or sectarian origin. We strive for this aim. Turkey is in the position of an order instituting country that has the closest contact with all the countries in the region. (Hurriyet 2009)

Ankara approached Iran as "a friend" after 2009 elections, despite the sanctions applied by the US and the West (Tait 2009). The same year,

Omar al-Bashir, the President of Sudan, who is accused of genocide, was invited to Turkey and the Gaddafi Human Rights Award was accepted during the visit to Libya in December 2010. These all showed that Ankara was determined to apply a policy independent from the West (Kubicek 2013). As Turkey and Brazil objected to the resolution no. 1929 against Iran in the UN Security Council in June 2010, the allegations were brought forward that Ankara turned its back to the West (United Nations 2010). The global discussions on “axis shift” started following the succeeding events such as the Mavi Marmara crisis with Israel on 31 May 2010, the compensation agreement for uranium signed with Iran, voting against the sanctions on Iran in the UN, and the initiatives to form the Middle East Union (Erdurmaz 2010). Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan rebuffed the allegations, saying: “Those who allege that Turkey has broken away from the West are the intermediaries of an ill-intentioned propaganda” (Beesley 2010). Ankara cautiously followed the uprisings that took place on the first days of 2011 against the present regimes in the Arab countries, and tried to proceed with its current policy.

In addition to the visits to the Arab countries, such as Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, the UAE and Egypt, and the political and economic relations formed with these countries in recent years, in January 2011 President Abdullah Gül paid an official visit to Yemen and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to Qatar. Al-Faisal, the Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia, paid an official visit to Turkey (Erdurmaz 2011). In February 2011, Rached Ghannouchi, the leader of the Tunisian opposition, pointed out that the Turkish democracy would be a model for Tunisia (Yanatma 2011). Similarly, in March 2011, when Abdullah Gül visited the post-Mubarak Egypt, Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, the Chairman of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces of Egypt and the Interim President, stated: “The Turkish experience is similar to the Egyptian one. Turkey sets a good example.” This explanation is a proof of Turkey’s influence. Likewise, in 2012, Mustafa Abdul Jalil, the Chairman of the National Transitional Council of Libya, said: “The democratic structure of Turkey sets an example for Libya and the other countries living through the Arab Spring. For its own democratic structure, Libya will take Turkey as an example” (Bali 2012). Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s visit to Egypt, Libya and Tunisia in September 2011 was evaluated as a visit emphasizing Turkey as a role model, since Turkey is the sole Islamic country that is based on secularism, democracy and a free market economy, and represents Islamic values (Jung 2011; Kubicek 2013).

Davutoğlu’s speech at the Grand National Assembly of Turkey on 26 April 2012 clearly explains the policy toward the Middle East:

*A new Middle East is being born. We shall keep being the master, leader and servant of this new Middle East. In this new Middle East, not suppressions, oppressions or dictates shall reign, but the popular will, people's voice and the voice of justice shall. Turkey shall be the strong advocate of this voice, and a new zone of peace; a new zone of stability and wealth shall be created. ("Dışışleri . . ." 2012)*

The 4th Ordinary Congress of the JDP on 30 September 2012, to which many country representatives from the Middle Eastern region were invited, turned into a show of force, declaring Turkey's position as a model in the region. This was supported by Mohamed Morsi, the President of Egypt; Osama al Nujaifi, the Speaker of the Council of Representatives; Ali Osman Mohammed Taha, the Vice President of Sudan; Khaled Mashal, the Leader of Hamas; Tariq al-Hashimi, the Vice President of Iraq; Masoud Barzani, the President of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq; Amine Gemayel, the Former President of Lebanon; Yusuf Raza Gillani, the former Prime Minister of Palestine; Rached Ghannouchi, the President of the Ennahda Party in Tunisia, and, outside the region, Gerhard Schroder, the former Prime Minister of Germany, and Almazbek Atambaev, the President of Kyrgyzstan attended the congress ("Foreign Leaders Praise Achievements of AKP and Turkey" 2012). In his congress speech, Prime Minister Erdoğan delivered a message on the rise of Turkey in the region, stating: "We are the party of the Turk, Kurd, Arab, Laz, Georgian, Circassian, Tatar, Bosnian, Pomak and Roman. We are everyone's party" ("Başbakan Erdoğan'ın AK Parti 4. Olağan Büyük Kongresi Konuşmasının Tam Metni" 2012). From this point on, Turkey decided to support the opposing movements (Altunışık 2014). In order to analyse Ankara's subsequent regional policy, it is important to examine Ankara's approaches toward countries, such as Libya, Egypt and Syria, where opposing movements emerged, and toward Israel and Iraq.

