

TURKEY-SYRIA RELATIONS IN AKP ERA (2002-2013)

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## Abstract

2002 elections was the beginning of a new era both for Turkish political life and Turkish foreign politics. AKP, which came to power with 2002 elections, have secured its position in domestic politics through Conservative Democrat identity and by disconnecting from its progenitor political Islamist National Vision line. Conservative Democrat identity is the name of an approach that is filled by the AKP in line with its own needs. As a definition, Conservative Democrat identity; It is a discourse that the AKP uses to create legitimacy and space for itself, as well as to maintain relations with the Islamic base, but also to develop relations with the West.

With the end of the Cold War and new developments within international system that created by September 11 attacks, AKP have tried to practice its conception of foreign politics in the framework of Strategic Depth concept by Davutoğlu. With the maneuver area created by 2003 Iraq war. AKP have developed economic and political relations with especially Middle Eastern countries, until Arab Spring in 2011. The relations with Syria, which were developed for the past ten years and were shown as an example, were turned into a power struggle during the Arab Spring period and an indirect war was started between two countries.

In this study establishment phase of AKP and the creation process of Conservative Democrat identity was discussed. Then AKP's approaches to foreign policy were addressed and lastly the progress of Turkey-Syria relations between 2002 and 2013, which is referred as the most significant example of the foreign policy of AKP, was examined.

**Key Words:** Conservative Democrat, Strategic Depth, Axial Shift, Turkey-Syria Relationship, Arab Spring

## Özet

2002 seçimleri hem Türk siyasal hayatı hem de Türk dış politikası için yeni bir dönemin başlangıcı olmuştur. 2002 seçimleri ile iktidar olan AKP, öncülü olan siyasal İslamcı Milli Görüş çizgisinden koparak, Muhafazakar Demokrat kimliği ile iç siyasette güçlenerek yerini sağlamlaştırmıştır. Muhafazakar Demokrat kimlik, içi AKP tarafından kendi ihtiyaçları doğrultusunda doldurulan bir yaklaşımın adıdır. Bir tanım olarak, Muhafazakar Demorat kimlik; AKP'nin iç siyasal sistem de kendisi için meşruiyet ve alan yaratmak için kullandığı, aynı zaman da İslami tabanı ile ilişkilerini sürdürmesini sağlayan ama Batı ile de ilişkileri de geliştirmek için kullanılan bir söylemdir.

Soğuk Savaş'ın bitişi ve 11 Eylül 2001'deki saldırıların uluslararası sistemde meydana getirdiği gelişmelerle AKP, dış politikada Stratejik Derinlik konsepti çerçevesinde dış politika anlayışını uygulamaya çalışmıştır. AKP, 2003 Irak Savaşı ile başlayan sürecin yarattığı manevra alanı ile özellikle Ortadoğu ülkeleriyle ekonomik ve siyasi ilişkileri hızla geliştirirken, 2011'de meydana gelen Arap Baharı ile bu ilişkiler sekteye uğramıştır. Arap Baharı ile başlayan süreçte on yıllık süre boyunca Suriye ile geliştirilen ve örnek olarak gösterilen ilişkiler Arap Baharı ile bir güç mücadelesine dönüşmüş ve iki ülke arasında örtülü bir savaş yaşanmaya başlamıştır.

Bu çalışmada, öncelikle AKP'nin kuruluş aşaması ve Muhafazakar Demokrat kimliğinin yaratılma süreci ele alınarak incelenmiştir. İkinci olarak, dış politika da AKP'nin yaklaşımları konu edinmiş ve son olarak da AKP dış politikasının en önemli başarısı ve örneği olarak gösterilen Türkiye-Suriye ilişkilerinin 2002-2013 yılları arasındaki seyri incelenmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Muhafazakar Demokrat, Stratejik Derinlik, Eksen Kayması, Türkiye-Suriye İlişkileri, Arap Baharı

## **Abbreviations**

AKP: Justice and Development Party /Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi

MP:The Motherland Party /Anavatan Partisi

NMP: The Nationalist Movement Party /Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi

MNP: The National Order Party /Milli Nizam Partisi

DP: Democrat Party /Demokrat Parti

WP: Welfare Party /Refah Partisi

NSP: The National Salvation Party /Milli Selamet Partisi

VP : Virtue Party /Fazilet Partisi

JP: Justice Party /Adalet Partisi

TPP: True Path Party /Doğru Yol Partisi

TESEV: The Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation

MG: The National View Tradition /Milli Görüş

USA: The United States of America/Amerika Birleşik Devletleri

USSR: The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics/Sovyet Sosyalist Cumhuriyetler Birliği

NSC: National Security Council/Milli Güvenlik Konseyi

UN: United Nation/Birleşmiş Milletler

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## **Introduction**

The concept of political Islam, which had gained wider popularity in the political arena as a result of the coup d'état staged by the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) in 1980, was pushed out of the system with yet another military intervention (28th Feb 1997-post modern coup). In the early 1980s and 1990s, the most important representative of the Islamic movement and its demands were Necmettin Erbakan's National View (Milli Görüş) Movement and the parties that were formed thereafter.

Although the Justice and Development Party (AKP), officially founded in 2001, claims to have severed ties with The Welfare Party; its predecessor political Islamic party, it is practically a continuation of it. The most prominent three founders of the party, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Abdullah Gül and Bülent Arınç stood side by side in the political arena with Erbakan. This is a significant indicator that shows the bond and the continuity between the two parties and political Islamic movement. Previous interventions on political Islamic parties became a learning experience for AKP and the founders of the party sought after a system that is at peace with the system. This has paved the way for the commencement a different discussion on the place of Conservative Democratic identity in the Turkish political scene.

The purpose of this study is to examine the reasons for the emergence of AKP's Conservative Democratic identity, the process of the formation of this identity, its repercussions on the foreign policy and its impacts on the relations between Turkey and Syria that are shown as the best example of the new foreign policy approach. The underlying question is whether the impacts of the Conservative Democratic identity of

AKP were reflected -or not- on the rapid regression of the relations between the two countries after the Arab Spring, until which the relations had been improving quite swiftly. In this sense, the study consist of three main parts. The contribution of this study to the literature is the exploration of the reflections of AKP's Conservative Democratic identity on the foreign policy approach and the review of an exemplary foreign policy case.

In the first part, AKP's Conservative Democratic Identity has been historically examined; 2001-2007 as the establishment and preparation period, and 2007-2011 as the settlement and maturing period. These dates are based on general elections. The period after 2011 is the one when the already-formed Conservative Identity, with the influence of the Arab Spring as well, was applied and presented to the surrounding countries via foreign policy. In this sense, as will be explained in details in the upcoming chapters, the domestic and foreign policies have intertwined with each other.

The break-up with the National View section of the political Islam, which was one of the essential veins of the political life, meant that AKP had to face the question of re-defining itself. The "Conservative Democratic" discourse has played an important role in overcoming this problem of self-definition. This identity definition is meaningful for AKP, firstly in terms of showing that the ties with the past have been completely cut off. Secondly, it provides a discursive shield for AKP in avoiding being shut down like its predecessors were. Lastly, it provides an opportunity to embrace a wider mass by forming a balanced policy between all parties.



The definition of Conservative Democratic Identity also satisfies the need for a legitimate identity. The fact that its predecessors were pushed out of the system by the dominant powers of the system meant that the primary goal for AKP had to be the creation of a legitimate space for itself within the Turkish political system. Thus, as stated by the ideologists of the party, the use of the phrase Conservative Democrat instead of Muslim Democrat was a conscious choice. For a political movement whose political past is seen suspicious by the system, the phrase Conservative Democrat is a definition that is compliant with the system, mild and open to acceptance by masses. Another reason for choosing this phrase is the desire to be coherent with the international system as part of the foreign policy. It has a tone and quality which suggests that the Islam religion and culture can be combined with the Western values as opposed to the Islamophobia that rose in the West (USA and EU) after 11 September attacks.

In addition to all of this, the significance of the functional aspects of the definition Conservative Democrat for AKP cannot be ignored. First of all, AKP aspired to create a new space within the system and own the central right view. This proved to be extremely important in terms of protecting itself against the system, creating a space for itself in the system and setting the newly-formed identity on a course. Secondly, the Conservative Democrat definition is also functional when it comes to keeping the relations with the religious members that form the base voters of the party. Reference to conservative values generally consists of religious elements as well. Finally, AKP's wish to integrate into the West is firstly due to its effort to gather legitimacy and support and secondly, the strategy to create a safe space for itself in domestic politics via

foreign policy. Another important experience that AKP learned from during the National View period is the fact that one cannot keep the rule without foreign support.

With its second term (2007-2011), AKP has gradually settled into the system. The preventive and controlling moves by the system towards political Islam had been performed by two bureaucratic institutions: first one were the coups by TAF and the others were the court cases by the Constitutional Court to shut them down. The Welfare Party (WP) and its leader Erbakan had been thrown out of the system through these processes. However, AKP and its leader Erdoğan who also faced the same challenges, managed to get away from the situation and started to be more and more dominant over the system.

The political arena that endured high tension during the Presidential election of 2007 due to the 367 crisis brought about a serious confrontation with TAF's E-Memorandum on 27 April. With Nationalist Movement Party (NMP) entering the parliament in 2007 general elections and joining the voting sessions, AKP has overcome the 367 crisis and Abdullah Gül was elected as the 11th President. AKP managed to gain more and more power over the system by holding the Presidency, Prime Ministry, Head of the Parliament and the majority of the parliament while the TAF's dominant position over Turkish politics started to gradually regress after this date.

In 2008, the other bureaucratic institution that had previously pushed the political Islamists out of the system; Constitutional Court, filed suit to shut down AKP. AKP was not shut down as a result of this court case, however it was decided that the financial

support they receive from the Treasury would be reduced by a certain amount. Thus AKP managed to survive in the system against the two bureaucratic powers that had eliminated its predecessor political party from the system. After this point, AKP settled more and more into the system thanks to the highly-controversial Ergenekon and Balyoz court cases wherein several commissioned army officers and intellectuals were put on trial. It seems that AKP has won its power challenge against TAF.

With all these processes AKP, as a party that has shaped its identity, overcome its fears and settled into the system, alongside the impact of the success it has gained in domestic politics, nominated itself as a role model for the new systems to be structured following the events of the Arab Spring in the Middle East with a disguised Conservative Democratic identity.

In the second chapter of the study, the foreign policy aspect and the reflections on the foreign policy of AKP's Conservative Democratic identity formation process will be examined starting from the post Cold War era. In this sense, the history of pre-AKP international system will be prioritized. Post Cold War era has influenced Turkey as well as the whole system. Elaboration of this period is of great importance in terms of understanding the emergence of AKP's Conservative Identity definition and examining its impacts on the foreign policy approach. In addition, the foreign policy approach during AKP's rule will be dealt with the same historical limitations and distinctions as the first chapter. This means that the first term between 2002-2007 will be viewed as the establishment and preparation term while the period between 2007-2011 will be examined regarding the impacts of Conservative Democratic Identity on AKP's policies

in the new conjuncture brought about by the Arab Spring and the frequent discussions about a shift of axis in the political arena.

