

# Düşük Angajmandan Yüksek Angajmana: AKP Döneminde Türkiye'nin Orta Doğu'da Değişen Angajmanını Açıklamak

## From Low Engagement to High Engagement: Explaining Turkey's Changing Engagement in the Middle East during the JDP Period

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### Abstract

*Why did Turkey shift its Middle East policy from soft power oriented approach to the security oriented one in the early 2010s? While Turkey prioritized diplomatic, commercial and economic relations during the first decade of the 2000s, it has increasingly used military means to influence the Middle East since 2011. The primary objective of this study is to ascertain the reasons behind this widely debated question in Turkish foreign policy literature. Unlike existing explanations, the main argument of the study is that the U.S. grand strategy towards Middle East appears as the most important causal factor shaping the nature of Turkey's engagement in its region.*

**Keywords:** Turkey, the Middle East, Low/High Engagement, U.S. Grand Strategy, Over/Passive Engagement.

### Öz

*Neden Türkiye Orta Doğu politikasını 2010'ların başında yumuşak güç eksenli bir yaklaşımdan güvenlik eksenli bir yaklaşıma dönüştürdü? Türkiye, 2000'li yılların ilk on yıllık zaman diliminde Orta Doğu'da diplomatik, ticari ve ekonomik ilişkileri öncelikle, ikinci on yılda ise artan bir şekilde askeri araçları kullandı. Bu çalışmanın en temel amacı, Türk dış politikasında yoğun bir şekilde tartışılan söz konusu değişimin arkasında yatan nedenleri ortaya koymaktır. Mevcut literatürün aksine bu çalışmanın ana argümanı; ABD'nin Orta Doğu'ya yönelik grand stratejisinde meydana gelen değişimin, Türkiye'nin bu bölgeye yönelik angajman biçimini belirleyen en önemli nedensel faktör olduğudur.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Türkiye, Orta Doğu, Düşük/Yüksek Angajman, ABD'nin Grand Stratejisi, Aşırı/Pasif Angajman

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## Introduction

Contrary to its traditional distanced approach to the Middle East, Turkey's increasing engagement in this particular region has become more apparent in the 2000s. During the first two decades of the new millenium, the Middle East has both intensely occupied Turkey's foreign policy agenda and turned into one of the leading dynamics directly affecting the country's strategic relations. However, this 'pro-active' Middle East policy of Turkey, to use the label put forth by its makers, exposes two different patterns: low engagement (between 2000 and 2010) and high engagement (between 2010 and 2020). During the low engagement period, Turkey tried to improve political, commercial and economic relations with the regional countries. Inter alia, Turkey mediated in the disputes between Syria-Israel, Israel-Palestine and Iran-the West while it gave a great deal of importance to trade relations with the regional countries. Besides the free trade agreements signed with many countries in the region, Turkey also established regional cooperation mechanisms through bilateral and multi-lateral agreements.

Following the first ten-year period that witnessed developing political and economic relations with the regional countries, Turkish foreign policy -albeit for a short time- went through a transition period. Turkey involved in a first-ever power struggle with its regional rivals in the Iraqi elections, and mediated between regimes and oppositions in Libya and in Syria during the initial stage of the Arab revolts. The second period that started after a short period of indecisiveness, between 2010 and 2011, continues to date. The elements of hard power, such as establishing regional order and using military tools came into play. The second period is called *high engagement* and it differs from the first period as far as foreign policy agenda and tools are considered. Turkey, in the first period, decidedly avoided security-oriented involvement and limited itself with peaceful mediations between Middle Eastern actors. However, this role has changed in the second period and Turkey has directly become a party in crises and disputes of the region. Trade cooperation that dominated the agenda of relations with the regional countries in the first period fell behind and military/security cooperation came to the forefront. Turkey directly, sometimes indirectly, became a party engaged in crises areas, such as Syria, Iraq and Libya, after 2010. On top, Turkey has been involved in a cut-throat power struggle with the regional countries, and great powers active in the Middle East.

The transformation of Turkey's Middle East policy leads to this question: Why did Turkey give up soft power-oriented approach (prioritizing diplomatic, economic and commercial relations) and embraced the use of military means in order to realize its regional interests? This question appears more puzzling given the fact that low engagement policy based on

soft power tools gave its fruits such as Turkey's well-performed economy between 2002 and 2013. Why Turkey started to pursue a military oriented policy despite its high cost and risk?

The existing literature aiming to introduce systematic explanations generates different answers to the above question at individual, state and regional levels. Explanations focusing on individual level particularly point out former Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, a key figure in the country's foreign policy from 2002 to 2015, and his ambitions towards the region. State-level explanations mainly draw the attention to the Justice and Development Party (JDP) and its rise to unchecked power status in Turkey. On the other hand, the explanations prioritizing regional level dynamics assert the Arab uprisings as the independent variable of the change in Turkish foreign policy.

Unlike the existing literature, we assert that in the Middle East there is a causal relation between the change in the engagement style of Turkey as a regional power and the grand strategy of the U.S. as a superpower in the international system after the Cold War. As part of its over-engagement strategy in the Middle East since 2000, covert support of the U.S. to expansionist behavior of Israel, its military intervention in the region through occupation of Iraq (2003) were deeply felt in the region by 2010. The situation minimizing power vacuum enabled regional actors to establish rather political, economic and trade relations. On the other hand, the U.S. changed its strategy from over-engagement to passive engagement since 2010, withdrew from Iraq, lowered its traditional security commitments and encumbered regional actors with more responsibility. That led to a power gap in the Middle East. The situation both caused a regional chaos environment and power struggles among regional actors. This structural change at the regional level is the main reason for Turkey's transition from low engagement to high.

### **Literature on Turkey's Changing Engagements**

Since 2000 to date, there are a large number of studies addressing the causal explanation of Turkey's engagement in the Middle East. Some of these studies focus only on the first (2000-2010) or second (after 2010) period while others tend to examine both periods and directly explain the changes in foreign policy. In this study, however, we will make a classification to cover the entire literature in this particular section, since we will determine the independent variable of both periods differently from the existing literature. In this respect, the section examines Turkey's engagements towards the Middle East in the existing literature on the levels of individual, state and the regional system.