## **Turkish Foreign Policy toward the Middle East since the Arab Spring**

### **Turkish-Israeli Relations**

Turkey's good relations with Israel were established in the 1990s and resulted in a set of agreements that the countries tried to sustain in the first half of the 2000s, in spite of some problems. Despite the political tensions in this period, economic and commercial relations were improved (Tür 2009). Operation Cast Lead in Gaza on 27 December 2008 by Israel started the deterioration of relations between Turkey and Israel (Analiz

2011). The first political tension that was publicly watched by the whole world and went down in history as the “one minute” incident occurred between Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Simon Perez, the President of Israel, at the World Economic Forum held in Davos in January 2009 (BBC 2009). Following this event, the tension between the two states increased due to the “low chair” crisis (Hürriyet 2010). And the climactic incident was the Israeli military operation on 31 May 2010 that killed ten Turkish nationals on the *Mavi Marmara* ship, which had been sent to Gaza for humanitarian aid. After the incident, Turkey’s diplomatic relation with Israel was downgraded to the chargé d’affaires level, the lowest level. In January 2010, Ehud Barak, the Israeli Minister of Defence, visited Turkey in an effort to decrease the tension between the two states. However it was not effective, as he could not meet President Gül or Prime Minister Erdoğan (“Kriz üstü Ankara” 2010). Subsequently, Turkey suspended all the military activities and agreements with Israel (Arsu and Cowell 2011).

It can be said that what motivated Turkey to suspend relations with Israel was to strengthen Turkey’s influence on the Arab countries in the Middle East during the same period. It was necessary for Ankara to ensure the environment of trust by severing relations with Israel, which is considered an enemy by the Arabs. Thus, Turkey would resume the policy of resolving problems through negotiations and keep being the playmaker as a soft power. Only in this way would Turkey be a leader and get accepted as a role model by the Arab countries.

However, on 22 March 2013, during President Obama’s visit to Israel, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu phoned Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and apologized on behalf of Israel for the *Mavi Marmara* attack. Erdoğan accepted this apology on behalf of the Turkish people (“Türkiye-İsrail Siyasi İlişkileri” n.d.). Owing to the pressure by the US, the negotiations to ameliorate the relations between the two states are still ongoing (“Türkiye ve İsrail Yeniden Görüşüyor” 2016).

### **Turkish–Libyan Relations**

Turkey’s good relations with Gaddafi, the leader of Libya, were at their best in 2009–2010 (Erdurmaz 2012). During Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s visit to Libya in November 2009, eight agreements and memorandums of understanding were signed in various areas such as visa exemption, cooperation in banking and agriculture, joint investments in Africa, and transportation (“Dış Politika Kronolojisi Kasım 2009” 2009; *Milliyet* 2009). On the rebellion of 17 February 2011 to overthrow the

Gaddafi regime, Erdoğan commented that the conflict in Libya was an internal conflict and should be resolved internally. He also said that Turkey could act as a mediator between the rebels and the government (Milne 2011). The underlying reason for this comment was the concern that the current good relations would deteriorate. As the US and NATO supported the rebellions against Gaddafi, and the rebels reacted against Turkey's behaviour, Ankara, too, decided to recognize the opposition, and stopped supporting Gaddafi (Outzen 2009). After the UN Security Council resolution no. 1973 on 17 March 2011 calling for military intervention, NATO took over on 25 March, and Turkey got involved in the Operation "Unified Protector" with seven aircraft and six ships (NATO 2011). In July, to show Ankara's support for the opponents, Ahmet Davutoğlu visited Benghazi where the uprisings had started, and declared that 300 million dollars would be donated to the National Transitional Council ("Turkey Recognizes Libyan Rebels, Offers Another \$200 Million in Aid" 2011). With the support of NATO, the opponents officially ended the Gaddafi regime on 20 October 2011.

Before this date, Prime Minister Erdoğan had paid a visit to three countries in the middle of September. Having started his Arab Spring tour from Egypt and Tunisia, Erdoğan went to Libya on 16 September 2011 and delivered a speech to the Libyan people in the Martyrs' Square in Tripoli. In his speech, he expressed Turkey's support, stating: "In the forthcoming period, we, Turkey, will be on the side of our fellow Libyans for all the political, military, economic, commercial, infrastructural and superstructural needs. We will be hand in hand and shoulder to shoulder" (Sabah 2011).