The bi-polar international system created after the II. World War endured its first breaking point as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) collapsed. The USA was the only super power in the system. Having remained unrivalled and enemy-less until the 11 September 2001 terror attacks, the USA has since identified its new nemesis as “international terrorism”. The System, which was more or less stable during the cold war, gained a new dimension after the fall of USSR, which has directly affected Turkey as well as all other countries. The Turkic States that gained independence following the dissolution of the USSR has provided new opportunities and risks for Turkey. Turkey was caught unprepared and devoid of theoretical infrastructure by this period which coincided with the last part of the reign of Turgut Özal who had become the Prime Minister with the elections that were held after the 1980 military coup. Despite this, Özal considered Turkey as the successor of Ottoman’s cultural, strategic, historical and religious heritage. In this sense, Turkey, as a model country, was supposed to serve as a bridge between the Central Asiatic as well as Caucasian States and the Western World, while pioneering the process of these countries’ internalization of the western values and eventually integration into and unity with the West.

The second breaking point in the international system was the attacks on 11 September 2001 which also interestingly coincided with the period when AKP, that stated its detachment from the Islamic National View which was shaped around Özal’s political style, entered the Turkish political scene. The first breaking point in the system that

occurred with the end of the Cold War was around the time when Özal had already settled into the system and became powerful. On the other hand, the second breaking point happened when AKP had just been founded and while the discussions on Conservative Democratic identity were still ongoing. That's why, in its first term, AKP was not able to follow a political style as obvious as that of Özal. This term remained as a preparation period for AKP. However, after 2007; it has strengthened its place within the system and gained more visibility among the discussions on "shift of axis and Neo-Ottomanism" thanks to the Strategic Depth Concept as well as those on exporting the model with the Arab Spring in 2011.

During its first term (2001-2007), AKP used the maneuvers in foreign policy as a critical instrument in alleviating the influence of TAF on the system and in creating a safe space for itself within the system. Furthermore, AKP's Conservative Democratic Identity discourse was used as an appropriate model in the transformation of Turkey for The Great Middle-East Project put forward by the USA in order to create a new system based on Mild Islam in the Middle East within the framework of war on global terror.

It was not enough for AKP to have won the first elections and formed the government in order to modify the political structure as they wish. The closure of its predecessor Welfare Party had clearly shown this. That's why the EU Candidacy Process was beneficially used by AKP not only as a reform opportunity to continue its success in the elections, but also as an important process to alter the domestic political scene. In this process, the influence of TAF on The National Security Council has been diminished via the Legislative EU-Alignment Packages. In addition, TAF's involvement in the

terrorist activities that emerged as a result of the Kurdish question was reduced. Lastly, the Cyprus issue that could also be seen as a matter of security in a way was moved to the political sphere via EU framework, thus ending TAF's active role in the process.

Throughout the first few years of its second term (2007-2011), AKP kept fighting the dominant powers in the domestic political system for authority and gradually started to dominate the system at the end of this struggle. The ever-stronger and intensified relationships with the Middle East during this period led to the claims by domestic parties that "Turkey was implementing axis-shifting practices in foreign affairs" as of 2007 and the Western parties started to agree with these claims after 2009. The fundamental criticism was that Turkey was receding from the Western (USA and EU) system and steering on a course towards the Middle East while going through a period of axis-shifting.

Rapidly developing economical and political relations with the Middle East during AKP's Government have gained a new dimension following the Arab Spring that took place in the Middle East towards the end of this term. The management of AKP was caught unprepared by the emergence of the Arab Spring, just like Özal was by the dissolution of USSR, and the Strategic Depth Concept that had seemed to function without a problem until then was strongly tested.

The last chapter of the study examines the reasons why the relations between Turkey and Syria, which was shown as the best example of the foreign policy approach created during AKP's 10-years rule, have regressed swiftly. In this process, the foreign policy

and its outcome were analyzed in terms of the role played by AKP's Conservative Democrat identity in becoming a model country in the region after the Arab Spring. As done in the other chapters, the short pre-AKP history of both countries were taken into consideration in order to understand the most recent status of the relations that had been fluctuating between conflict and peace repeatedly. It is of crucial importance to remind ourselves at this point that İsmail Cem's (Minister of Foreign Affairs during Bülent Ecevit term) multi-dimensional foreign policy approach played an instrumental role in the commencement of good relations between the two countries in that it served as a springboard for the policies AKP has been trying to develop.

The relations between the two countries that rapidly developed after AKP gained power per the "Zero Problem with Neighbours" policy within the Strategic Depth concept were examined. AKP neglected the identity- or religion-based politics in this term and shaped its relations with Syria generally around economical, religious and bilateral relations between the two leaders.

The Arab Spring that came about in 2011 rocked the relations that were developed over 10 years to its foundations and moved them to a new dimension. The Conservative Democratic identity that JPD tried to form after gaining power ended up being a success in domestic politics. This situation forced AKP to present this identity as a role model to the other countries in the region although it hadn't clearly expressed it in the beginning of the Arab Spring. In this sense, AKP tried to increase its dominance in the region by secretly cooperating with the Muslim Brotherhood that boasts wide presence in the region.

Consequently, AKP's reflexive, devoid-of-vision estimation that the rapid regime changes that occurred in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya during the Arab Spring would be repeated in Syria has driven the two countries into an indirect war. Caught unprepared for this new development, AKP transitioned from the "Zero Problems with Neighbours" discourse to a "Valuable Solitude" discourse. Thus, AKP ended up being unable to restate the Strategic Depth theory that it had voiced in every platform for many years and considered as the foundation of developing relations with the region.

AKP, having dominated the domestic politics during its 10-years rule, formed its Conservative Democratic Identity and reached a high level of self-confidence, saw the Arab Spring as an opportunity for its foreign policy strategy to become the leader country in the region. Though at first the developments were promisingly in favor of AKP, the problems being experienced with this country have become an untangled web once the events spreaded to Syria.

AKP initially shaped its policies with the assumption that Bashar Assad would shortly be overthrown, however, the process proved this strategy to be vain. Secondly, AKP failed to assess the positions of international powers accurately. At this point, the involvement of big powers such as USA and Russia in the problem as well as the existence of different opinions regarding Syria created a dilemma for AKP. It was unable to garner the required external support for these policies due to the International powers' concern that radical Islamist terrorist groups which they view as the main enemy might settle into the region and structure to be formed after Assad.



Finally, AKP abandoned the pluralistic discourse of the successfully-created Conservative Democratic Identity once it settled into the system and chose to be active in both domestic and international politics with a more Islamist discourse like its predecessor WP did. In this sense, AKP started to use and practice a religion-based discourse in its policy regarding Syria, which has led the problems between the two countries to get deeper and deeper.



## **Chapter I. AKP and Conservative Democrat Identity**

### **1.1. Establishment of the Justice and Development Party: Disengagement from National Vision**

The year 1980 symbolizes an important turning point in terms of Turkey's political history. Public visibility of Islam increased ironically after TAF seized power in order to protect secularism on September 12<sup>th</sup> and became a political language in the Turkish political life (Çemrek, 2005:643). With this process TAF, which seized power, gravitated towards a dual policy that controlled and compromised Islamic groups by making them a part of political life (Yavuz, 2005:287). By unifying Islam with the state's nationalist ideology (Çemrek, 2005:644), an attempt was made to keep these groups within the system and under control.

Islam was accepted as an important part of Turkish identity both by military government (1980-1983) and by the governments under the presidency of Turgut Özal (1983-1989) (Çemrek, 2005:643). The most significant representative of Islamic movement and its demands in political arena during 1980's and early 90's was Necmettin Erbakan's National Vision.

Necmettin Erbakan continued the National Vision line, which he maintained with the National Order Party (MNP) and with the National Salvation Party (MSP) during the 1970's, with the Welfare Party (RP) in 1990's. According to this, the necessities for transforming the state and the society into a more Islamic path, economically supporting

a statist intervention under the name of “fair order”, building closer relations with the Muslim countries while taking opposition to Europe and Israel was discussed as a goal (Öniş, Globalization and Party Transformation: Turkey’s Justice and Development Party in Perspective, 2005). While the left wing was regressing, RP managed to gain the support of the people, who suffered from the economic liberalization after 1980’s, by emphasizing social justice construct within an Islamic discourse (Dağı, 2005:5).

The general elections of 1995 was the peak point of RP’s political power, but it also was the beginning of the process, which lead to its dissolution. Receiving %21 of the votes, RP formed the 54. Government (RefahYol Government) with True Path Party (DYP). Secular-Islamist segregation was made more visible after the Islamic discourse became dominant with RP thereby forming a government with DYP, which is a center-right party, even though discourses of Western opposition and statism had softened (Dağı, 2005:6).

Even though the discourse had softened, they were still considered as an unfavorable party by secular groups and TAF. The actions of Necmettin Erbakan during his prime ministry disturbed secular groups. Making his foreign trips only to countries, which are ruled by Islamic regimes, inviting leaders of religious communities and sects to the prime minister’s residence for iftar (the evening meal breaking the Ramadan fast), describing religious vocational high schools as “back yard”, were subjects that were discussed frequently by national media organs and public (Çağlar, 2012:26-27).

Before RefahYol government completed its first year, RP was shaken by two significant events. First event was the National Security Council meeting, which was held on 28<sup>th</sup> of February 1997 and lead to the dissolution of the government. Army (TAF) warned the government about religious reactionism and demanded precautions. Later, this process would be described as a “post-modern coup”. The second significant event was the opening of a closure case against RP on the grounds of “being the center of actions against Constitutional Law’s secularism principle”. Hence, RP was closed by Constitutional court on January 15th, 1998 (Çemrek, 2005:648). Erbakan was banned from politics for 5 years (AlJazeera, 27 December 2013).

This process on February 28<sup>th</sup>, 1997 was a turning point for Secular-Islamist relations and the future of Islamist parties. After RP was closed the Virtue Party (FP) was established with support from Erbakan and from the people at RP, who were not banned from politics. As a continuation of RP, it can be said that FP had a more moderate discourse (Öniş, 2005:8). After the crisis of February 28<sup>th</sup>, social unrest had increased. This was the basic reason behind the change of discourse. FP had realized that in order to be in power, they needed the support of a large segment of the society and the way to do that was by adopting a reconciliatory attitude towards this unrest. This situation would later on be taken as reference by AKP, which will be established from within FP.

After FP lost its place in government in 1999 elections, the future of Islamic policies started to be discussed within and outside the party. The discussions within FP have brought out two different point of views. First one is the traditional wing, which was led by Recai Kutan. Kutan, following Erbakan, continued the traditional Islamic policies

and did not question the natural leadership of Erbakan. On the other hand, the second perspective was led by Abdullah Gül, Bülent Arınç and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. This group was the reformist wing, which envisaged and demanded a wide set of transformations about party leadership, party organization, etc. (Erler, 2007:129).

FP, the last party of National Vision was closed on June 22<sup>nd</sup> 2001 just like RP. As a result of this closure two new parties have emerged. First one was Felicity Party (SP) of traditional wing. The second party was formed that was formed in the last congress of FP was the AKP, which was established by Abdullah Gül and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who ran against Erbakan supported Kutan and lost (Yazıcı, The Analysis of a Party in Key Questions: Justice and Development Party). In the elections of November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2001, the year after its establishment, AKP came to power alone by receiving 34.2% of the votes first time that they ever participated in the elections (Aydın and Çakır, 2007:1).

