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Briefing Paper 1

From soft power to soft borders: Crisis management and migration flows in Turkey

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Abstract:

This paper seeks to outline how Turkey's foreign policy actors in the early 2000s have developed soft power capabilities, and how these have failed in the wake of the Syrian Crisis. Building on the core arguments presented in the collection *Another Empire? A decade of Turkey's foreign policy under the Justice and Development Party* (Istanbul, Bilgi University Press, 2012), it suggests that the liberal visa regimes, which the Turkish government introduced with its non-Schengen neighbours in the region and beyond have added to the multiple challenges, which the political crises and wars in its eastern neighbourhood pose for Turkey's internal stability.

Keywords:

Soft power, Schengen, visa regime, Islamist movements, refugees, Kurds, Syrian Crisis, Iran

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Joseph Nye's book *Soft power: The means to success in world politics* was written at a time when US influence was perceived to wane rapidly, both in the Middle East and in some "old" European countries. Reverting from his earlier rejection of the thesis of the decline of American power in *Bound to Lead* (Nye 1990), part of his argument was the realisation that George Bush's "triumphalism" might endanger US hegemony in the post-9/11 world. In particular, Nye was concerned about the inability of the US administration to receive Turkish, Mexican and Chilean support for the US war effort in Iraq in 2003. It would almost seem ironic that the very Turkey, whose occasional opposition to US soft-power Nye was lamenting, emerged as a new regional actor with hegemonic ambitions in the overlapping geographies of the Middle East, the Balkans and the Muslim word, and engaging soft power resources in a fashion which would suggest an enthusiastic reception of Joseph Nye's work.

The impact of Turkey's soft power resources and the role of actors mobilising them are of central importance for the country's migration-related challenges. And even more consequential is the failure of these soft power capabilities, as the unfolding Syrian crisis reminds us. In this brief overview, I will seek to summarise an argument, which I have developed in more detail in my co-edited volume *Another Empire? A decade of Turkey's foreign policy under the Justice and Development Party* (Istanbul, Bilgi University Press, 2012). [http://keremoktem.com/books/another-empire]

Joseph Nye speaks of two core dimensions of power in international relations: 'Whereas hard power—the ability to coerce—grows out of a country's military or economic might, soft power arises from the attractiveness of its culture, political ideas and policies' (Nye 2004, p. x). In Nye's view, soft power is a 'nation's ability to attract and persuade… to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments' and in this it is complementary, rather than alternative, to 'hard power' (Ibid.). Barnett and Duvall distinguish between compulsory power (coercive and/or soft) on the one side, and institutional, structural and productive or discursive power on the other (2005). If the modes of institutional and structural power are beyond the capabilities of a "middle power" like Turkey, the prisms of both compulsory and discursive power appear to promise analytical insight into the workings of Turkey's non-conventional foreign policy tools and into Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's approach to his country's international relations. This approach is expressed in both his rather Bismarckian doctrine of 'Strategic Depth' (Davutoğlu 2001) and through his foreign policy activism since 2007, first as advisor to the Prime Minister and since 2009 as Foreign Minister. In Davutoğlu's intellectual

universe, a country's 'strategic depth' is determined as much by military considerations (and, historically, the resources and the territory, within which it could deploy its armies within a reasonable time window), as by history and cultural affinities with other countries. In the context of modern Turkey and Davutoğlu's model, history is the Ottoman Empire and culture roughly, but not exclusively, equals high Sunni Islam (Gözaydın 2012).

We can distinguish four areas of non-conventional power projection, for which the current AKP government has been lauded by many US and European decision makers in search of a "moderate Muslim country", and scolded by others—from the power of ideological persuasion, to non-conventional foreign policy instruments, religious and educational networks, and finally, to popular culture and the famous Istanbul-based soap operas, Turkey has become visible in many spheres, from which it had been largely absent before the early 2000s. Mapping these four areas of interaction, I argue that Turkey's international visibility, as well as its reputation has indeed progressed significantly. Yet, it is questionable whether they have culminated in tangible soft power capabilities. Furthermore, hardly any of these policies can be credited to the AKP government alone. While it would be fair to assert that such policy instruments have been advanced, extended and perfected under Davutoğlu and his predecessor Abdullah Gül, most of the non-conventional foreign policy instruments aiming at "attracting and persuading" date in fact back to the globally oriented leadership of Prime Minister and later President Turgut Özal in the late 1980s (Altunışık 2008; Ataman 2002), a period which was truncated by his sudden death and the Kurdish War of the 1990s.