The good relations established after the fall of the Gaddafi regime began to bear fruit in Turkey's favour. Turkish companies started to take over the works that due to the civil war were half finished. Furthermore, the new regime assigned the Medina Tower project, a symbolic project, to the Turkish constructors and showed its care for the issue. Mohamed Yusuf al Magariaf, the President of Libya, attended the conference entitled "New Region, New Relations: Turkey and Libya" organized by the SETA Foundation, and underlined the importance attached to Turkey, stating: "If it is essential to express gratitude, I would like to thank you for everything that you provided for us" (Öztürk 2012).

Yet, the good relations formed in the past three years between Ankara and the National Transitional Council of Libya tended to deteriorate, because of Turkey's stand in the structuring after the elections (Doğan 2015). It is observed that two governments with two separate bases emerged from the efforts to form the new regime, and that they are in a

power struggle. One of the bases is in Tobruk; it represents the liberals and elites and is recognized by the international community. The other is in Tripoli; it is the Islamic-inclined structure called Fajr Libya, which is formed by the supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood. The international community, especially the US and the EU, recognize the government in Tobruk.

The government in Tobruk states that Turkey and Qatar support the Tripoli government, which is led by Omar al Hassi and dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood (Hogg 2014; *Taraf News Paper* 2015). In an interview on Al Jazeera television on 29 August 2014, there was a statement: “It is not possible to accept that the National Congress of Libya is convened in Tobruk”. This was reacted against as an intervention in the internal affairs of Libya (“Libya’da Siyasi Kriz ve Türkiye” 2014). General Khalifa Haftar, who is backed by UAE, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, declared that he would wipe out the Muslim Brotherhood in Libya. Claiming that Turkey and Qatar support terror, he demanded that the Turkish and Qatari leave Libya within 24 hours (“Renegade General Urges Turks, Qataris to Leave East Libya” 2014). Abdullah al Sani, the Prime Minister of the government in question, alleged that “his government cannot reach an agreement with Turkey, as Turkey sends arms to the opposing group in Tripoli for the Libyans to kill one another” (*Hürriyet* 2015a). In sum, Turkey’s relations with Libya came to an impasse due to the image of supporting the Tripoli government, which is ruled by the Muslim Brotherhood and extremists. Since 25 June 2014, Turkey has shut down the Turkish Embassy in Tripoli (Turkey. Ministry of Foreign Affairs n.d.).

### **Turkish–Egyptian Relations**

When the demonstrations against President Hosni Mubarak started, Ankara was one of the first governments to support the opposition, because it was trying to avoid getting into a tight corner again as experienced in Libya. In the party caucus at the beginning of February 2011, Prime Minister Erdoğan delivered a speech for the first time calling for Mubarak to abdicate (*Hürriyet* 2011a). According to Yaşar Yakış, who served as the Foreign Minister in 2002–2003, one of the reasons for this early act was the thought that the Muslim Brotherhood would be influential in the new regime (Yakış 2013).

President Mohamed Morsi attended the 4th Ordinary Congress of the JDP on 30 September 2012 and, praising the JDP’s success in democracy, stated that Turkey would be a role model in the region. He also asserted



that Turkey and Egypt would stand together against the regime in Syria (Rajabova 2012).

Morsi's foreign policy toward Syria and Israel was parallel with that of Turkey, and it was causing Israel to lose support and become isolated in the region. This, for sure, was strengthening Turkey's hand in the region. Yet, when Morsi took the required precautions on the Egyptian–Israeli border and declared that the channels between the US and Israel would be kept open, it was welcomed by Israel (Gold 2013). The good relations between Ankara and President Morsi were maintained at a high level, in the Muslim Brotherhood context. These relations were maintained until 3 June 2013, when the military coup led by Abdel Fattah el-Sisi overthrew Morsi before he could even complete his first year. Prime Minister Erdoğan reacted against the coup without delay and stated that the “military coup” was not acceptable (“Turkey PM Blasts Egypt ‘Coups’ as Enemy of Democracy” 2013; “Turkey Calls Military Overthrow Of Egypt’s Mohammed Morsi ‘Unacceptable’” 2013). Hüseyin Çelik, the JDP spokesman, said that “some Western countries did not recognize the Muslim Brotherhood’s coming to power” and that “they supported the overthrow of Morsi” (“Mısır’da Ordu Mursi’yi Devirdi” 2013). In terms of political relations, el-Sisi, after his accession in June 2014, began a bitter struggle against the Muslim Brotherhood, and tried to minimize the religious influence in Egypt (Linn and Linn 2015; Trager 2016). He also declared that Turkey should stop interfering in the internal affairs of Egypt (Nader 2015).