## **1.2. The Problem of Self-Identification**

During its self-identification process AKP, as a newly established party, has felt the need to keep its distance from National Vision line; even though it came from it and also in held an important part of it (Doğanay, 2007:68). Especially during their pre-election statements, public meetings and party program AKP has emphasized that they were not an Islamic party (Declaration of Election 2002) and that they were disconnected from the National Vision customs (Erler,2007:130). This situation points out to a self-identification, which is reconciled with the system, in order to overcome

the problem related to the cancellation of progenitor parties by the Constitutional Court (Doğanay, 2007:68).

In order to come to power after the process on February, 28<sup>th</sup> and in order to remain in power, AKP has favored economic issues and used European Union (EU) membership and democratization discourses since they were fully aware that they needed to establish a political balance (Çavdar, 2006:488). Considering economic and political unrest in Turkey before 2002, it can be clearly stated that AKP was using the right political discourse.

The effort for disconnecting from National Vision line put AKP in such a position that they had to re-identify themselves. This situation has pushed them to identify themselves as a party, which aims for political power and asks for the support from every segment of the society. AKP was not perceived as a continuum of political Islam, whose potential voter numbers decreased due to the unrest caused by the February, 28<sup>th</sup> crisis. Instead AKP has gravitated towards center-right, which uses a unifying language and identity, emphasizes on common values, addresses larger masses and thus creating more potential voters (Sarıbay, 2004:89; Mert, 2007:137). AKP had not prioritized the religious demands and was able to create a unifying mass party image in the eyes of the voters through a moderate discourse rather than being perceived as a party, which creates tension. According to Tepe, these are the reasons behind the success of AKP (Tepe, 2005:81).

According to the surveys, which were conducted after 2002 elections, AKP received votes not only from people with Islamic world view but also from nationalist-conservative, liberals and even liberal-left wings (Dağı, 2006:6). Insel defined AKP as a conservative organization with strong authoritarian and nationalist tendencies in his article in Birikim Magazine in 2002. In addition to that, he also claims that patriarchal reflexes of Turkish family customs reflect on the values and behaviors of the AKP cadre as conservatism. In addition to that, he argues that the yearning of becoming a pragmatic middle class has an important place in this structure (İnsel, 2002: 24). Therefore, AKP has appeared like a combined mass party of liberals, social democrats and conservatives rather than a party with a homogeneous base.

According to Somer, AKP is a result of a conscious alliance. The estrangement of various fractions after February, 28<sup>th</sup> Process has led to such an alliance (Somer, 2004:26). Moreover, economic crisis caused by February, 28<sup>th</sup> Process explains such an alliance more clearly. According to Smith, AKP received votes by promising economic change and assuring the people, who was affected from the crisis in 2001, that their demands for democratization, human rights and EU membership will be met (Smith, 2005:318).

### **1.3. The Need for a Legitimate Identity: Conservative Democrat Identity**

In their first period after their establishment (2001-2007), “self-identification” was AKP’s main problem. The need for creating a new path as a party derived from National Vision Movement had become a priority. “Conservative Democrat” identity discourse was an important characterization for overcoming this problem.

After coming into power in 2002, AKP was characterized with an Islamic identity and as a continuation of National Vision Movement. Therefore, they were perceived as a threat to the primary elements of the regime by the secular segment of the society. At this point, the leader cadre of AKP re-identified their identity and General President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan introduced AKP as a “conservative democrat” party (Hürriyet,10 January 2004). As the ideologist of this new identity, Yalçın Akdoğan wrote a book called “AK Parti ve Muhafazakar Demokrasi (AKP and Conservative Democracy)” in 2004, which discusses the details of the new party identity. A symposium called “Uluslararası Muhafazakarlık ve Demokrasi (International Conservatism and Democracy)” was held and the new identity was discussed in this symposium (Erler, 2007:130).

In this period, the Conservative Democrat identity, which was brought up by AKP, had just started to be discussed. Akdoğan accepted the criticisms about the fact that the concept of conservative democracy is a new one and does not take part in the literature however, a new concept can be added to the literature by a powerful party like AKP (Akdoğan, 2004: 18).

Being a newly established party, some practical concerns can be seen as the basic reasons behind the lack of theoretical background for Conservative Democrat identity. These practical concerns reveal themselves in an effort to create a legitimate area in Turkish politics and also in an effort to keep receiving the support from different segments of the society by separating its identity from the Islamic line.



According to Kalaycıoğlu, it was considered efficient and useful for the leaders of AKP to be able to attribute a content to this new concept over time. This way, conservative democracy can be interpreted in many different and ambiguous ways (Kalaycıoğlu, 2007:240) and a room for manoeuver for the discourses of AKP can be formed.

Unlike some situations of western equivalent parties, which used the term Christian Democrat in their self-identification processes, AKP used the term “Conservative Democrat” instead of “Muslim Democrat”. This choice should be considered as a conscious act in order to sever all ties with the past and to reach a wider mass (Dağı, Zaman, 9 January 2004). According to Aktay, AKP has acted consistently with their discourse by establishing relations with Christian Democrat parties in Europe rather than parties in Muslim countries and by keeping its distance from Islamic past (Aktay, 2005: 5).

According to Akdoğan, it is a conscious decision to use the term Conservative Democrat instead of Muslim Democrat. Because Conservative Democrat identity is more inclusivist than Muslim Democrat identity:

*“Some have identified our conservative democrat identity as Muslim democrat. But this is not true. Muslim democrat concept creates discrimination, polarization and segregation among ‘we and the others’. This concept creates tension. If this polarization will be allowed, sociological problems will occur.”* (Sabah, 16 Aug 2003).

It is possible to claim that basic characteristics of Christian Democrat parties coincide with AKP. Market economy, policies, which support religious communities, the powerful position of the party leader and the establishment of a centrist party network stand out as similar characteristics (Hale, 2006:157-159).

However, there are differences between Islam and Christianity terms of their content and history. In Christianity, The church has an important place; but such an organization, a clergy or a hierarchic structure does not have a place in Islam. Therefore, there is not a single authority in Islam. Thus, Islamic way of life and interpretation lack homogeneity (Hale, 2006:158).

In addition to these differences, there are also practical reasons behind AKP's choice of the name Conservative Democrat instead of Muslim Democrat. First one is the need to keep its distance from National Vision line. The name Muslim Democrat has a direct relationship to Islamic discourse. This does not correspond to the "change" philosophy, which underlies AKP's discourse. This does not harmonize with establishing a centrist party and being a party of masses. However, conservatism is a practical discourse, which unites against conventional Kemalist system and DP, even though it is a more legitimate concept compared to Muslimism (Dağı, 2006:94).

The second one is the fact that, Conservative Democracy is perceived as a compatible, moderate and legitimate concept in Turkish political system and it creates a positive image in contrast to the name Muslim Democrat, which appears distrustful especially to the people, who have a grasp of political history. Also, the religious connotations of

conservatism are multifaceted and functional for communicating with the religious segment of the society (Kalaycıoğlu, 2007:235).

Thirdly, in spite of the escalated Islam opposition in the West, especially after the terrorist attacks on <sup>th</sup>, 2001, Muslim Democrat identity was not practical for AKP, which has aimed for integration with the global economy and stronger political relations (Uyanık,2004:184-187). Conservatism has a correspondent in Western political culture with which AKP has aimed to be integrated (Somer, 2004:2).

### **1.3.1. Making Room for Itself in the System: Looking Out for Center Right**

The main goal of AKP during its first period was utilizing Conservative Democracy discourse to protect itself from the system and to make room for itself within the system. This is because, all political Islam parties, which AKP has followed, was closed and pushed out of the system. At this point, as Akdoğan has stated, the aim for using the Conservative Democrat identity was not introducing a new concept to political science, rather making room for itself within the system (Akdoğan,2004:18).

Current approaches of political Islam have clashed with sovereign regime and were pushed out of the system, even though it was rising in the 1990's. This has proved the unsustainability of these kind of approaches (Somer,2004:26). AKP was looking for a new political discourse. In order to make room for itself and to set this newly created identity right, it was important for AKP to embrace the line represented by Democrat Party (DP), Justice Party (AP) and ANAP, which is nationalist-conservative, open to modernization and represents center-right (Mert,2004:266-268).

It can be stated that AKP intended to carry on the ANAP of Turgut Özal's approach, which succeeded to bring different segments of society together by adopting a culturally conservative, politically liberal and politically pragmatic attitude (Çoşar and Özman, 2004: 60). The support ANAP received from different groups, a discourse that did not conflict with the regime after the military coup and still projected a reformist image has been a good example for AKP's discourse and aims. The desire to disengage from National Vision coincides with claiming different segments of the society by positioning in center right and discourse about being a party of masses.

A party, which desires to come to power and to locate itself in center right, requires receiving votes from every segment of the society. In order to achieve that, they should avoid radical discourses and do politics without using ethnic or religious identities. AKP has managed to get votes from both religious and democrat segments of the society, by using the advantage of the vagueness of the Conservative Democracy concept (Somer, 2004:27).

### **1.3.2. Maintaining the Relations with the Religious Base**

AKP's definition of conservative identity is important for maintaining the relations with the religious base. As of its establishment period, AKP has approached religious subjects with a more conservative discourse and addressed the necessity for protecting the religious values without any direct religious reference. This was different from National Vision's discourse, which were based on Islam (Akdoğan, 2004:103-106).

In order to reach wider masses. It is important to use a more inclusivist discourse by referring general values. In 2003, GENAR made a survey in Istanbul about AKP's voters. According to this survey, %26.8 of AKP's voters identified themselves as Islamist, %14.6 as right wing, %13.6 as democrat, %9.9 as conservative and only %3 as Atatürkist (GENAR, 2003). Even though AKP rejects the Islamic approaches of National Vision, the main base of its voters are from the religious segment of the society (Haber7, Online Newspaper,2014).

In addition to that, the comprehensiveness of the Conservative Democracy discourse has a problem solving function for AKP. "Kurdish problem" is one of the most important problems of the Republic era. By using "religious fellowship" concept, despite ethnic differences amid point was created (Yavuz, 2009: 109). The vote rates of Eastern Anatolia and Southeastern Anatolia regions, where the Kurdish population concentrate, are supporting this (TÜBİTAK 1001 SOBAG Programı, May 2015).

There are people, who interpret AKP's approach in different ways. According to Houston, AKP's establishment of a conservative discourse by renouncing the Islamic discourse of National Vision, as a party that shifted from the periphery to center, is affected by its party organization, the changes in the structure through its ideological opening to outside and ideological separation due to expansion.

Even though AKP has used an inclusivist discourse with the claims of no state pressure or control over religious preferences or life style; financing the Religious Affairs Administration, which reflects the notions of Sunni Islam only, with the taxes of all

citizens appears as a contradiction (Somer, T24 Online News Paper, 23 December 2014).

### **1.3.3. The Wish for Western Articulation**

Using Conservative Democrat identity was an effort to show that Islam and Islamic culture can become integrated with Western values. However, this effort was not pertaining to Turkey. Muslim countries like Pakistan, Indonesia and Malaysia had the same effort after the Cold War period to change the perception of Islam in West and to reduce the effects of Radical Islam (Nasir, 2005:17). In these countries that have tendencies towards modernization, the basic assumption is that Islam is open to different interpretations historically and can be integrated into a democratic system (Ayyob, 2004:1-2).