Turkey at the dawn of the millennium, hence, was an inward-looking, economically and culturally uninspiring country, engaged in some degree of conflict with most of its neighbours. It suspected many of these countries of conspiracy and support for Islamist or Kurdish terrorist groups, not always without reason. The country's foreign policy was constrained by its NATO membership, as well as by its ethno-centric self-imagination. As importantly, the public perception of Turkey in most countries in its eastern and western neighbourhoods was shaped by memories of anti-Ottoman liberation struggles and nationalist historiographies, the activism of Diaspora organisations commemorating the Armenian genocide and other acts of mass violence committed in the last years of the empire, as well as by popular movies such as *Midnight Express*, which depicted the inhumane conditions in Turkish prisons with shocking accuracy, but also with a measure of cultural essentialism. The 12th of September military regime, which took over in 1980, and the tens of thousands of Turkish and Kurdish refugees it created, further aggravated the –justified- image of a brutal military state that tortured and killed its very own people.

Today is indeed a far cry from the 1990s. It can be said with some certainty that Turkey has become a major hub of attraction for a region stretching from Southeast Europe to the Black Sea, the Caucasus, Central Asia and the Middle East, 'an actor, an economic pole, and perhaps and aspiring regional hegemon' (Bechev 2011, p. 9)—or 'order setter' in Davutoğlu's own terminology, or 'agenda setter' in Nye's (Nye 2004, p. 5). Part and parcel of this new foreign policy was a more relaxed visa regime with all Non-Schengen neighbouring countries and further beyond. This relative freedom of movement increased both business and tourism travel particularly from the Arab world and the Balkans. But visa free travel arrangements with many countries in the Middle East, which are now rocked by multiple economic and political crises, may yet come to haunt the Turkish government.

A key question is the extent to which unconventional foreign policy tools—the 'cacophony of messages' (Hocking 2005, p. 34) from a multitude of actors or the rather fuzzy workings of popular culture and TV series—really have a decisive impact on how a state projects itself, on how it 'attracts and persuades'. Based on a more constrained reading of Nye's understanding of power as *inter alia* 'the changed behaviour of others' (Nye 2004, p. 2), one would probably come to the conclusion that they do only ever so slightly. Turkey's soft power presence in the Middle East has so far had less impact on political elites than Turkish foreign policy actors would have hoped for. Within the strategic 'zero-sum' environment of the Middle East, and even more so in the context of the yet inconclusive series of Arab uprisings, Turkey's 'zero problem' strategy has wavered (Krastev 2011, p. 79), to say the least. With the Syrian crisis and the realisation of Ankara's almost complete loss of influence over the Syrian regime, it can be declared as failed.

But even before Syria, things had not been going so well: From Turkey's negotiation in the Syria-Israel proximity talks that were disrupted by Israel's invasion of Gaza in 2008/9, to its demoted role in the release of the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit by Hamas, and from its inability to stop a UN panel from adopting the rather blatantly pro-Israeli 'Palmer report' on the killing of nine Turkish nationals by Israeli soldiers in international waters (the Mavi Marmara incident; cf. Finkelstein 2011), Turkey's persuasive power seemed to have had only little impact. Even less successful were the cases of the well-meant but ultimately suspended rapprochement with Armenia, after Turkey succumbed to Azeri behind-the-scenes politics and in Cyprus, where Turkey's protestations against the Republic of Cyprus' deep sea drilling exercise failed to induce action from the European Union or the United States. And even the Kurdistan Regional Government under its leader Massoud Barzani, which is arguably heavily dependent on Turkish economic and political support (Shadid

2011), repeatedly refused to heed Turkish requests for military cooperation against the PKK (Taraf 2011).