Erdoğan points out that he still recognizes Morsi as the President of Egypt, and blames el-Sisi for overthrowing the elected President by a military coup, and for suspending and harming Egyptian democracy (Moore 2015). At this point, Turkish–Egyptian relations are at the lowest level in terms of politics. However, according to the data of the Turkish Ministry of Finance, commercial relations are maintained (“Mısır–Türkiye 2014 Yılı Dış Ticaret Verileri” 2015).

### **Turkish–Iraqi Relations**

It was not possible for the Iraqi politicians to establish a stable order, since the US had left Iraq in November 2011. Even though the secular-origin al-Iraqiya Party led by Ayad Allawi won 91 of the 325 seats in the parliamentary elections on 7 March 2010, al-Maliki, who is of Shia origin, seized power with 2 votes less (89 seats), pursuant to the Iraqi Constitution. The al-Iraqiya list was prepared including Ayad Allawi as the candidate for Prime Minister, secular Shia and Sunni Arabs, former

Ba'athists and nationalist Arabs, as well as the Iraqi Turkmen ("El Irakiye Listesi" 2010). The State of Law Coalition led by Nouri al-Maliki included mostly the Shia groups (Cubukcu and Özhan 2010). The National Iraqi Alliance led by Muqtada al-Sadr and Jafari, who are supported by Iran, and some other small parties participated in the election (Stevenson 2010). After nine months' work establishing a government, Nouri al-Maliki succeeded in coming to power.

The first tension between Turkey and the Maliki government arose when Tariq Hashimi, the President of Iraq, was arrested at Baghdad Airport on 19 December 2011. This incident turned into a symbol for the Sunni community in the Sunni-Shia conflict following the US's withdrawal. Afterwards, Tariq Hashimi took refuge in Turkey and declared that he would not recognize the sentence of death in absentia which was pronounced in Iraq. Hashimi blamed al-Maliki for sectarian discrimination against the Sunni. Al-Maliki reacted to Ankara's hosting Hashimi as an intervention in the internal affairs of Iraq (Erkus 2012). Turkey evaluated this incident as an application by an oppressive regime over the Sunni Arabs (Erkmen 2013). On the subsequent days, Ankara explicitly supported the Kurds and Sunnis. Ankara responded positively to the Kurdish and Sunni tribes seeking support in internal affairs against the extreme centralist regime of al-Maliki (Erkmen 2013). Additionally, improving relations with Barzani, the President of Iraqi Kurdistan (Dedeoğlu, 2012), caused relations with Iraq to deteriorate further in 2012. In the fourth month of 2012, when Erdoğan accused al-Maliki of being oppressive to the Sunnis and of being self-interested, the relations became more problematic ("Maliki'nin Küstahlıkları Devam Ediyor" 2012). In response to this accusation, al-Maliki summoned the Turkish Ambassador in Iraq and stated that Turkey should not intervene in their internal affairs (*Sabah* 2012).

In the meantime, subsequent to the US's withdrawal, relations got quite tense, because of the power sharing between the Iraqi central government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), the disputed territories such as Kirkuk, and disagreement in sharing the oil revenues. Although at first both governments attempted to moderate the relations, they were not successful. After al-Maliki had become the Prime Minister in February 2011, he acknowledged the validity of oil agreements signed by the KRG. This approach provided better relations to some extent. Yet, later on, Masoud Barzani complained of the Shia oppression by the Iraqi government and declared that he would not accept dictatorial behaviour ("Iraqi Kurd Leader Threatens Secession Unless Power Share Demands Met" 2012). In November 2012, the central government demanded that the

KRG transfer its armed forces consisting of the peshmerga to the “Tigris Operations Command” subordinate to the central government. The KRG reacted against this demand and this resulted in a conflict (“Iraqi Kurdish Leader Says Region Will Defend Itself” 2012). In June 2014, the al-Maliki forces failed in the attack against ISIL in northern Iraq and retreated. Upon this, the Kirkuk region was occupied by KRG (Hawramy and Baumont 2014), followed by Masoud Barzani’s declaration on 1 July 2014 that a referendum for independence would take place (Chulov and Hawramy 2014). Turkey gave green light to the demand for independence via Hüseyin Çelik, the JDP spokesman (Bender 2014).