It can be claimed that AKP had such an effort also. In spite of being a party with an Islamic base, by interpreting Islam through its Conservative Democrat identity, AKP has tried to reconcile Islam with Western values; such as democracy, human rights and free market economy. AKP's effort corresponded to their emphasis about Islamic values being compatible with Western values, in spite of the rising Radical Islam perception after attacks; and new capital classes will help develop economic and political relationship with West (Ghanim, 2009:77).

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has laid emphasis on their gravitation towards Western Civilization and good interrelations. AKP has supported the argumentation of “Dialog between Cultures-Religions” and “Alliance of Civilizations”, as a reaction to “Clash of

Civilizations” argumentation, which was believed to exist between Islam and Christianity. Their support can be discussed within the framework of Erdoğan’s emphasis (Balci and Miş, 2008:389).

AKP’s wish to integrate into West is an effort to provide legitimacy and support in foreign politics and secondly, to create a safe space for itself over in domestic matters/politics with the use of foreign politics. The most important lesson AKP has learned from National Vision is that it is not possible to stay in power without external support. Therefore, AKP has held on to the EU membership perspective and to the necessity of EU reforms during its establishment period (Hale and Özbudun, 2010, 23). The given importance to this subject appeared in party program such as:

*OUR PARTY, perceives full membership of our country to European Union as a natural result of our modernization process. Putting economic and political provisions of EU criteria into practice is a huge step towards modernization of our state and society. It is inevitable to materialize these criteria, even independently from EU membership. We can deliver our messages to mankind only by being aware of the era that we are living in and we can maintain our existence in international area by using the opportunities of this era.*

*Ideological approaches about national sovereignty, national security, national interest, national and local culture of elements, who object our unification with Europe, delay the materialization of the Copenhagen Criteria. OUR PARTY, sides with the readdressing of*

*these concepts, which aims for maintaining the bureaucratic statist administrative mentality with a democratic, civic and pluralist apprehension, which is based upon protecting individual's rights and participation of the public (AKP 2002 Seçim Beyannamesi).*

In addition to that, it is known that capital owners have supported European Union membership. EU membership is also supported by most of the public, in order to attain a more prosperous life. TAF, due to its influence in Turkish politics, is in favor of the strategic-military relationship with NATO and U.S.A. At this point in their 2002 election statement, AKP has declared that they will show effort to be in the European Security and Defense Concept, which is established in the framework of European defense strategy, in parallel with NATO (AKP 2002 Seçim Beyannamesi).

Conservative Democracy concept allows them to emphasize Western values and to carry on Islamic discourse at the same time. AKP has also emphasized that Turkey's membership to EU will make Europe multi-cultural, multi-lingual and multi-faith and thus contribute to The European culture (Uslu,2010:158). The statement of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan below presents this approach:

*EU membership of Turkey, which is a model country for Islamic world, will show that Islam and modernism can coexist and Christians and Muslims can live together under the roof of EU with common values and interests (Zaman, 10 Jan 2004).*



AKP, which cares for relations with West and Muslim world at the same time, has used Conservative Democrat identity in a bilateral way: First, after U.S.A. has settled into the Middle East after Afghanistan and Iraq, new forms of relations were formed between Turkey and U.S.A. in which AKP has shown effort not to contradict with the U.S.A. policies in the area. Also, with its new approach of “Neo-Ottomanism or Strategic Depth” AKP has tried to minimize the regional risks through the strategy of playing as the moderator (Güler, 2008:9).

Secondly, the developing strategy to become a role model in the region through Conservative Democrat identity coincided with the regional policies of U.S.A. (Karagül, YeniŞafak, 9 November 2002). It can also be said that AKP has followed a strategy that used the Ottoman Empire history within the framework of a common past and belonging with the countries in the region (Uslu, 2010, s.150).

Another important subject related to AKP’s effort to integrate into the West is strengthening its position against military-civic bureaucracy, which still dominates the domestic policy (Müftüler-Bac,2004:435). It can be said that, AKP has tried to eliminate the accusations done by dominant power, which perceives itself as the defender of the regime and to separate itself from the discourses of National Vision related to western opposition by EU reforms and developing relations with the U.S.A. (Yavuz, 2005:111).

Due to the EU reform packages, the power of military-civic bureaucracy over the system had started to narrow down and AKP has used this as a requisition for EU

membership and democratization, which limited the reactions (Robbins, 2007:292). In this sense, AKP has taken the right steps towards expanding its sphere of influence by reading the political developments of post-Cold War era correctly. According to Yavuz, AKP, which emphasized human rights, individual freedom and democratization, has tried to limit the power of TAF on political area and also tried to legitimize by emphasizing conservative values and religious subjects internally, and EU policies externally (Yavuz, 2004:225-227).

#### **1.4. Integration into the Political System: 367 Crisis, E-Memorandum and Closure Case**

AKP, which ranked first in the general elections on June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2007, gained its second victory in a row. This election can be perceived as a turning point in domestic political life. The Year 2007 had not started well for AKP. The 10. President Ahmet Necdet Sezer's term of office ended and Turkey was focused on the elections for the new president. Former president of the Supreme Court Sabih Kanadođlu suggested that minimum 367 parliamentarians should be situated in the session at the parliament at the same time, in order to start the session. This suggestion has started a new discussion (Özipek,2014:683). This situation will be referred as 367 Crisis in Turkish political life.

Presidential election put AKP and TAF at odds. The April 27<sup>th</sup> Note, which was published online on the website of the General Staff of the Republic of Turkey, left its mark on the first round of voting for the presidential elections. This will hereafter be referred to as E-Memorandum afterwards. As a result of these events CHP took this

vote to the Supreme Court and the Supreme Court has accepted the 367 Claim on May, 1st (Şahin, 2014:1009). This has exposed AKP to a great political tension. With the statement by Vice President Cemil Çiçek below, AKP answered this memorandum on February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2007:

*“It is not comprehensible in a democratic constitutional state that General Staff, which is connected to the Prime Ministry, to make a statement against the government about any subject. General Staff is an organization under the command of the government, whose duties were determined by constitutional and corresponding laws. According to our Constitutional Law, the Chief of General Staff is responsible to the Prime Minister”* (NTVMSnbc, 28 April 2008).

In the second session on May 6<sup>th</sup>, 2007 AKP could not overcome the 367 crisis and reach the required number. Upon this, AKP has decided to have early elections and the general elections were held by Higher Election Committee (YSK) on July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2007.

With MHP’s attendance to the sessions after the 2007 elections, on August 28<sup>th</sup>, 2007 AKP has overcome the 367 crisis and Abdullah Gül was elected as 11. President (Aksiyon, 27 August 2007). AKP has managed to attain a more powerful position by retaining the President, Prime Minister and the President of the Assembly positions and the majority of the parliament. TSK’s dominant position in Turkish political life started to deteriorate after this date.

The “closure case” in 2008 was the most critical confrontation for AKP in the domestic politics. AKP has faced the same destiny as RP, from which it has been trying to disconnect through the new identity establishment. The case opened by General Prosecutor of the Supreme Court of Appeal Abdurrahman Yalçınkaya on the grounds that AKP “becoming the center of unsecular acts” (NTVMSnbc, 17 March 2008). Even though the case did not lead to the closure of AKP, it was decided to cease the treasury grants pro rata (Milliyet, 30 July 2008). After this period AKP has appeared to be settled into the system and won the power struggle with TAF through Ergenekon and Balyoz case, within which many active officers and intellectuals were trialed and which created discussions in Turkey’s agenda until recently (Vatan, 16 July 2008). After winning the 2011 elections alone, AKP has become the constitutive of the system.

## **Chapter 2: Foreign Policy of AKP Era**

### **2.1. International System and Turkey between 1945 to 2002**

With the end of World War II a bipolar world, one pole being the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R.), had emerged. The separation of U.S.S.R started a new era for international system after the long Cold War. This new situation brought a fracture like change in the international system (Sönmezoğlu, 2006:464).

The attacks on 11 September did not only start a new era for U.S.A. but also for the international system. Beside the horrors that these events unraveled, they were responsible for the start of a new period in the U.S. foreign policy and world politics (Gözen, 2004:161). In this aspect, the attacks of 11 September can be considered as a milestone for the U.S.A. homeland security and foreign policy.

The U.S. president George W. Busch, would later on portray Iran, Iraq and North Korea as nations that are threats to the American security, naming them as “Axis of Evil” in his State of the Union Address on 29 January 2002 and would emphasize the war against terrorism, stating that the governments supporting terrorism are also terrorists and that a neutral ground does not exist on the war against terrorism (Yetkin, Radikal Daily News; 24 January 2004).

In September 2002 the “American National Security Strategy”, which laid emphasis on the concept of “Preemptive Strike and Preventive War” explaining the eras U.S. foreign

policy principals, was published with the signature of President Bush (Ayhan, 2006:376). In this new American policy, the term “Soviet Threat” was replaced with “International Terror Threat”. With this new term, the U.S. foreign policy changed their multilateral cooperation to a one sided strategy based on the American interest and security (Ari,1999:40).

After , the first stop for the war against international terrorism was Afghanistan, which was governed by El-Qaide and Taliban, who were held responsible for the attacks (Bozkurt;2003:183). After the intervention in Afghanistan, U.S.A. invaded Iraq in 2003.

After the September 11 attacks and the military operation of 2003 in Iraq, U.S. politicians started talking about the “Greater Middle East”. According to this, the economic and political stands of the countries in this region would be healed by encouraging democracy and free market economy. A better socioeconomic environment would be created for the people in this region, therewith reducing the security risks arising from this region (Aydın and at. al;2007:20). The fundamentals of this project were laid according to the principals of the “New World Order” after the U.S.A. came out victorious from the Cold War around 1990s. In 1995 a Greater Middle East division was created in the RAND Cooperation, which was a think-tank foundation close to the U.S. government. This think-tank defined the region starting from Afghanistan, to east of the Caspian Sea, Caucasus, traditional Middle East and Northern Africa, as the Greater Middle East region (Gürses and Kaynak, 2007:11). The U.S.A. saw a Moderate Islam project more fitting to this region as opposed to Radical Islam, which was seen as

the root of international terrorism (Rand Cooperation, Building Moderate Muslim Networks, Report, 2007).

When the world was experiencing two fracture points in a timeframe of 20 years, Turkey has also been directly affected in this process. After the military coup of 1980, the democratic system was reinstated with the elections in 1983. In the first elections after the coup, Turgut Özal's ANAP became the major party and Turgut Özal government has been effective from 1980's to the beginning of 1990's.

During the Özal governments in the 1980's, the domestic policy was going through a change while in the international arena Turkish Foreign Policy was discussing the newly occurring paradigms, which consists of the Middle East, the Balkan, the Caucasus, the Mediterranean and the Eurasian identities, with the end of the Cold War (Yenigün, 2010:78).

Turkey has realized once again its geopolitical importance with the newly emerging conjuncture, which occurred from the removal of the status quo supporting structure of the Cold War. Because of the power gap that occurred with the dissolving of U.S.S.R., all the powers have started arguing their position in the system. In this uncertainty environment, Turkey has also started to discuss its position again. In this context, discussions about Islamism, Turkism, Ottomanism that were discussed in the last periods of the Ottoman Empire (more info: Akçura, Üç Tarz-ı Siyaset), which were suppressed with the foundation of the New Republic, started to enter the Turkish political life once again by adding the prefix (neo).