In the more controlled environment of the Balkans, Turkey's foreign policy actors seemed to have succeeded in contributing to regional peace and stability. For instance, the long delayed accreditation of the Bosnian Ambassador to Belgrade and the apology of the Serbian Parliament to the victims of Serb violence in Srebrenica, are generally seen as successful examples of mediation by a regional third party (Türbedar 2011). The Serbian-Turkish accord not to refer to Srebrenica as genocide, however, has been criticised fiercely by many Bosniaks (Kovać 2010). Even though it has not yet led to substantive outcomes, Turkey's mediation between the leaders of two Muslim communities in Serbia's Sandžak province (one leaning to Belgrade, the other to the *Islamska Zajednica* of Sarajevo) is also seen in this more positive light. Yet, Turkey's peace-keeping and conflict resolution in Serbia, Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina do not touch upon the country's key strategic interests, and neither have they been able to go much beyond the areas with predominantly Muslim populations (Petrović & Reljić 2011, p. 166). One should, however, not underestimate the very fact that Turkey has been able to project itself as a patron of the Muslims in the Balkans. Neither can we belittle the massive political investment which the Turkish government has made in Islamist movements like Ghannouchi's An Nahda, the Moroccan Justice and Development Party and factions of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, even though it is yet too early to evaluate the impact of this policy.

It is probably also too early to gauge what all this means for our understanding of the future migratory patterns that Turkey's emerging General Directorate for Migration Issues will have to engage with. What we can say though, with a degree of certainty, is that Turkey has become more globalised, attractive and more influential thanks to the "soft power" policies, I have described above, at the same time as it has become more vulnerable and open to manipulation. The openness of its borders particularly to the East, growing mutual trade relations with its neighbours and massively increasing numbers of visitors and businessmen from the neighbourhood and beyond have all benefited from Davutoğlu's "zero conflict" policy. Yet, the increasing and sparsely controlled flow of individuals might increase Turkey's vulnerability on a number of fronts, from organised transnational crime and growing pressure on public services in areas with large immigrant populations to implication in regional conflicts. Growing anti-immigrant sentiment in the security forces and in immigrant quarters in Istanbul is a case for the former.

The mounting civil war in Syria and Turkey's support for the Free Syrian Army is a case for the latter: Its operation in the province of Antakya (Hatay) has already put a significant strain on public services and inter-community relations. So have the presence of now more than a hundred thousand registered Syrian refugees and many more who have entered the country legally with their passports. They are unsettling the precarious patchwork of Hatay's ethnic and religious communities, a patchwork that reflects Syria's main communities. The tensions between the Syrian Sunnis and Alawites is now being exported to the Sunnis and Alawites of Turkey. The war in Syria and disagreements with Iran, the Kurdistan Regional Government and Iraq have also undermined the uneasy stalemate in Turkey's Kurdish provinces too. The ghosts of Kurdish war of the 1980s and 90s seem to have been revived, as several hundred people have been killed in renewed hostilities between the Turkish military and PKK in the Kurdish provinces in less than a year.

As the 'Zero Problems with Neighbours' policy now lays buried under the rubble of the bombed cities of Aleppo and Damascus, Turkey will have to brace itself for multiple new challenges on its borders: The flow of refugees from Syria is not and will not be ebbing away, and an increasing number of Syrians who possess passports, will make their way to the Turkish border posts. As the UN sanction regime comes down ever harder on Iran –the Iranian Rial has just lost 50 per cent of its value vis-à-vis the US Dollar- Turkey will be the first port of call for disillusioned Iranians, and probably also for criminal transnational network. More Syrians and Iranians will endeavour to cross further into European territory through Turkey's western land and sea borders.

The coming months will be a veritable test case for the ability of the Justice and Development Party government. It will show whether Erdoğan and Davutoğlu will be able to re-adjust their foreign policy outlook from one of historical vision, compelling narrative and soft power appeal to sober crisis management and hard power politics. As for the Directorate for Migration Issues: Once it is established, its prospected 3,500 civil servants will have a lot on their plate to deal with!

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