Following the US’s withdrawal, the most important step taken in the improvement of relations with the KRG was Erdoğan’s visit to Erbil in March 2011 (Gurses 2011). Afterwards, the Turkish Consulate in Erbil was opened in October 2010 (“Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Erbil Başkonsolosluğu” 2010; Charountaki 2012) and Ankara received visits in 2012 from Nechirvan Barzani, the KRG Prime Minister (Rota Haber 2012); President Masoud Barzani (Mynet 2012); Ayad Allawi, the leader of al-Iraqiya (Free Library 2012); and Ammar al-Hakim, the President of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (News.az 2012). In exchange, again in the same year, the Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu (Tonkus 2012) and also the Ministers of Energy and Trade paid an official visit to the Kurdistan Region in Iraq. In this period, Ankara did not have any relations with the Baghdad government. While political relations were proceeding in this manner, there were also developments in economic and military relations. The most significant initiative in terms of economic relations is the agreement to export over Turkey the oil and natural gas under KRG control (Safak 2013). At first, the al-Maliki government was against this (al-Amin 2015). However, when Haider al-Abadi became the Prime Minister, Erbil recognized this agreement (BBC Türkçe 2014a), and they reached a mutual understanding. In 2013, it was stated that the oil in the Erbil region would be sent independently from Baghdad (Ottaway 2013), and that Turkey had no objections (Duran 2015). In 2014, Turkish armed forces began to train the peshmerga in Erbil (*Milliyet* 2015a). The PKK was upset by the military training for the fight against ISIL, and its political wing the PCK (Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party) criticized Barzani, as the Turkish army was installed near Mosul (*Milliyet* 2015b). In return, Barzani replied in a sharp manner and severely criticized the PKK. In 2014, before even one year had passed, al-Abadi demanded that the Turkish soldiers, who were on duty in the Beseka region by Baghdad’s approval, should retreat (Hameed and Toksabay 2015). This was a great confusion for Ankara (Al Jazeera 2015b).

Since al-Maliki's position toward the uprisings in Syria was supportive of the Syrian regime, it added to the problems with Turkey (Kareem 2012). Subsequently, Iraq opened its airspace for the airdrop assistance from Iran to Syria. This was one of the points contributing to the deterioration of relations (Gordon 2012).

Today, when we examine Ankara's policy toward Iraq, it can be claimed that the developments are far away from Ahmet Davutoğlu's approach of "zero problems" with the central government. It can be observed that against Baghdad, an alliance with the KRG is being established through political, economic and military relations, even though, at one time, *realpolitik* required abstention from even mentioning the KRG.

### **Turkish–Iranian Relations**

Turkey handled its relations with Iran, the secret rival for centuries, in a different manner compared to those with the Middle Eastern countries. Ankara had to benefit from the Iranian oil and natural gas resources, so, it put emphasis on developing a cautious and well-balanced policy, despite the pressure by the US and the West. Ankara saw that, in case of any threat or conflict of interest, Iran could easily form an alliance with Russia. Furthermore, it did not go unnoticed that Iran could create problems in Turkey's domestic and foreign policy, when Iran brought forward support for Kurdish terrorism and sectarian discrimination (McCurdy 2008). For these reasons, Turkey preferred to keep good relations and handle them independently of the West. By a resolution of 1 March 2003, Ankara refused the US forces permission to use Turkish territory to intervene in Iraq. Therefore, in exchange for the tense relations with Washington, it was necessary to improve relations with Iran for the search for an alliance in the region and for the increasing energy need (Larrabee and Nader 2013). Because this necessity was compatible with the proactive foreign policy applied by Ahmet Davutoğlu, it was put into practice (Bağcı 2015).

Ankara supplies Iran with one third of its energy need. In 1996, Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan signed an agreement for natural gas supply and trade. However, it took a long time for the agreement to come into force. The Iran–Turkey pipeline that was put into operation in 2001 kept

running with ups and downs, although Iran tried to use it as a political instrument<sup>2</sup> and suspended it at times (Robins 1997).