Turkey's changes in the domestic political and economic axes, the identity discussions, the new situation that occurred with the collapse of the Eastern Blocks and the uncertainties that these brought, led to an alternative practice in Turkey's foreign politics: New Ottomanism (Çalış, 2010: 96). The reason behind of Turkish foreign policy is the New Ottomanism lies of Turkey's emphasis on the Ottoman identity in accordance of these politics.

In this period, Özal is coming across as a leader who tried to change Turkey's course by being influential to the Turkish foreign policy. Özal saw Turkey also as an heir to the Ottoman cultural, strategic, historic, and religious legacy (Karpaz, 2003: 227). In this context, Turkey as a model country would act as a bridge between the Middle Asia and Caucasus governments and the Western world, leading the way for these governments to internalize the western values and eventually to coalesce with the West and be a model for the regions countries. The AKP's neo-Ottoman vision builds on the approach of former President Turgut Özal. Shortly after the Cold War came to an end, Özal helped Turkey rediscover its imperial legacy (Taşpınar,2001:2).

As an interesting coincidence the second fracture point in the international system, which happened with 11 September 2001, happened in the same time when AKP, who took Özal's line of politics as a base and declared to be severed from Islamic National Vision, was entering the Turkish political life. The fracture that happened by the end of the Cold War occurred when Özal was settling in the system and powerful. Compared to this, the second fracture occurred in a period when AKP was newly forming and the



discussions about its conservative democratic identity was still being continued. As regard to their first term, AKP could not carry out an open policy of Neo-Ottomanism as Özal. This period was a preparation time for AKP. However, securing its position in the system after 2007, a situation occurred where Neo-Ottomanist tone became more apparent in the “Strategic Depth Concept” and “Axial Shift” discussions and it became even more apparent with the 2011 Arab Spring model export disc ussions.

## **2.2. 2002-2007: Preparation Era**

### **2.2.1. EU Procedures and the Design of the Domestic Political System**

The foreign and domestic policies of a country are in a mutual interaction so that they cannot be separated. In this context, AKP has used the foreign policy as a strategic tool for its domestic struggle against the Militaristic-Kemalist elites.

As stated in Chapter 1, the first term of AKP in the Turkish political life has been focused on finding a position against the dominant Militaristic-Kemalist elite. In this context, it has been significant in the domestic politics, to separate itself from the National Vision by separating from the Islamic rhetoric, to address a broader base by bringing forth the democratic values and trying to get support from the internal liberal groups (Jung, 2011:35). On the international front, in the discourse about integration with the west, AKP’s position inside the Greater Middle East Project, which suggested Moderate Islam against the EU’s and the U.S.A’s struggle against Radical Islam, has played an important role (Taşpınar,2008:13).

AKP's coming to power by obtaining a great majority (%34) in the elections of 2002 was not enough to change the political structure in line with its own preferences. This had been experienced with the previous line of National Vision being pushed outside the system by Militaristic-Kemalist elites. Therefore, the EU membership period has been an important period for AKP not only because it was an opportunity to make reforms in order to continue its success but also an important period for the internal shift in balance (Balci, 2015: 83-84). The impact of EU reforms has been most visible in the terms of the style and processes of Turkey foreign policy (Tür and Han, 2011:20).

The enthusiastic behavior of AKP to enter the EU, has been considered by many analysts as a strategic attitude towards the domestic politics (Aydın and Açıkmeşe, 2007:269; Kösebalaban, 2002:138). The big impact that February 28<sup>th</sup> had on the Islamic tradition, forced them into a sharp strategy change. After this date, the EU membership process had a big impact on determining the domestic dynamics and became an important strategic foot in the internal struggles (Philips, 2004:93).

The EU process was an important period for AKP as it was a breaking point for the effectivity of the military's internal and external security in the internal power struggle. First one is the necessary democratization packages, which are necessary for EU membership and the limitation of the effectiveness of TAF on the National Security Council. Second, is the inclusion of the Kurdish problem (PKK vs Military), which was seen as an internal and in some way external security problem, into the EU reforms framework as a democratization process. Third, is AKP's willingness to bring a political solution to the Cyprus problem, which was seen as an international security threat by

the military, within the EU membership period (Usul, 2006:199-212). According to Balçı in the first five years that AKP took office, the AKP government has entrapped the Militaristic-Kemalist elite block, who have advocated towards a membership into the EU, with the use of the legal regulations set by the EU membership. Therewith, they have weakened the opposing block significantly (Balçı, 2015:82).

In this sense, after the second half of the 2000's, AKP has justified the deceleration of the EU membership process with the rise of the power of the right wing in Europe. However, what undoubtedly more important is the fact that the EU membership process started losing its power over the internal struggles (Balçı, 2015:85).

### **2.2.2. 1 March 2003 Memorandum Crisis: Relations with U.S.A. and New Opportunities**

During the same time as the domestic and foreign changes that took place with the EU membership process, the preparations and the invasion of Iraq by U.S.A. proved to be an important foreign political problem for AKP government. The March, 1<sup>st</sup> (2003) Memorandum Crisis is important since it paved a new way to AKP's approach of foreign policy (Ersoy and Hasgöl, 2015:6).

On one hand AKP has tried to solve this problem in the pre-war time peacefully but on the other hand the AKP government has continued their negotiations with U.S.A. that had started during the Bülent Ecevit government era. During the U.S. Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz's visit to Turkey in the time when Ecevit was the prime

minister and also during the prime ministry of Abdullah Gül, he concluded that Turkey would allow U.S.A. to open a northern front in the war against Iraq (İnat and Duran, 2006:49).

While the negotiations with the U.S.A. were proceeding, the Prime Ministry Memorandum of February 5<sup>th</sup>, which allowed the military bases and facilities to be modernized by the Turkish government, had passed on the 6<sup>th</sup> of February 2003 at a closed hearing. The February, 6<sup>th</sup> Memorandum had given hope to the U.S.A. that Turkey would fully support them.

The second memorandum that would strain the relations between U.S.A. and Turkey, which was presented to the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (TBMM) by the government that would allow the Turkish Armed Forces personnel to be send abroad and that foreign armed forces would be allowed to station in Turkey, was rejected in the parliament on March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2003 (Hürriyet, 1 March 2003). However, after the memorandum on 1<sup>st</sup> of March was rejected, a third memorandum on March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2003, when the U.S.A. actively started its campaign, had passed from the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (TBMM), allowing the U.S.A. to use Turkey's air space, provide logistic support from the north and use the air force military base in Incirlik (Dumanlı,2007:123). The new memorandum however, could not stop the strain between the U.S.A. and Turkey, which had occurred after the rejection of the memorandum on March 1.

There are three main reasons why the AKP government could not support the U.S.A. in the war against Iraq. Firstly, AKP was concerned that PKK, which is located mostly at northern Iraq, would gain power and increase their attacks as there would be a sudden power loss with the fall of Saddam Hussein. Secondly, the remembrance of the economical damage that Özal's Turkey took during the 1991 Gulf War by the Turkish people and government. Third, is the zero problem policy of AKP with its neighboring countries and the close relations that AKP wanted to build with the Middle East countries could be affected by the war (Yeşiltaş, 2009:38).

Additional reasons to these can be listed as, the anti-war attitude of Turkish public opinion, having some diverse standpoints inside during its first term and some were unwilling to support a war. The main opposition party CHP's (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi), the Turkish President's and the Turkish Armed Forces's (TSK) higher echelons thought that supporting the war would be against international law, Turkey was being screened as a country that could be bought by the U.S press, and following the EU's major countries (France, Germany) as they were showing an anti-war attitude in accordance with the relations with EU (İnat and Duran, 2006:51-53).

It was not a coincidence that the Turkey - U.S.A relations hit a regression and tension right after the March 1<sup>st</sup> Memorandum crisis. In this context, the position that was attributed to the Turkish Armed Forces by the U.S.A. requires attention as to the domestic political balance of this time. At the National Security Council (MGK) of February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2003, before the memorandum, a certain answer to the U.S.A.'s Iraq war could not be achieved. After the polls on March 1<sup>st</sup> 2003, Paul Wolfowitz stated that for

whatever reason the Turkish army was not playing the strong leader role, which was important because it showed that the U.S.A. was looking at the Turkish politics over TAF and not the government (Karadeli, 2007:45).

After the March 1<sup>st</sup> crisis, the incident that took place on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2003 at Suleymaniyah Iraq, where Turkish Special Forces troops were hooded and arrested by the U.S. troops (The Hood Incident), was a remark of U.S.A.'s anger against TSK.

Against all the distressed process, the dismissal of the March 1<sup>st</sup> Memorandum brought forth the opportunity to expand towards the Middle East region. With the dismissal of the memorandum not only were the military plans of U.S.A. affected, since they were preparing to attack Iraq from the north, but also Arab World's perception of Turkey has changed (Karadeli, 2007:44).

The opinion about Turkey of the Middle East countries became positive with the dismissal of the March 1<sup>st</sup> Memorandum, and this continued with the positive effects that EU-Turkey relations brought to the domestic political field, Turkey's reaction to Gaza attacks and the reaction of Prime Minister Erdoğan at Davos. With this, Turkey was viewed as a democratic, stable and peaceful country with increasing welfare levels and capability of solving its problems by itself, thus representing a Middle East vision by the countries in this region (Altunışık, 2010:10).

### **2.2.3. BOP (Greater Middle East Initiative): AKP's Special Position and Strategic Depth**

The process of evoking the historical, cultural, social and economic ties with the Middle East was accelerated after the power shift occurred as a result of the 2002 elections (Uslu:2010:149). Greater Middle East Project, which started with AKP, can be discussed as a newer and faster form of the changes that took place in the 1980's and the 1990's during Özal government.

Neo-Ottomanism policy was discussed during Özal government as a result of sudden events (dissolution of the U.S.S.R), without any theoretical background and with a reflex discourse. AKP government's consultant Ahmet Davutoğlu, who is an International Relations professor, provided the theoretical background with his book "Stratejik Derinlik ve Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu" (Davutoğlu,2001) and this book was used as the basic source for the foreign application of this policy. Davutoğlu has outlined five principles for Turkish foreign policy. These are; establishing a new balance between security and democracy, following a zero problem policy toward Turkey's neighbors, developing relations with the neighboring regions and beyond, adherence to a multidimensional foreign policy and finally proactive foreign policy based on rhythmic diplomacy (Tür and Han, 2011:21). However, according to Balcı, the Strategic Depth approach is not just for the application source of a new foreign policy approach but also a showdown text for the fight against the Militaristic-Kemalist elite (Balcı,2014:221).

In its first term in power, AKP has relied upon international support for gaining political legitimacy, more than any other political party in Turkey (İnat:2007:104). In this regard, forming relations with the Middle East and other regions is important for AKP, both internally and externally.

Political equations have started to change in Middle East with September 11 attacks and the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. Turkish foreign policy had to adopt to this change. U.S.A. has settled to the area through invasion of Iraq in 2003. 11 September 2001 and the Iraqi war of 2003 provided new opportunities for Turkey as well as challenges. The U.S.A. intervention in Iraq disrupted the Middle East's notoriously contested balance of power (Tür and Han, 2011:19).

U.S.A's decision to start and execute reforms about human rights and democratic principles in regional countries by starting "Greater Middle East Initiative (BOP)" in 2004, was for the legitimization of the policies they executed in Middle East during this period. "Active Foreign Policy" approach, which is one of the basic parameters of the Strategic Depth concept, is not the only determinant of the relations, which were formed after 2002 with Middle Eastern countries. International conjuncture's decisiveness is also very important. In this regard, Turkey's policies related to the Middle East are coherent with the policies of the U.S.A.