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Studies regarding Turkey's Middle East policy on individual level view Ahmet Davutoğlu's reading of the Middle East as a causal factor. Davutoğlu was the Chief Adviser to Prime Minister, Foreign Minister and Prime Minister between 2002 and 2016, respectively. Studies focusing on Turkey's low engagement assert that Turkey's developing political, economic and commercial relations with the regional countries are constructed on Davutoğlu's new foreign policy vision. According to this vision, with its new borders drawn in the aftermath of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey was alienated with its neighboring regions and this alienation continued when the country acted in line with the Cold War's security-oriented perspective. Although Turkey took the opportunity to unify with neighboring regions after the Cold War, it lacked the vision to enable this unification. Turkey eliminated the lack of vision through the policy of "zero problem" with neighbors, the architect of which was Davutoğlu, and began to improve its political, economic and trade relations with the Middle Eastern countries.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, individual studies focusing on the period of Turkey's high engagement claim that the endeavor to constitute a new order in the Middle East is the product of Davutoğlu's world of thought. Accordingly, existing political regimes in the Middle East were not peculiar to the region; on the contrary, they were the product of impositions from the outside. When political systems reflecting demands of peoples are established in lieu of these regimes, which are "artificial" just as the borders dividing the regional countries, the societies that are culturally alike will be further integrated. On that account, Turkey achieving its own political transformation with the arrival of the JDP to the power must lead other societies in the region and provide necessary support in accordance with their demands. Thus, Turkey relying on Davutoğlu's vision to build a new order in the Middle East supported the Arab revolts and activated military means for the overthrow of the existing regimes in the region.<sup>2</sup>

State-level studies are the most prevalent of the studies assessing Turkey's engagement in the Middle East. They accept national identity change and the internal political struggles as causal factors - both of which

- 1 Alexander Murinson, "The Strategic Depth Doctrine of Turkish Foreign Policy" *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.42, No.6, 2006, p.947; Ahmet Sözen, "A Paradigm Shift in Turkish Foreign Policy: Transition and Challenges" *Turkish Studies*, Vol.11, No.1, 2010, p.108; Bülent Aras and Aylin Gorener, "National Role Conceptions and Foreign Policy Orientation: the Ideational Bases of the Justice and Development Party's Foreign Policy Activism in the Middle East", *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, Vol.12, No.1, 2010, pp.73-92.
- 2 Behlül Özkan, "Turkey, Davutoğlu and the Idea of Pan-Islamism" *Survival*, Vol.56, No.4, 2014, pp.119-140; Zeynep Arkan and Müge Kınacıoğlu, "Enabling 'Ambitious Activism': Davutoğlu's Vision of a New Foreign Policy Identity for Turkey" *Turkish Studies*, Vol.17, No.3, 2016, pp.381-405.

occurred with the JDP's coming to power in 2002. Identity-based approaches assert that Turkish political discourse has begun to change with the JDP's ascending to power and Eastern and Islamic components of the Turkish identity have become more evident in the foreign policy discourse. This new identity reference has provided Turkey to improve its distant and low-profile relations with the Middle East. In this context, Turkey put military and security dimensions of its regional relations in the back burner and focused rather on economic and trade dimensions.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, studies approaching Turkey's changing engagement in the context of internal political competition read foreign policy as an area of political struggle between civilian and military. Accordingly, with an extremely pragmatic approach, the JDP wished to have the political sphere civilianized, therefore, delimit the military by purifying foreign policy from military issues as much as possible, because foreign policy was a means for military tutelage. In line with this pragmatic approach, the JDP government followed the integrationist policies towards the Middle East countries, especially the neighboring states. Following the Ergenekon and Sledgehammer law suits which changed the balance of power in favor of civilians in 2008 and 2010 respectively, the JDP continued to instrumentalize foreign policy in order to consolidate its power. Supporting Islamist groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, in countries where Arab uprisings were on the agenda, the JDP tried to attract conservative voters inside by claiming leadership over Muslim communities. In accord with this pragmatist approach, the discourse formed by the Government created crises and challenges in foreign policy.<sup>4</sup>

As part of the studies on Turkey's changing engagement in the Middle East, explanations issued at the regional system level came to the forefront. They focus on the transformative effect of the Arab uprisings on state behaviors and suggest that decision-makers used the experiences as an opportunity. According to this approach, the focal point of Turkey's low engagement strategy, the policy of zero-problem with neighbors, lost its popularity due to the Arab uprisings. This new conjuncture put pressure on decision-makers to redesign foreign policy. In this context, Turkey headed for interventionist tools from the integrationist foreign policy instruments.<sup>5</sup>

3 Joerg Baudner, "The Evolution of Turkey's Foreign Policy under the Ak Party Government" *Insight Turkey*, Vol.16, No.3, 2014, pp. 85-89; Emel Parlar Dal, "The Transformation of Turkey's Relations with the Middle East: Illusion or Awakening?" *Turkish Studies*, Vol.13, No.2, 2012, pp. 250-257; Meliha B. Altunışık and Lenore G. Martin, "Making Sense of Turkish Foreign Policy in the Middle East under AKP" *Turkish Studies*, Vol.12, No.4, 2011, pp.577-578.

4 Burak Bilgehan Özpek and Nebahat Tanrıverdi Yaşar, "Populism and foreign policy in Turkey under the AKP rule" *Turkish Studies*, Vol.19, No.2, 2018, pp. 198-216; Bill Park, "Turkey's 'New' Foreign Policy: Newly Influential or Just Over-active?" *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol.19, No.2, 2014, pp.161-164.