In 2004, when Prime Minister Erdoğan visited Tehran (*Hürriyet* 2004), an agreement was signed on the fight against PKK, the terrorist organization (Larrabee and Nader 2013). Iran decided to act jointly in protecting the borders, as it was worried about the PJAK (Free Life Party of Kurdistan), which is stationed in northern Iraq and has close relations with the PKK. Ali Larijani, Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council of Iran, visited Ankara in May 2006, and stated that Iran had documents proving that the US supported the PKK and PJAK (Moubayed 2006). Turkey believed that cooperation with Iran regarding terrorism was really helpful. Indeed, at the Turkish-Iranian High Security Council meeting in April 2008, Abbas Mohtaj, Deputy Minister of the Interior of Iran, pointed out: “Iran considers PKK and PJAK as the same organization under different titles” (McCurdy 2008). In order to protect the borders, both countries increased cooperation, intelligence and joint activities. Yet by the end of 2011 this cooperation had decreased considerably, owing to the difference in approaches toward the crisis in Syria (Uslu 2012).

In parallel, the dispute between the two countries was brought forward during the elections in post-US Iraq. While al-Hashimi was on a visit in Turkey, he stated that following the elections on 7 March 2010, Iran was trying to influence the internal affairs of Iraq to ensure that a Shia-dominated coalition be formed (*Dunyabulteni* 2010; Bozkurt 2010; Kane 2011). After the elections, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu visited Tehran, and one of the most important issues discussed there was avoiding intervention in the internal affairs of Iraq. Even though both parties issued a press release stating that an agreement on the issue was reached, an environment of trust was not provided (Bozkurt 2010). And despite all these tensions, economic relations in the past ten years improved notably (Larrabee and Nader 2013). Turkey avoided a stance against Iran related to its nuclear programme. Ankara objected to the sanctions by the UN (Larrabee and Nader 2013). Indicating that it did not wish to see an Iran with nuclear weapons, Ankara kept emphasizing that Iran had the right to use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes (Stein, n.d.; Kibaroglu and Çağlar 2008). In this respect, Ankara, together with Brazil, persuaded Iran, and played a leading role in signing the compensation agreement in June 2010 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2010). Nonetheless, Iran reacted against

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<sup>2</sup> In January 2006 natural gas deliveries to Turkey were reduced by 80 per cent days after Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan weighed in on Iran’s confrontation with the West over its nuclear programme.

the radar installation in Kürecik, Malatya, which is part of the missile defence system of NATO (Demirelli 2012).

The tense political relations became more visible along with the uprisings in Syria under the influence of the Arab Spring (Larrabee and Nader 2013). Upon the anti-government demonstrations in Syria, Iran unconditionally supported the Syrian regime, based on the strategic relations (Sinkaya 2011). Iran considered that there were two significant impacts of the uprisings in Syria. The first is that Iran perceived them as a conspiracy against itself by the foreign powers, for the purpose of eliminating the influence of Iran in the Syria–Iran axis. As for the second, besides losing the most important ally if the Assad regime were to be overthrown, Iran would lose its *de facto* contact with Hizbollah, by means of which it had influence in the Middle East (Bigdeli 2011). Iran considers Syria as “a resistance front against the Zionist regime”, because Syria supports the Hizbollah in Lebanon. Since the beginning of the uprisings in Syria, Iran stood against the idea of overthrowing Assad and the government, for it would bring down the solidarity, and Iran would be weakened against Israel and the West (Giles 2015). Therefore, after the uprisings had become more violent, Tehran sent the revolutionary guards to help the Assad regime; at first Tehran denied having done such a thing, but acknowledged it later on (Crilly 2011; Cohen 2012).

The disintegration of the Turkish–Iranian relations in terms of Syria became evident during Erdoğan’s visit to Tehran on 28 March 2012 (Arıkan 2012). The primary issue of the visit was Syria, and although it appeared that both parties reached a consensus, in reality it turned into a platform where Turkey and Iran underlined their stances toward the Assad regime (Arıkan 2012). In November 2013, Foreign Minister Davutoğlu attended the 21st Council of Ministers of the Organization of Economic Cooperation in Tehran. In the press meeting held with his counterpart, Javad Zarif, Zarif stated: “We have different ideas on the crisis in Syria. We will resolve this through mutual assistance” (Giles 2015). Hassan Rouhani was elected President in 2013 and visited Turkey in 2014 (BBC Türkçe 2014b), which was followed by Erdoğan’s return visit. It was clear that it would not be possible to turn the dissent into consensus on Rouhani’s visit (Barkey 2014; Hafezi and Karadeniz 2014). Erdoğan remarked that this visit was a means to meet on common ground and overcome the tensions concerning Syria (Inat 2014). After this stage, Iran supported Assad by means of either Hizbollah and the revolutionary guards, or its advisors. This played the major role in distancing the relations (Eisenstadt 2015). Having signed the nuclear agreement, the US and the West evaluated it as an opportunity when Iran, together with