Turkey's participation to BOP was officialized in 2005 during Erdoğan's U.S.A. visit (Yetkin, 2005). Within the frame of BOP, the main expectations of U.S.A from Turkey was to develop good relations with Israel, to support stability in northern Iraq and to



exclude Iran and Syria from international system. AKP, on the other hand, has tried to develop good relations also with Iran and Syria without attracting too much attention (Yeşilyurt and Akdevelioğlu, 2010: 389-92).

AKP's expectations from U.S.A. related to BOP was oil flow for a reasonable price, regional stability and promotion of democracy and regional development (Bağcı and Sinkaya, 2006: 99-100). It was stated by Prime Minister Erdoğan that policies of Turkey and U.S.A. are accordant with each other (Radikal, 09 June 2005). Thus, AKP has acted together with U.S.A. in these policies, which are based on and shaped by the discourse of modernization (Bağcı and Sinkaya, 2006: 101-102).

Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad's Turkey visit in 2004 was a turning point for this relationship. The 10. President Ahmet Necdet Sezer visited Syria in 2005. After these visitations, other high-ranking officials from other countries were hosted by Turkey such as President of Egypt Hüsnü Mübarek (2007), King of Jordan Abdullah (2005) and President of Lebanon Refik Hariri (2004) (Tür, 2006: 165). Moreover, these newly formed relations were not limited with Muslim countries in the Middle East. Relations with Israel have developed as part of BOP and policies related to the Middle East (Gruen, 2004: 446). Also, a Turk was instated as the secretary general position of Organization of the Islamic Conference (İKÖ) (Bağcı and Sinkaya, 2006: 102).

In 2005, the importance of the economic perspective in regard to the Middle East became more apparent. In the same year an agreement about constituting a free market region including all countries in the region by "Persian Gulf Cooperation Council" and

also other agreements about purchase and modernization of military planes and military personnel exchange with Israel was signed. In addition, negotiations about “Mediterranean Pipeline Project” between Turkey and Israel started. The aim of this project was to transport the Russian gas over Turkey and under the Mediterranean Sea to Israel (Göknel, 2008). In addition to these many commercial treaties were signed with different countries in Middle East.

In 2006, Erdoğan attended the Summit of the Arab Union in Sudan and became the first Turkish Prime Minister, who attended and gave a speech. At the end of the summit, Turkey received a “Permanent Guest” status (Fuller, 2009: 137). U.S.A. asked Turkey to be a negotiator for the Lebanon crisis in 2006. Davutoğlu went to Damascus upon the request of Bush, attended meetings for ending the war between Lebanon and Israel (Çakır, 2006).

U.S.A. could not solve the problems in Iraq since things did not go as planned after the invasion of Iraq. Therefore more elbow room was given to the regional powers related to the policies about Middle East. In this regard, Turkey has played an active role in the region due to its close relations with both Israel and U.S.A. and its high rate Muslim population.

In 2007, another incident has occurred, which lead to the questioning of relations between Turkey and U.S.A. Despite U.S.A., Turkey launched an operation to northern Iraq, due to PKK threat from this region and Iran has cooperated. As a result of this, the tense relations due to PKK between Iran and Turkey started to resolve.

AKP's accession to power, being a party with Islamic history and identity, has created hope for the Middle Eastern countries that it is possible to come together under the Islamic values. The mutual initiatives with the Middle Eastern countries were not only political. Abolishing visa requirements with countries like Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Libya and Qatar can be perceived as a political initiative removing the obstacles in front of human flow (Pope, 2010: 161-71). Import and export rates have increased during this period. At this point, it can be stated that economic relations with Middle East has developed during AKP period.

This foreign policy for Middle Eastern region during AKP period was accompanied by many discussions. Especially "Axis Shift" discussions for foreign politics have occupied the agenda notably.

### **2.3. 2007-2011: Axial Shift or Neo-Ottomanism and Arab Spring**

Despite the fact that AKP –during its second period– focused more into the region around itself than to the west; AKP has given weight to politics only in economic relations without considering the anti-democratic characteristics of the regimes in the surrounding countries. In this new concept called "Trading State" (Kirişçi, 2009:29-57), economy is not only considered as an outstanding objective because of the direct contribution to the country's prosperity but also an instrument of the functionality of leading to the construction of a more peaceful area.

The rapidly improving economic relations with Middle East in this period and the active involvement of the problems in the area as a mediator has deepened the relationship within the region. It can be said that AKP has tried a multi-dimensional approach to foreign politics to improve independent politics of the region, with the use of AKP's Strategic Depth strategy. Especially the close interrelations developed with Syria and Iran can be counted as main dynamics in this period. AKP has adopted the view to developed interrelations with authoritarian regimes that would liberalize and internationally expand those regimes to the outside. AKP has tried to legitimize its approach, by placing itself as a mediator between Iran and Syria and the West (Kösebalaban, 2012:144).

Intensive developing relations with the Middle East in this period led to the outbreak of claims such as "Penetration of Practices Leading to Axial Shift in Foreign Affairs" from some segments in Turkey especially after the year 2007, and starting from 2009 some segments from the West have started to agree with these claims (Manisalı, 2011; 11). Again, AKP's harsh criticism towards on Israel on behalf of the Gaza Attacks, choice to continue developing good relations with Iran even though the West was bringing Iran to bay because of its nuclear program, development of relationships with the Islamic Hamas in Palestine, which is considered as Terrorist organization by U.S.A. and Israel, became reasons for the axial shift claims (Yeşiltaş and Telci, 2013:4). The criticism is mainly identified as Turkey is in an axial shift, which is getting away from the Western system (U.S.A. and EU) and directing itself towards the Middle East (Çandar, 2010; 4).

Beneath the axial shift claims with the emphasis on Neo-Ottomanism, it should not be overlooked that Turkey was having a period of change and this change is understood as a separation from the West and setting new relations with the East because of the international power gap that occurred with the end of the Cold War and the maneuver area caused by U.S.A. with the project of Greater Middle East.

In this point, examining the concepts of Ottomanism and Neo-Ottomanism will be appropriate in terms of understanding axis shift discussions. Ottomanism can be defined as the political thought aiming to incorporate different ethnic and religious groups living under the Ottoman rule into the identity of Ottoman (Albayrak and Turan, 2016:131) However, Neo-Ottomanism did not target the population of the Turkish Republic, but the countries that were a part of the Ottoman Empire. As a result, Neo-Ottomanism can be defined as an attempt to increase Turkey's influence over these countries (Albayrak and Turan, 2016:141)

According to the explanation of Neo-Ottomanism, the Strategical Depth approach of Davutoglu is certainly Neo-Ottomanist. According to Davutoglu, Turkey need embrace her Ottoman past and developed a deeper, wider and multidimensional relationship within ex-Ottoman territories (Davutoglu, 2001:41-42).

Additional to this, AKP's domestic victory in the 2007 elections and thereby strengthening its government and getting the opinion of consolidation from the masses, increased its self-confidence as a result. It helped the AKP implement the Neo-

Ottomanist policy more clearly. The Strategic Depth Book was written in 2001. This is important in that Davutoglu, who would later carry out important duties in the AKP, actually formed this concept long ago.

We see that the Turkish right-wings parties in the spaces that are widespread in the international system use the idea of Neo-Ottomanism. In this respect, during the period of Ozal, this term is used for Central Asia after the Cold War, but it seems that it was used by the AKP for the Middle East after changing the balance of power in the region in the middle of 2000s.

At this point, the Middle East constitutes the center of Davutoglu's approach of Strategic Depth. According to this, instead of having an axial shift AKP can be evaluated as having an axial stabilization. Davutoglu has brought critics in the book he wrote in 2001 to Republic Period Foreign Affairs towards Middle East.

*“Turkey’s Middle East politics carries the traces of Absolute Sovereignty – Absolute Abandonment dilemma and the inadequacy of strategic planning. Turkey’s strategy of burning the bridges with the total Middle Eastern politics, culture and strategy after the First World War, resulted in an inability to use the five hundred yearlong rule over the advantages of the regions natural resources that had the power to determine world relations (Davutoğlu, 2001:56-57).”*

Due to the discussions of an axial shift, criticism of AKP pursuing Neo-Ottomanism in its foreign affairs has intensified. The term Neo-Ottomanism contains the emphasis that Turkey is following imperialist politics of the Ottoman region. According to how the Ottoman heritage is read; for some it is seen as politics to create an area of influence, by the others it is used to emphasize the Islamic agenda deep down (Kardaş, 2011:22).

Some sayings of Davutoglu, the inventor of the foreign affairs strategy, and the other higher ups of AKP has supported the critics against themselves. The words of Davutoglu such as “one day we will worship in Al-Aqsa Mosque –Masjid al-Aqsa –” has excited these discussions. Davutoglu needed to put an effort in order to explain clearly what he implied in these statements (Kardaş, 2011:23). The ones who criticized AKP, underlined the problems occurring in the relations with West in this period. In this context, the rapidly tensed relations between Turkey and U.S.A., especially after the Iraqi war and AKP’s advancement in the EU-Membership reaching to the point of stopping in 2007 can be observed. On the other hand, it is claimed that some of the initiatives taken in the Middle East can be explained with direct ideological roots and the government’s Islamism. Therefore, in the last developments, especially as observed in the examples of Iran and Palestine, the thesis of Turkey’s foreign policy getting away from its traditional axis and directing towards Middle East rapidly is embroidered by these groups.

The rapidly developing economic and diplomatic relations has gained a new meaning towards the end of these relations with the developments that occurred in the Middle East. After a costermonger putting himself on fire in Tunisia on December 17<sup>th</sup>, 2010, a

civilian rebellion called Arab Spring started on January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2011 and spread out to all Arab regions. The rebel, based on economic inequality, corruption and diplomatic deterioration, created an avalanche. Such as the countries in the region, Turkey was also caught unprepared to this unexpected progress. This caused the differences in reactions towards these countries (Ünver Noi, 2012; 13).





## **Chapter 3: Turkey-Syria Relationship during AKP Era (2002-2013)**

### **3.1. Brief History of Turkey-Syria Relationship before AKP Era**

The problems between Turkey and Syria started with the agreement in 1936, which foresees Syria's independence by France. According to this agreement, France implicitly passes on its sovereignty on Alexandretta to Syria. Thereupon, as a result of Turkey's attempts, Alexandretta gained its independence in 1938 by the name Hatay. A year after, Hatay Parliament decided to become a Turkish province. This created an important problem, which has continued until quite recently, between Turkey and Syria, after Syria gained its independency in 1964 due to the withdrawal of French army (Arı, 2006:723).

Syria started a new era with the 1970 coup d'état, which resulted in Hafez Al Assad's full control over Syria. Syria has supported PKK with the means of creating instability in Turkey; provided military education opportunities in Bekaa Valley to PKK and allowed its leader -Abdullah Öcalan- residence in Damascus (Arı, 2006:724). Syria used this situation as a means of negotiation when dealing with problems with Turkey (Sönmezoğlu, 2006: 558). The Syrian government also supported the Armenian terrorist organization -ASALA- which was known for its assassination attempts on Turkish diplomats until 1984.

1993 onwards, Turkey has embraced a strict policy against Syria's support of PKK and in 1998 the two countries came to the edge of a war. With this development, Syria

banned the PKK's leader from the country thereby marking a new era for Turkey and Syria.