5 Ömer Taşpınar, "Turkey's Strategic Vision and Syria" *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol.35,

However, this change was not sufficient to distract Turkey from its vision about the Middle East. For, the Arab uprisings had the potential to promote regional stability, economic cooperation and interdependence by means of creating an opportunity to have direct contact with the Middle East communities. Hence, this change opened the door for Turkey to construct a new regional order.<sup>6</sup>

Considering the course of Turkey-Middle East relations in 2000-2002 and the transition process covering the early stages of the Arab uprisings, it may be said that causal explanation at three different levels composing a large part of the literature does not reflect the reality on the ground. Contrary to the claims made at individual and state levels, the beginning of the first period in which the low engagement strategy was put into work corresponds to the year 2000 and not to 2002. Turkey left behind security issues with its neighbors, such as Iraq, Iran and Syria and began to improve its economic and trade relations with them but before the JDP government and the Davutoğlu factor, relations were tense.<sup>7</sup> For instance, after the sanctions imposed before the Gulf War on Iraq were eased in December 1999, Turkey's export to Iraq significantly increased (58%) in the first eight months of 2000. Similar to the case of Iraq, Turkey-Iran trade relations developed, as well. The trade between the two countries gained momentum with the establishment of the Turkish-Iranian Business Council in 2001. Elsewhere, Turkey-Syria relations similarly developed. After a protocol was signed between the two countries, the railways not operating since 1993 were put back into operation in 2001, and the Joint Economic Commission not functioning since 1988 was revived, first meeting was held in Istanbul in June 2001.<sup>8</sup>

The literature emphasizes Davutoğlu's world of thought or the JDP's ascending to power in November 2002 as the causal factors of Turkey's low engagement strategy. However, relations that developed with Iraq, Iran and Syria since 2000 demonstrate that the literature is mistaken on this account.

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No.3, 2012, p.135; Soli Özel, "Waves, Ways and Historical Turns: Turkey's Strategic Quest", *GMF Policy Brief on Turkey*, 30 January 2012; Emirhan Yorulmazlar and Ebru Turhan, "Turkish Foreign Policy towards the Arab Spring: Between Western Orientation and Regional Disorder" *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, Vol.17, No.3, 2015, pp.337-352.

- 6 Tarık Oğuzlu, "The 'Arab Spring' and the Rise of the 2.0 Version of Turkey's 'zero problems with neighbors' Policy" *Sam Papers*, 1, 2012; Özgür Özdamar, B. Toygar Halistoprak, İ. Erkam Sula, "From Good Neighbor to Model: Turkey's Changing Roles in the Middle East in the Aftermath of the Arab Spring" *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol.11, No.42, 2014, pp.105-108.
- 7 Mustafa Aydın and Damla Aras, "Political Conditionality of Economic Relations between Paternalist States: Turkey's Interaction with Iran, Iraq and Syria", *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Vol.27, No.1/2, 2005, pp. 21-43.
- 8 Kılıç Buğra Kanat, "Continuity of Change of Turkish Foreign Policy under the JDP Government: The Cases of Bilateral Relations with Israel and Syria" *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Vol.34, 2012, pp. 239-242.

Trade relations began to develop with the neighboring countries during the coalition of the Democratic Left Party, the Motherland Party and the Nationalist Movement Party, each of which has a different political identity, indicate the causal factor is not individual-based or identity-based. Besides, Turkish military's support for foreign policy demonstrates the readings in the context of domestic political struggle were wrong. Another point that individual, state and the regional-system level explanations are missing is Turkey's transition process from low to high engagement. Studies associating the Arab uprisings with Davutoğlu or the JDP's Islamist identity studies, and representing them as the causality behind the change in Turkish foreign policy, in general, argue that Turkey seized the uprisings as a big opportunity. However, Turkey's reaction during the occurrences of the riots refutes these arguments. Turkish authorities did not show any reaction from the onset of the revolts on December 18, 2010 until the overthrow of Zain al Abedeen Bin Ali on January 14, 2011 in Tunisia. On the other hand, Turkey sternly reacted against the military intervention in Libya and tried to mediate between the Muammar Ghaddafi regime and the opponents.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Turkey engaged in mediation during the revolts in Syria, kept communication channels both with the regime and the opponents and exerted tremendous efforts to resolve the crisis peacefully.<sup>10</sup>

The existing literature not only ignores Turkey's desire to end crises with peaceful methods by means of mediation attempts but also misses the fact that transition to high engagement strategy, in which military means are put into operation, was beyond the will of its. The remark of "as the regional transition is completed, we will continue our efforts for the regional integration with the spirit of zero-problem with neighbors,"<sup>11</sup> in an article written by Davutoğlu, indicate that the decision-makers preferred low engagement but the conditions beyond their will forced them into high engagement. Otherwise, to explain the change at individual and state levels leaves unanswered a range of questions: If the efforts of Turkey to build a regional order by using military means are the projection of Davutoğlu's world of thought or the identity characteristics of the JDP government, why did Turkey not put this strategy into practice in 2002-2010? What was it that pushed Turkey into exhibiting aggressive behavior in the second period despite peaceful wishes and efforts?

Unlike the existing literature, we argue that the engagement style of the U.S., the single pole of the global power distribution after the Cold War, towards the Middle East shaped the behaviors of the regional countries. The

9 Thomas Seibert, "Turkey pursues Libya mediation efforts despite setbacks" *The National*, April 7, 2011.

10 Pinar Akpınar, "Mediations as a Foreign Policy Tool in the Arap Spring: Turkey, Qatar and Iran", *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, Vol.17, No.3, 2015, pp.254-257.

11 Ahmet Davutoğlu, "Zero Problems in a New Era" *Foreign Policy Magazine*, March 21, 2013.

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over-engagement of the U.S. in the Middle East that minimized the power gaps in 2000-2010 transformed into a passive engagement that refrained from the responsibility of fighting regional crises, and rather opened space for other actors after 2010. This transformation radically changed Turkey's Middle East policy and drove its to adopt a policy based on use of force rather than a policy that mostly focused on economic and commercial relations.