Another major problem during this period was the water resources of Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Turkey's attempt to accumulate water in Atatürk Dam as part of the Southeast Anatolian Project (SAP) in 1990 resulted in a friction between Turkey, Syria and Iraq (Kıran, 2005:93). At this point, Turkey guaranteed its neighbors that the water resources will never be used as weapon against them (Arı, 2006:725).

Adana agreement, which was signed on October 1998 and Turkish President of that time Ahmet Necdet Sezer's attendance to Hafez Al Assad's funeral, revealed the progress between the two countries. Hafez Al Assad's elected son Bashar Al-Assad's intention to pursue mild policies and the continuous of political visits increased the hopes of improvement of Turkey-Syria relationship (Beşar Esad Dönemi Türkiye-Suriye İlişkileri, online, 2015). The relationship improved more with high level political visits from Syria.

The effect of changes in the international system on the transformation of the challenging Turkey-Syria relationship in the late 1990's and early 2000's cannot be overlooked. The end of the Cold War, the fracture caused by the dissolution of U.S.S.R., Syria's loss of an important ally, September 11 attacks, USA's invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, all put Syria on a dangerous spot, which had become a major problem for Syria. Bashar Al-Assad's leadership enabled Syria for new maneuvers. During this period, Turkey in a way being the victorious by being at the side of West in

the Cold War and having good relationship with Israel, one of Syria's major foes, lead Syria to solve the problems mentioned. From Turkey's perspective, the economic crisis in early 2000's and the tense situation created by the war in Iraq also lead Turkey to improve its relationship with Syria. AKP's victory in 2002 elections and AKP's understanding of 'zero problems with neighbors' policy, accelerated the improving relationships and carried it to new levels of economic 'model partnership'.

We need to special emphasis on İsmail Cem (1997-2002) who was the Turkish Foreign Minister before the AKP term. Cem offers a new approach to Turkish foreign policy by criticizing certain aspects of classical Turkish foreign policy and diplomacy. From 1999 onwards, as the coalition government's Foreign Minister Cem had played a key role in this shift adopting an active and multidimensional foreign policy approach (Tür and Han, 2011:16). According to İsmail Cem, Turkish foreign policy had been alienated from its cultural roots and historical past and it must be replaced with a new understanding that was based on the awareness of Turkey's rich identity and historical assets inherited from the Ottoman state. He tried to create a convenient environment to be more flexible and active in foreign policy. For him, Turkey, as a democratic country having reached European standards of human rights in the Islamic world, should be presented to other Middle Eastern countries as a model. İsmail Cem in addition to his peace- seeking foreign policy, engaged in friendly relations with his counterparts. İsmail Cem admitted that his personal dealings and friendships also helped Turkey to follow an active foreign policy and get some results and personal relationships have an important place in international relations since they could increase sympathy and reliance of both sides towards each other (Örmeci,2011:224-225). His basic politic

approaches went on the AKP term. He changed the foreign policy of Turkey in a few years. After, his term, AKP used these approaches with a new theoretical perspective.

### **3.2 Zero Problems with Neighbors: Improving Political and Economical Relationships with Syria**

AKP's election in 2002 changed the Middle East paradigm of Turkish foreign politics. AKP adopted the 'zero problems with neighbors' approach as its main paradigm in its political perspective towards the Middle East. Throughout the AKP era, Turkey-Syria relationship, especially politically and economically improved drastically and the issues between the two countries came to an end (Demirtaş, 2013:112; Salık, 2011:24).

New developments in the international system also played an important role in the improvement of the relationship between the two countries. USA's invasion of Iraq marked a turning point for Middle Eastern Countries and it brought with new settlement and conflict areas.

The denial of 1 March Memorandum, enabled AKP to act independently but also made it difficult to act on new developments in Iraq. One of the major issues that rose after the invasion of Iraq was the Kurdish Problem in Northern Iraq and PKK. Kurdish groups who had had worked together with the US forces, had the opportunity to act independently after the war. This development led Turkey and Syria -both countries having a significant Kurdish population- to set a common ground. Hence keeping the integrity of Iraq was crucial for both countries.

In addition to this, Colin Powell's visit to Damascus in May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2003 to discuss Iraq and Powell's implicit warnings to Syria, worried Syria about being next on the list. (NTV MSNBC, 3 May 2003). Hence, Assad focused on improving the already good relationship with Iran to overcome regional solitude and continued its relationship with organizations like Hezbollah, Hamas and Islamic Jihad to increase deterrence against Israel and U.S.A. Furthermore, parallel to its strategy of increasing allies and solving the problematic relationships with the West, Syria pursued a political path to support Turkey who was against the invasion of Iraq (Salik, 2011:23).

The first visit in presidential level since 1946, Syria's independence, was held by Assad in January 2004. This visit is critical in the sense that it was Assad's first foreign visit and it accelerated the economic and political developments among the two countries. (Ayhan,2009:27-33).

As a result of AKP's increasing interest in the Middle East and Turkey's improving relationships with the Middle Eastern countries, Turkey started to get more effected from the events occurring in the Middle East. During this period, disregarding the anti-democratic regimes of the region, AKP pursued a strategy, which merely focused on the improvement of economic relations (Kösebalaban, 2011:144), with the hope of reflecting good economic links to politics. AKP has followed this strategy in the 2000's with Syria with whom Turkey had had improving economic and political relationships.

In this context, Assad's visit to Turkey in 2004 accelerated the economic relationship between the two countries. The length of the border line, Turkey being the gate to North

for Syria and Syria having an important position in development of commercial links between Turkey and Middle East were important factors that made collaboration easier between the two countries. Hence, improvement of the economic relationship was the first step of improvement of the relationship between two countries.

Free Trade Agreement (FTA), which was signed in 2004, came into force on January 1st, 2007 and played a crucial role in improvement of commercial link between the two countries. Trading volume had increased from 720 million dollars to 1.174 million dollars between the years 2000-2007 (Tür, 2011:35).

The rapidly developing economic relationships with Syria had been a gate for AKP, opening to Middle East; therefore, a great emphasis was given to the economic link with Syria (Phillips, 2012:3). FTA had developed the economic links rapidly and the relationship between Turkey and Syria was seen as a good example of the model which was needed to spread to Middle East region as part of AKP's 'zero problems with neighbor's policy (Tür, 2011:36-37).

Following Assad's visit, Syria Internal Affairs Minister announced that as of January 13th, 2004 Turkish businessmen would be given visas easily (NTV MSNbc, 15 January 2003). This development enabled businessmen who were trading with Syria to enter the country without losing time to get visas.

In 16 September 2009, during Bessar Assad's visit to Turkey, it was announced that in order to take the dialog and cooperation between the two countries to a strategic level

Strategic Cooperation Council would be formed (Togay, Beşar Esad Dönemi Türkiye Suriye İlişkileri,2010). During the same visit, the Foreign Affairs Ministers of the two countries signed the agreement, which abolished visa between two countries. After this agreement it was announced that visa implementation had been abolished.

Another important development at this time was the Turkey-Syria High Level Strategic Cooperation Council's First Ministry Cabinet Meetings, which was held synchronal in October 2009 in Halep and Gaziantep in which new measures to build a corporate infrastructure were taken. Foreign Affairs Minister of that time, Ahmet Davutoğlu underlined that they worked like a single committee and afterwards read the two countries' slogan both in Turkish and Arabic: "Common destiny, common history, common future" (Zaman, 14 October 2009; Ayhan, 2009:32).

While AKP rapidly improved its economic relationship with Syria as part of its strategy, which favors economy, Turkey started to get impacted more from the conflicts and problems of the region. This situation was one of the main contributors to the axis shift debate in 2007.

During a period when relations between Turkey and Syria were developing and high-rank visitations were made, assassination of the old head of the state Refik Hariri in 2005 (Ayhan, 2009:27) put Turkey in a difficult position with the relations with Syria in the international arena. An organization called "Büyük Suriye'de Zafer ve Cihat (Victory and Jihad in Great Syria)" claimed the assassination (Atlioğlu, Refik Hariri Suikastı ve Suriye,2005) and afterwards a UN commission concerning this subject

found Syria guilty. Yet, President Ahmet Necdet Sezer did not cancel his trip to Damascus. This situation was the reason that put Turkey in a difficult position within the international arena (Atlıoğlu, Mehlis Raporu Sonrası Suriye, 2005). This visit caused criticisms in the West. This situation was significant, since it showed the importance given by Turkey to the interrelations with Syria.

On the other hand, the Lebanon war in 2006 is important; since it showed how quickly this region can turn into a war zone. The missile attacks of Hezbollah to Israeli, and the kidnapping of Israeli soldiers by them influenced the start of the Lebanon war. (Altunışık, 2007:11). The operation that was launched afterwards by Israel to Lebanon has received reactions from the rest of the world. Syria's military existence in Lebanon has created a risk of war between Syria and Israel. Iran's support for Syria created concerns of this turning into a regional war (Yeşiltaş,2008:108). Whilst criticizing Israel, Turkey carried out meetings with both sides during this crisis. After the issue was taken to the UN, and a decision was made to send an international force, which would include Turkish soldiers, to be sent into the region. This situation gave problems for AKP in the domestic arena since the opposition criticized them for dragging Turkey into a regional chaos. However, AKP claimed that this decision was made only to increase Turkey's credibility in the Middle (Cicioğlu,2008:173-174).

In 2007, the short-termed tension between Syria and Israel increased the conflict between the two countries and affected Turkey negatively. The tension, which have started with the news about Israel attacking regions of Syria by violating the Syria's airspace, and the founding of Israeli jet fuel tanks inside Turkish borders, caused Turkey



to take a position against the ongoing crisis (Hürriyet, 8 September 2007). Despite these problems, Turkey did not want to oppose Israel. Nonetheless, Turkey has tried to balance the situation in order to not ruin the close relations with Syria.

In 2008, Turkey, France and Qatar attended a summit called “İstikrar için Diyalog (Dialog for Stability)”. In this summit peace and stability in the Middle East was discussed (Cumhuriyet, 4 September 2008). In the summit, in which Turkey attended as a moderator, the problems between Israel and Syria was discussed and it was stated that if Golan Hills were given to Syria, most of the problems of Palestine and Lebanon would be solved and this would bring peace to the region (Beşar Esad’ın Türkiye Ziyareti ve Bölgesel Güvenlik, 2007).

AKP’s regional activity increased through the meetings with Syria and Israel, making Turkey directly involved with the regional events. Prime Minister Erdoğan argued with Israeli President Şimon Peres about Gaza attacks in Davos Economic Summit and left the summit. This situation created tension in Turkey-Israel relations (Radikal, 30 January 2009). In 2010, Israel intervened the ships, which were carrying humanitarian help cargo for Gaza, in international waters, leading to the death of 9 Turkish citizens during the raid (Hürriyet, 31 May 2012). This incident known as Blue Marmara incident has brought Turkey-Israel relations to a breaking point. At the end of the same year, the roots of AKP government’s Middle East strategy was shaken by the Arab Spring, which turned the region into a war zone.

### **3.3. Arab Spring: AKP's Changing Syria Policy**

Arab Spring was a protest, a riot and with many other definitions an Arab Civil Movement, that started with the act of self-immolation of a Tunisian university graduate, Muhammed Azizi, due to unemployment and financial difficulties in Tunisia and later on spread over to the other Middle Eastern countries. The spark of the fire, which burned this Tunisian young man, burned all of Middle East and acquired an international dimension (Ayhan, 2012:75-76).