### Types of the Super Power's Grand Strategy in Unipolar Structure

The structure of the international system that was reshaped when the Soviet Union lost its super power status in the early 1990s transformed into a unipolar structure where only the U.S. has the super power status. This receives wide acceptance in the literature.<sup>12</sup> As we arrive at the end of the third decade today, unipolar global power distribution still continues to exist. Whether the unipolar power distribution can survive is closely related to whether in the strategic regions beyond the the polar leader's own region, any one state can or cannot reach a dominating position.<sup>13</sup>

The super power intends to maintain the existing global power distribution and is involved in power relations in other strategic regions through grand strategies it follows. First of all, an answer is needed for this secondary question in terms of this study; which grand-strategy options does the super power have in the strategic regions beyond its own in the unipolar international system? In this study, by benefitting from the literature, we argue that the super power has four different grand-strategy options in the unipolar international system. These are: active engagement, passive engagement, over-engagement and dis-engagement.<sup>14</sup>

In this study, to distinguish the above-mentioned four grand strategies, we consider essential two main parameters, which are the regional balance of power and the regional security order. Accordingly, we separate each grand

- 12 Kenneth N. Waltz, "The Emerging Structure of International Politics", *International Security*, Vol.18, No.2, 1993, pp.44-79; Robert Jervis, "Unipolarity: A Structural Perspective", *World Politics*, Vol.61, No.1, 2009, pp.188-213; William C. Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World", *International Security*, Vol.24, No.1, 1999, pp.5-41; Nuno P. Monteiro, *Theory of Unipolar Politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2014, John Ikenberry, Michael Mastanduno and William C. Wohlforth, "Unipolarity, State Behavior and Systemic Consequences", *World Politics*, Vol.61, No.1, 2009, pp.1-27.
- 13 Jervis, "Unipolarity: A Structural Perspective", pp.188-213. Wohlforth, "The Stability of Unipolar World", pp. 4-41; Robert Powell, "Stability and the Distribution of Power, *World Politics*, Vol.48, No.2, 1996, pp. 239-267; Ikenberry, Mastanduno and Wohlforth, "Unipolarity, State Behavior and Systemic Consequences", pp.1-27.
- 14 Robert J. Art, *A Grand Strategy for America*, Cornell University Press, New York, 2003, pp.7-11; Stephen G. Brooks and William Wohlforth, *America Abroad: The United States' Global Role in the 21st Century*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2016, pp.73-87; Barry R. Posen and Andrew L. Ross, "Competing Visions for U.S Grand Strategy, *International Security*, Vol.21, No.3, 1996, pp.5-53; Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present*, Cornell University Press, New York, 2006, pp.3-9.



strategy from the other, in the region it is applied, by looking at whether or not it changes the regional balance of power and if it builds regional security order. Firstly, if the super power takes responsibility for both to maintain regional balance of power and build regional security order in a specific region, it is then presumed that the super power is actively engaged in this region. Secondly, if the super power disregards to build regional security order in a particular region and focuses only on to maintain existing regional balance of power, it is then presumed that the super power is passively engaged in this region. Thirdly, if the super power exhibits a behavior to break both regional balance of power and regional security order in a certain region for its own favor, then it is acknowledged that the super power is over-engaged in that specific region. Lastly, if the super power exhibits no behavior to take responsibility for either to protect regional balance of power or build regional security order, it is then presumed that the super power is not engaged in this particular region. Table I systematically depicts the types of reflections the super power creates on a region when the afore-mentioned grand strategies are applied.

**Table I:** Grand Strategy Options of the Super Power in a Unipolar System and Its Regional Implications

	<b>Disengagement</b>	<b>Passive Engagement</b>	<b>Active Engagement</b>	<b>Over Engagement</b>
<b>Behavioral Pattern of Super Power</b>	Neither defensive nor offensive	Defensive	Defensive	Offensive
<b>Means of Implementation</b>	Not to have military existence and not making security commitments	Low level military presence No security commitments	Both military presence and Security commitments	Excessive level of military presence
<b>Regional Balance of Power</b>	Outside the Area of Responsibility	Passive protective	Active protective	Destructive
<b>Regional Security Order</b>	Outside the Area of Responsibility	Outside the Area of Responsibility	Active protective	Destructive
<b>Regional Power Vacuum</b>	Exists	Exists	Does not exist	Does not exist

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<b>Regional Security Deficit</b>	Exists	Exists	Does not exist	Exists originating from the super power but not from regional power
<b>Behavioral Pattern of Regional Powers</b>	Severely anti status quoist in order to fill the power gap and eliminate the security deficit	Somewhat anti-status quoist in order to fill the power gap and eliminate the security deficit	Pro-status quo due to no power gap and security deficit	Pro-status quo due to no power gap

**Kaynak:** İsmail Akdoğan, *Saudi Arabia; Between Dependence and Non Dependency*, Kadim Press, 2020

### **Relatively Stable Period in the Middle East: From 2000 to 2010**

#### ***The U.S. Grand Strategy towards the Middle East: Over-engagement***

At the onset of the second decade after the Cold War ended, it was witnessed that the U.S. grand strategies in the Middle East were radically restructured. In the period 2000-2010, it is clearly seen that the U.S. attitude and behavior towards the Middle East show the characteristics of the above described over-engagement strategy. With its attitude and behaviors exhibited in the Middle East, the U.S. was breaking the regional balance of power and destroying the regional security order.

A closer look at the textual background of the U.S. grand strategy in the period 2000-2010 reveals that the content of national strategy documents encapsulates the elements of over-engagement strategy. In this regard, the first document to mention is the former President George W. Bush's "State of the Union" address in January 2002.<sup>15</sup> In this address, it is drawn attention to an imminent national security threat the U.S. faces; Iran and Iraq are described as the "axes of evil" that pose a national security threat.

The second document dissected, in this context, is the "West Point" address of the former President Bush in July 2002.<sup>16</sup> It dwells upon that the 9/11 attacks presented the U.S. a historic opportunity to reshape the world and that security threats cannot be overcome by defense-oriented foreign policy means (containment and deterrence, etc.) and that action must be taken, from now on, through pre-emptive strikes against authoritarian

15 "President Delivers State of Union Address", *The White House*, January 29, 2002.

16 "President Bush Delivers Graduation Speech at West Point", *The White House*, June 1,

states that are trying to procure WMDs. Again, by the same token, another document to be examined is the Pentagon report (dated August 2002) on September 11, 2001 attacks. Pentagon describes Saudi Arabia as the “kernel of evil” for its authoritarian political system and religious understanding of Wahhabism.<sup>17</sup>

The most comprehensive strategy document specifying the framework of the U.S. policy in the Middle East is “The National Security Strategy of the United States of America” published by the White House, in September 2002.<sup>18</sup> This strategy document states that the U.S.’s superiority of power will be used to build a global balance of power in which the national interests and national security of the U.S. will be further assured. In addition, the document referring to the strategy of “the best defense is offense” reiterated that there will be pre-emptive and preventive attacks, and there will be no hesitation in acting unilaterally. The last document on the U.S. grand strategy in the period 2000-2010 is “The National Security Strategy of the United States of America” published in March 2006.<sup>19</sup> The document emphasizes that the U.S. will determinedly continue to fight against countries with WMDs in the Middle East on a pre-emptive platform and build democratic political systems in the region.

Secondly, concrete outcomes of the over-engagement strategy can be seen in the region if one looks at the practical implications of the U.S. grand strategy for the Middle East in the period 2000-2010. The first indication of the US’s behavior in the Middle East being shaped by the over-engagement strategy is its behavior towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. During the period of the Second Intifada (September 2000 - February 2005), the U.S. did not adopt a constructive attitude during the Intifada and supported Israel implicitly.<sup>20</sup> In fact, then the President Bush announced, in 2001, that the U.S. would focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict along the axis of the U.S.-Israel friendship.<sup>21</sup> In a letter, he sent to the then Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in April 2004, Bush stated that the U.S. recognized the right of Israel over the strategically important parts of the Palestinian territory.<sup>22</sup> Israel, not pressured by the U.S., and even had the implicit support of the U.S., exhibited expansionist behavior.<sup>23</sup>

2002.

- 17 “Saudi Arabia is kernel of evil, says US brief” *The Telegraph*, August 7, 2002.
- 18 “The National Security Strategy of United States of America”, *The White House*, September 17, 2002.
- 19 “The National Security Strategy of United States of America”, *The White House*, March 16, 2006.
- 20 Marina Ottoway and Mohammed Herzallah, “The New Arab Diplomacy: Not with the U.S. and not against U.S.”, *Carnegie Papers*, 94, 2008, p.7.
- 21 Bernard Reich, *A Brief History of Israel*, Fact on File, New York, 2008, p.221.
- 22 “Letter from President Bush to Prime Minister Sharon”, *The White House*, April 14, 2004.
- 23 Osama Anter Hamdi, “American Foreign Policy toward the Arab-Israeli Conflict: Strate-

On the other side, the U.S. adopting the over-engagement strategy in the Middle East ended the containment policy implemented against Iraq and Iran in the 1990s, and prioritized use of force. In this context, the U.S. asserting the existence of a link between al Qaeda and the Baath regime and of WMDs in Iraq occupied this country in 2003. The occupation of Iraq and the ensuing developments became the concrete indication that the U.S. was using its superiority of power in an aggressive way and that the regime-building policy was carried into effect in Iraq. Upon the completion of the U.S. occupation in Iraq, Iran - the country named as the "axis of evil" - was next to be exposed to use of force by the U.S. Beginning with the mid-2000s the Washington administration began to voice out that to change the Iranian regime is inevitable due to its support for Hamas and Hezbollah and the nuclear program it has executed. President Bush declared in January 2006 both to the Iranian people and the world public opinion that the regime change in Iran was necessary.<sup>24</sup> In this period, the U.S. was providing support to the PJAK organization through Iraq and the dissidents and minority groups in Iran for instability and internal chaos in the country.<sup>25</sup> In the same period of time, the U.S. was exercising similar pressure over Saudi Arabia. The U.S. Congress and intelligence services were claiming that there was a link between al Qaeda and the Saudi regime, and that the ideology of Wahhabism and the authoritarian political structure of Saudi Arabia were a resource of terror.<sup>26</sup>

Lastly, structural reflections of the over-engagement strategy of the U.S. on the balance of power in the Middle East in the period 2000-2010 should be enlightened. With the over-engagement strategy, the super power aims to build in other strategic regions an imbalance of power similar to the one that exists in own region in favor of the U.S. That means regional imbalance of power works for the super power, and weakens or takes under control, the power capacity of regional powers regarded as potential challengers in the region.<sup>27</sup> Thus, the super power revises both the global and the regional power distributions in favor of itself.<sup>28</sup> With this strategy, the super power takes a central role in the regional power relations and becomes the only state that decides the regional power distribution. Defensive means, such as deterrence and containment, are replaced by offensive means, such

gic Transformations", *Insight Turkey*, Vol.20, No.2, 2018, p.263.

24 "State of Union Address by the President", *The White House*, January 31, 2006.

25 Joseph A. Kechichian, "Can Conservative Arab Gulf Monarchies Endure a Forth War in the Persian Gulf?", *Middle East Journal*, Vol.61, No.2, 2006, p.289.

26 "Congressional Reports: Joint Inquiry into Intelligence Community Activities after the Terrorist Attacks of September 11, 2001", *United States Congress*, July 24, 2003.

27 Barry R. Posen and Andrew L. Ross, "Competing Visions for U.S. Grand Strategy", *International Security*, Vol.21, No.3, 1996-1997, p.30.

28 James Kurt, "America's Grand Strategy: A Pattern of History", *National Interest*, 43, 1996, pp.3-19.

as pre-emptive and preventive interventions/wars.<sup>29</sup> As a result the super power over-engaged in the region turns into a nonregional power center unsettling balance and order. In this case, it means, the real security threat for regional powers comes from the super power behaving aggressively.