This period, which started in Tunisia, spread to Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Morocco, Bahrain and finally to Syria. Arab Spring represents the second breaking point in the region, after the Iraqi war. The process, which toppled the regime in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, made the government withdraw softly in Yemen, fastened the shift to the constitutional monarchy in Morocco, was suppressed by military force in Bahrain, and led to a civil war in Syria (Öniş, 2012:45-47).

Arab Spring is also a very critical development in terms of global conjuncture. It changed the region with oppressive regimes, where people have lived under the arbitrary will of the dictators, irreversibly but it also had effects on an international level. The main reason behind this international effect is the importance of this region for the forces among international system. Turkey, as a part and an actor of the region, was also affected by these developments and strategies in the framework of Strategic Depth approach that were being developed during the 2000's, was obstructed by Arab Spring.

The collapsing regimes in the Middle East after the Arab Spring brought with the discussions if Turkey's developing relations, during the AKP period, and AKP's Conservative Democrat identity would be a model for these countries. ("Turkey: a model for the Arab world?" Euronews, 25 March 2011; Frankie, "Turkey can model democracy for the Arab World", 16 February 2011; Kalın, Is Turkey a model for the Arab world? 11 February 2011). During these discussions, AKP's prominent members have stated that, AKP does not have any intentions to be a model to these countries but they can share their experiences and show support, if requested (Bloomberg, 8 July 2012).

During these discussions, TESEV has conducted a survey about the Middle Eastern perception of Turkey in the years 2011, 2012 and 2013. The percentage of the people who said 'yes' to the question about whether or not Turkey can be a model to the countries in this region has decreased over the years. In 2011, %61 of the participants said 'yes' to the question, whereas this rate dropped to %53 in 2012 and to %51 in 2013 (Ortadoğu'da Türkiye Algısı, 2011,2012 and 2013, TESEV). This is important, since it shows that AKP has lost its qualification to be a model after Arab Spring.

In this regard, it is important for Turkey to support the civil society against the dictatorships, since Turkey was viewed as a model due to its democratic structure and westernized system with a Muslim identity. But AKP has misread the power balance in this region and misjudged the political orientations of the countries (Özel, Aljazeera, 26 April 2014). According to Özel, AKP has made two fundamental mistakes during this process. First, until the riots in March 2011 in Syria, AKP has stuck to its above

denomination policy. But they did not manage to convince Baath regime for a peaceful solution and became directly a party to the Syrian civil war and put the borders into use for opposing groups. Second mistake was the close engagement with the Society of Muslim Brothers in Egypt due to the ideological similarities (Özel, Aljazeera, 26 April 2014).

It was observed that AKP government did not show the same reactions at an equal rate to all of the countries. For example; while reacting faster and with more enthusiasm to the changes in Tunisia and Egypt, they did not show the same reactions towards Libya, Yemen and Bahrain (Ünver Noi, 2012; 13-14). Riots were not that problematic for Turkey, until they reached to Syria. But afterwards, the moderate and constructive attitude has become harsher and the relations with Syria became a power struggle.

During the groundbreaking ceremony for Turkey-Syria Friendship Dam, which was planned to be built over the Asi river in February 2011, Prime Minister Erdoğan addressed Bashar Al-Assad as “my brother” and made mention of the common history and culture of Turkey and Syria. He stated that *“The more peaceful Syria is; the more peaceful Turkey will be. The more prosperous Turkey is; the more prosperous Syria will become. We are made brothers and sisters by history. Throughout history we always had common faith, ours hearts have beaten together”* (Zaman, 6 February 2011; Hürriyet, 7 February 2011). Right after this meeting, in March 2011, the civil movements against the regime have placed Turkey in a dilemma, which was the start of the strained period between the two countries (Salık,2011:25). After this date, the

chronology of events that occurred between Turkey and Syria suggests that what started as a criticism, turned into an indirect military struggle.

After the riot movement reached Syria at the beginning of 2011, riots against the regime and harsh military intervention was the first signals for the unknown end (Aljazeera, 6 January 2014). More than 5000 Syrian have taken shelter in Turkey, escaping the Cısr eş Şuğur operation in June 2011 by Assad government (Cumhuriyet, 9 June 2011; NTV, 12 June 2011; Hürriyet, 12 June 2011).

At the beginning of the riots, Turkish officials were thinking that most of the civilians were supporting Assad, in spite of the excessive use of force. Thus, they have started to make reform appeals more strongly (Aljazeera, 6 January 2014). To this end, Turkish Foreign Affairs Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu went to Damascus on April 6<sup>th</sup>, 2011 and suggested that the state of emergency should be lifted, Kurds should be given identities and army should be removed from the cities. He even sent a draft for a speech to Assad, who was expected to make a speech about reforms, but when he made the expected speech on April 15<sup>th</sup>, it was understood that he did not accept the suggestions (Aljazeera, 21 January 2014).

MIT President Hakan Fidan's Damascus visit as Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's "special representative" on April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2011 (Sabah, 28 April 2011) was followed by Davutoğlu's visit in August. Having a 6,5-hour meeting with Assad, a road map of 14 articles about the reforms, which were to be executed by Syria, was prepared (Akyol, Şamda Kritik Görüşme, 9 August 2011), but soon it was understood that Assad would

not follow this map (Aljazeera, 21 January 2014). After this, Davutoğlu made a statement and said that “There is nothing left to talk with Syria” (Aktifhaber, 15 August 2011) and a declaration was made stating that economic and military sanctions to be applied to Damascus government in November (Aljazeera, 21 January 2014).

While the 2,5 milliard dollar trade volume from the year 2010 was decreasing rapidly, the number of Syrian refugees seeking protection in Turkey increased and in 2013 exceeded half a million. Opposing Syrians opened an office in Istanbul, while armed opposing initiative of Free Syrian Army positioned its headquarters in Hatay, which lies on the Syrian border. The Damascus Embassy in Turkey was closed on March 2012 (Aljazeera, 21 January 2014).

A new crisis emerged between Turkey and Syria on June 22nd, 2012, after a Turkish F-4 aircraft was caused to fall by (İçgen, Suriye, Türk Savaş Uçağını Düşürdü”, 23 June 2012). After this incident, Prime Minister Erdoğan stated that his perceptions of Syria have changed and Assad regime has become a threat to Turkey. After that, the engagement rules were changed and Turkey started to react directly to any bullet and attack coming from Syria (Zaman, 26 June 2012). In this period, the Syrian regime claimed that Turkey was helping to the opposing elements by providing them money and guns.

On May 15th, 2013, two bomb attacks were carried out 15 minutes apart from each other in Reyhanli, Hatay. According to the official sources 51 people died and 115 people were injured, but according to unofficial resources the dead toll was over 150.

After the attack Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arınç and Minister of Internal Affairs Muammer Güler claimed that Syrian intelligence agency, Muhaberat, was responsible for the attack, however Syria declined these accusations (BBC, 23 May 2013). Following Reyhanli attacks, the tension between AKP and Damascus governments increased to its peak, when Turkish battle planes hit a Mi-17 type chopper on September 6<sup>th</sup>, 2013 due to a border violation.

In a period, during which Neo-Ottomanism ideas were discussed in foreign policies and principles like “Zero Problems with the Neighbors” were displayed, Arab Spring has shaken the parameters. The region where the “Zero Problems with the Neighbors” policy, a policy that emphasizes peace and welfare in the region, was considered turned into a war zone. For example, visas were lifted, groundbreaking ceremonies for Friendship Dam were performed, the mines were cleared from the borders and a common cabinet were formed just one year ago; but only one year later Turkey became on a collision course with Syria (Türk Dış Politikasında Sorunsuz Alan Kaldı Mı? 2011: 4).

## **Conclusion**

After the first breaking point in the international system in post-Cold War era, an ambiguity period has started for all countries. Turkey, like any other country in the system, was affected by this situation. After September 11 attacks, the fact that the only super power was hit by terrorists has eliminated this ambiguity and a new period has started for Turkey and the world.

While major changes were happening in international system, Turkey was introduced to a new AKP government, which is separated from an old political line. In a ten-year period, AKP's foreign policies were discussed both practically and theoretically in many arenas. Strategic Depth concept has reached a discourse, even though it was discussed in terms of its application and results.

Changing international system due to the new era has provided partial maneuver area to many developing countries in foreign policies, within which they can move more independently. AKP government took this chance and entered to a new process by separating Middle East policies from general foreign policies of the Republic period.

Between 2002 and 2011 in the Middle East, policies were based on mutual relations between leaders, who do not value the regimes and economic relations between countries. In this regard, AKP tried to create an area of influence in this region, which was ruled by Ottoman Empire until WW I. The policies that U.S.A. was planning on executing in the region after Iraq war in 2003, has created a maneuver area for AKP and



independent policies have been followed until Arab Spring started and an area of influence was established.

As a result of Arab Spring reaching Syria, AKP government was forced to care about the regimes of the countries, which was not a subject they were considered at all before. With the intensification of the clashes in Syria, AKP ended the relations that they have been developing for the past ten years and put emphasis on their discourse about the necessity of Assad's abdication. But Assad government have shown more resistance than AKP has expected. Thus, Turkey was focused only on Syria in foreign politics.

AKP's reflexive, devoid-of-vision estimation that the rapid regime changes that occurred in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya during the Arab Spring would be repeated in Syria has driven the two countries into an indirect war. Caught unprepared for this new development, AKP transitioned from the "Zero Problems with Neighbours" discourse to a "Valuable Solitude" discourse. Thus, AKP ended up being unable to re-state the Strategic Depth theory that it had voiced in every platform for many years and considered as the foundation of developing relations with the region.

AKP, having dominated the domestic politics during its 10-years rule, formed its Conservative Democratic Identity and reached a high level of self-confidence, saw the Arab Spring as an opportunity for its foreign policy strategy to become the leader country in the region. Though at first the developments were promisingly in favor of AKP, the problems being experienced with this country have become an untangled web once the events spreaded to Syria.

AKP initially shaped its policies with the assumption that Bashar Assad would shortly be overthrown, however, the process proved this strategy to be vain. Secondly, AKP failed to assess the positions of international powers accurately. At this point, the involvement of big powers such as USA and Russia in the problem as well as the existence of different opinions regarding Syria created a dilemma for AKP. It was unable to garner the required external support for these policies due to the International powers' concern that radical Islamist terrorist groups which they view as the main enemy might settle into the region and structure to be formed after Assad.

Finally, AKP abandoned the pluralistic discourse of the successfully-created Conservative Democratic Identity once it settled into the system and chose to be active in both domestic and international politics with a more Islamist discourse like its predecessor WP did. In this sense, AKP started to use and practice a religion-based discourse in its policy regarding Syria, which has led the problems between the two countries to get deeper and deeper.

AKP government should break the deadlock, take into consideration the new developments in the international system, pay attention to the policies of global power and stop perceiving foreign policy as an area for "persistence". Secondly, the indirect military methods should be dropped, which perceives the Syrian issue as an internal issue. They should also try to carry this problem to more peaceful area, which would be accepted as legitimate by all powers in the international system, just like before 2003 in the Iraqi war. Lastly, the communication channels with Assad government and all actors in Syria should be kept open.

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