Over-engagement strategy produces two structural results on regional power relations. The first is that power gap is at minimum while security deficit is at maximum in the region where the super power is over-engaged. The super power's forward military presence in the region – through occupation or some other ways – narrows the regional powers' sphere of influence. In addition, the regional powers lack power capacity to resist the super power who is directly settled in the region. Thus, security concerns of regional powers increases for indirectly being neighbors to the super power. Nonetheless, in the minimum power gap, environment of competition and conflict weaken among the regional actors. Secondly, in the region in which the super power is over-engaged, rapprochement takes place among the regional powers not following the super power. This rapprochement, however, is the consolidation of political and economic/commercial relations that do not disturb much the super power rather than a military and security-centered one.

### ***Turkey's Middle East Policy: Low Engagement***

In this 10-year period, a relatively stable structure dominated among the regional actors, and Turkey followed low engagement strategy aiming to improve political, economic and trade relations with the regional countries. To this end, on the one side, Turkey conducted mediation works to end the crises that were likely to jeopardize its improving relations with the countries in the region; and, on the other, tried to bring in an institutional structure through bilateral/multi-lateral agreements with the regional countries.

In this two-column low engagement strategy, the first column consists of mediation attempts to peacefully end three main regional crises; the first of these attempts were the initiatives to settle the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Mediation efforts were brought to the agenda through the visits of the Foreign Minister of the period, Abdullah Gül, to Israel and Palestine in January 2005. Turkey's role increased when Israel decided to withdraw from Gaza in August 2005. As a result of Turkey's intensive efforts, President of Israel Shimon Peres and the Palestinian Authority leader Mahmoud Abbas met in Ankara (November 2007) and discussed the steps to be taken for building permanent peace.<sup>30</sup> The second of Turkey's mediation activities was about the solution of the 25-year-old crisis between Israel and Syria. The process

29 Robert J. Art, *A Grand Strategy for America*, Cornell University Press, New York, 2003, p.89.

30 Esra Cuhadar, "Turkey as A Third Party in Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Assessment and Reflections" *Perceptions*, Vol.12, No.1, 2007, pp.100-107.

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began in 2004 when the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad requested the help of Prime Minister Erdoğan to overcome the deadlock that had occurred in Syria-Israel talks. The mediation efforts were accelerated when the Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert positively approached Turkey's mediation. It was announced that the two countries began indirect peace talks under Turkey's supervision on May 21, 2008.<sup>31</sup>

The last of Turkey's mediation efforts was between Iran and the West, and on one of the most critical crisis areas in the region, Iran's nuclear program. The mediation role provided was the result of Turkey's close ties with both Iran and western countries, thus the involved parties accepted Turkey's mediation. On the one hand, Turkey conducted heavy diplomacy traffic to convince Iran and the western countries for nuclear swap, and avoided positions that might cast shadow on its mediation activities, on the other. In this connection, by abstaining from a vote to condemn Iran on November 27, 2009 at the IAEA, and voting against the expansion of sanctions on Iran on June 9, 2010 at the United Nations Security Council, Turkey prevented any harm to its mediation efforts.<sup>32</sup>

On the one side, with its mediation efforts, Turkey was trying to thwart potential conflicts to harm the regional stability, and on the other, it was seeking permanent political, economic and trade relations with the countries in the region by signing bilateral/multilateral agreements. Political, economic and trade relations, forming the second column of the low engagement strategy, were accelerated with the "Strategy to Develop Trade with Neighbor and Surrounding Countries" prepared by the Office of Foreign Trade Undersecretary in 2000.<sup>33</sup> The main objectives were: signing agreements with the countries of the region for the liberalization of goods, capital and human flow; harmonization of economic infrastructures in the region - transport and customs, in particular; the implementation of projects for the transportation of oil and natural gas produced in the region via Turkey to Europe; with special programs, supporting the activities of Turkish construction companies; and creating the conditions to accelerate the flow of foreign capital to Turkey.

Following the first meeting of the Turkish-Iraqi Joint Economic Commission held in Baghdad in February 2000, the rapidly developing bilateral relations experienced a short-term break with the U.S. occupation

31 Altunışık and Cuhadar, "Turkey's Search for Third Party Role in Arab-Israeli Conflicts: A Neutral Facilitator or a Principal Power Mediator" *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol.15, No.3, 2010, pp.380-382.

32 Rahman G. Bonab, "Turkey's Emerging Role as a Mediator on Iran's Nuclear Activities" *Insight Turkey*, Vol.11, No.3, 2009, pp.161-175.

33 Hüsamettin Kılıçkaya, "Komşu ve Çevre Ülkeler İle Ticareti Geliştirme Stratejisi" *The Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, (in Turkish), March 11, 2019.

in Iraq in 2003. However, the reconstruction of post-war Iraq and the need for many different sectors (particularly energy) was an important opportunity for Turkish firms. Within the framework of signed agreements in the energy sector in 2006, Turkish companies, such as Turkey Petroleum Corporation (TPAO), General Energy and Pet Oil, joined in oil exploration-mining operations, and took active roles in delivering Iraqi oil to international markets. The commercial and economic relations gained an institutional framework with the agreement of the High Level Strategic Cooperation Council (HLSCC) signed in Baghdad on July 10, 2008.<sup>34</sup> Iran is another country with which Turkey made a remarkable progress in political, economic and trade relations. In November 2001, Turkish-Iranian Business Council was established for developing commercial relations between the two countries. The parties signed agreements in many different areas, particularly in energy, to facilitate trade and investment between the two countries. The most important of them was the “Economic Cooperation Organization Trade Agreement” signed with Pakistan and Iran on July 17, 2003. In the scope of the agreement, the signatories decided to gradually lower tariffs, and keep the highest tax rate not to exceed 15 percent at the end of the next eight years.<sup>35</sup>

Syria is yet another country that Turkey associates importance with as part of its strategy to develop political, economic and trade relations with the neighboring countries. After 13 years, the Joint Economic Commission reactivated in 2001, and facilitated investment of Turkish firms in Syria. In terms of political and trade relations between the two countries, the most significant development, called “the beginning of the golden age”, occurred during Assad’s visit to Turkey in September 2009. During the visit, High-level Cooperation Council (HLCC) agreement was signed. Accordingly, in addition to free movement of goods, free movement of people was also recognized by lifting visa requirements mutually.<sup>36</sup> Besides, joint cabinet meetings were held with the participation of the ministers of the two countries and important steps were taken for political integration.

Turkey’s low engagement strategy was not only limited to neighboring countries. The institutional structure of the relations developed with Syria, in particular, was extended to include Jordan and Lebanon. In this context, the most noteworthy development was the 3rd Turkish-Arab Cooperation Forum held in Istanbul on June 10, 2010. A High-Level Quadruple Cooperation Council was established to ensure integration among the

34 S. Gülden Ayman, “Turkey and Iran: Between Friendly Competition and Fierce Rivalry” *Arab Studies*, Vol.36, No.1, 2014, pp.13-15.

35 Bayram Sinkaya, “Rationalization of Turkey-Iran Relations: Prospects and Limits” *Insight Turkey*, Vol.14, No.2, 2012, pp.138-142.

36 Turkey-Syria 1st HLSCC Meeting Joint Declaration, December 22-23, Damascus, *The Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs* (in Turkish), March 11, 2019.

four countries. Agreements involving the free movement of goods and persons were signed with these countries; hence, the agreements gained an institutional framework.<sup>37</sup> Facilitating foreign capital flows and supporting the activities of Turkish construction companies through various agreements is one of the primary objectives of the strategy to improve relations with neighboring and surrounding countries. They also reflected the overall nature of the relations between Turkey and the GCC. In line with these objectives, Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement was signed on May 2005 between Turkey and the GCC.<sup>38</sup> Accordingly, prevention of double taxation, facilitation of visa process for the citizens of all the involved countries and the promotion of mutual investments were recognized. Following the agreement, the Gulf capital's purchases in Turkey and biddings in the construction and infrastructure sectors awarded to Turkish companies were particularly noteworthy.

### **Relatively Unstable Period in the Middle East: Post-2010**

#### ***U.S. Grand Strategy in the Middle East: Passive Engagement***

In 2010, the U.S. restructured the grand strategy it had pursued in the Middle East for a while. The strategy of over-engagement in the period of 2000-2010 was replaced by a passive engagement strategy. In line with this strategy, the U.S. undertook its responsibilities in maintaining the regional balance of power, but avoided responsibilities to establish a regional security order. This inevitably reshaped the strategic environment where the regional powers interacted.

In the post-2010 period, as far as the textual background of the revised grand strategy of the U.S. is considered, the first document worth-mentioning is the National Security Strategy text published by the White House in May 2010.<sup>39</sup> To begin with, the document states that the U.S.'s power superiority has declined due to the strategy implemented in the previous decade, and that it is necessary to act sensitive about the use of power in order to avoid this downturn. The document refers neither to targeting definitions such as "axis of evil" and "rogue states", nor mentions about pre-emptive and preventive aggressive foreign policy instruments. It states that the excessive use of military power and the failure to share cost/responsibility with the regional actors eroded the U.S.'s power capacity. It is emphasized that the high-level of military presence, particularly in the Middle East, should be

37 Özlem Tür, "Economic Relations with the Middle East under the AKP—Trade, Business Community and Reintegration with Neighboring Zones", *Turkish Studies*, Vol.12, No.4, 2011, pp.596-597.

38 Robert Olson, "Turkey's Relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council from 2003 to 2007: New Paradigms?" *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Vol.19, No.3, 2008, pp.68-87.

39 "National Security Strategy", *The White House*, May 1, 2010.



decreased to a reasonable level and effective cost-sharing with the regional powers should be insisted upon.

Another document that needs to be addressed in terms of creating the textual infrastructure of the U.S.' Middle East policy is the article "America's Pacific Century" written by the then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in October 2011.<sup>40</sup> The article underlines that in the last decade, the U.S. spent its resources in Afghanistan and Iraq at an advanced level, but in the following one the U.S. has to transfer its energy to East Asia. Yet another document is the "Defense Strategy Document" issued by the Pentagon in January 2012.<sup>41</sup> The document points out that China is a security threat in East Asia and Iran in the Middle East, urging that the U.S. should share responsibility with the regional actors in the Middle East and concentrate on the Asia-Pacific region.

The White House issued a comprehensive security document entitled the "National Security Strategy" in February 2015.<sup>42</sup> This document is, at many points, consistent with the security document released in May 2010. It emphasized that, for durable global power supremacy, the U.S. should use its power economically and share responsibility with regional actors. The document states that the U.S. will remain in the background in the process of protecting the regional balance of power and security in the Middle East and that active participation of the regional actors will be encouraged. The security document clearly states that the way to ensure security and stability in the Middle East does not go through the use of U.S. military presence, but the regional powers to have the capacity to defend themselves and take active responsibility.

Secondly, when the behavioral practices of the textual infrastructure of the U.S.'s passive engagement strategy are examined in the post-2010 period, the first change is observed in the U.S. policy on Iraq. In parallel with the security document dated May 2010, the number of soldiers dropped from 120,000 to 50,000 in August 2010 with the withdrawal of the vast majority of invading American troops.<sup>43</sup> The pullout of the remaining American troops was completed in December 2011.<sup>44</sup> In this period, the U.S. approach to Iran was altered in accordance with the passive engagement strategy. In the process of preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, unlike the previous period, the threat of using force was pushed to the background, and international sanctions, diplomacy, dialogue and negotiation were effectively exercised. On the one hand, Iran had been subjected to heavy economic

40 Hillary R. Clinton "American's Passific Century", *Foreign Affairs*, October 11, 2011.

41 "Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defence", *Department of Defense*, January 3, 2012.

42 "National Security Strategy", *The White House*, February 6, 2015.

43 "Obama: U.S. Combat Mission in Iraq to End This Month", *Reuters*, August 2, 2010.

44 "Last U.S. Combat Troops Leave Iraq", *Al Jazeera*, December 18, 2018.

sanctions since the summer of 2010, but on the other, negotiation door had always been left open to Iran. Ultimately, Iran had to sit at the table with the U.S. The direct negotiations with P5+1 countries in October 2013 ended with the signing of the nuclear agreement in July 2015. After 2010, the attitude and behavior of the U.S. were shaped on the basis of the elements of passive engagement strategy in the civil wars in Syria, Yemen and Libya, where all had become fields for power struggles of global and regional actors. In these civil wars, the U.S. preferred to remain behind in the passive position but shared responsibility by bringing the regional allies to the forefront.

Thirdly, given the structural implications of the passive engagement strategy in the Middle East in the post-2010 period, this strategy does not give the super power the responsibility to build a regional security order but in the protection of the balance of power in the region. Moreover, the responsibility of the superpower to maintain the regional balance of power is in the scope of “postponed responsibility”. In other words, the responsibility to balance out the states that act in the direction of changing the balance of power in the region is primarily burdened on the regional forces. If they fail, the intervention of the superpower is necessary. Thus, with its passive engagement strategy, superpower transforms into a passive balancing power center outside the region.

Passive engagement strategy of the super power has two fundamental structural consequences on the power relations of the region where it is implemented: First, both power gap and security deficit arise in the relevant region. The structural conditions that occur as a consequence of the weakening impact of the unipolar global power structure on the regional power structure simultaneously introduce both opportunities and threats for the regional powers. The regional powers, expanding maneuvering areas in the power gap, intensely compete with each other in order to fill the gap for their own benefit. On the other hand, due to the emerging security gap, the security dilemma increases with the regional powers’ increasing security concerns about each other. Secondly, in the region where the passive engagement strategy applies, regional forces exhibit balancing behavior towards each other on the one hand, and establish alliance relations with each other, on the other. This brings about flexible and changing alliance relations in the region. As the U.S. terminated over-engagement strategy and adopted passive engagement strategy in the Middle East since the midst of 2010, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Israel have engaged in regional rivalry.

### ***Turkey’s Middle East Policy: High Engagement***

Power vacuum and security deficit that occurred as a result of the structural change in the Middle East led Turkey to revise its regional strategy. Turkey adapted to the conditions imposed by this new structure, and radically

changed the two columns of the low engagement strategy and implemented high engagement strategy by bringing military means into play. In the period Turkey adopted low engagement strategy towards the Middle East, it was engaged in mediation activities for peaceful settlements of regional crises. In the second period, in new crisis areas, Turkey directly positioned itself and engaged in power struggle with its regional rivals. On the other hand, regression<sup>45</sup> was observed in the other column of the low engagement strategy, i.e. developing political, economic and commercial relations with the countries of the region and designing institutional framework for these relations. On the other hand, flexible/changing formal and informal alliances shaped around security issues have become more visible.

The first indicator of high engagement strategy was Turkey's being a direct party in the regional crises and embarking on a fierce power struggle with regional competitors. Iraq is one of the areas where this new strategy was practiced; military means were put into play to fight against threats posed by the security deficit and to take advantage of the opportunities created by the power gap. Following the U.S. decision to withdraw from Iraq, the question of who will be influential over Iraq came to the agenda of regional actors such as Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia. The Iraqi elections in March 2010 were a serious breaking point for this power struggle. As part of the low engagement strategy, Turkey together with Saudi Arabia supported the Iraqiyyah group, led by Iyad Allawi, against Nouri al Maliki backed by Iran in the Iraqi general elections. After being re-elected as the prime minister, Maliki isolated some politicians such as Tariq al-Hashimi and Rafe al Isawi, who are known for their proximity to Turkey. An act of counter-balancing led to rapprochement between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government. Bilateral relations gained momentum with the establishment of Turkish General Consulate in Arbil in March 2010.<sup>46</sup> In terms of fighting with threats that occurred as a result of the power vacuum and security gap in Iraq, and of its approach to benefit from arising opportunities, Turkey approached KRG trying to balance out the relations between Iran and the Baghdad administration. Upon the KRG's referendum for independence in 2017, Turkey changed its position. Following the KRG's referendum, Turkey considering that territorial integrity of Iraq was necessary for its own national security came closer to the Baghdad administration and Iran. In this respect, a military intervention was brought to the table in September 2017 in case of the KRG's possible independence; Turkey with the Baghdad administration organized a military exercise.<sup>47</sup>

45 The number of economic and trade agreements Turkey signed with the Middle Eastern countries made a peak in 2010, but rapidly decreased as of 2010; see, Aylin Aydın Çakır and Gül Arıkan Akdağ, "An Empirical Analysis of the Change in Turkish Foreign Policy under the AKP Government" *Turkish Studies*, Vol.12, No.4, 2017, p.346.

46 Ayman, "Turkey and Iran: Between Friendly Competition and Fierce Rivalry", pp.16-17.

47 Galip Dalay, "Evolution of Turkey-Iraqi Kurdistan's Relations" *Al-Jazeera Report*, De-

In terms of fighting with threats that occurred as a result of the power vacuum and security gap in the Middle East, another example of Turkey's high engagement strategy is Syria. Turkey conducted mediation efforts between the sides in the first six months of the uprising in Syria. However, Turkey, seeing that such attempts in the new regional structure were outfashioned, had to resort to hard power elements. After the Syrian opposition's getting organized in Istanbul in September 2011, Turkey sought ways to change the regime in Syria. With the economic and military assistance of Qatar and Saudi Arabia, Turkey played a key role in the armament of the Syrian opposition forces. In this respect, a military command center was formed in the southern Turkish province of Adana so as to increase the efficiency of military aid to the Syrian dissidents.

Turkey was actively fighting the security deficits that originated from the regional power vacuum while it was putting military means into play to fill this gap. Especially, the Syrian regime's downing a Turkish fighter jet in June 2012, the drop of shells to the settlements near the border and the bomb attack against the Cilvegözü border crossing by individuals linked with the Syrian intelligence Muhabarat demonstrated that Turkish national security was under serious risks. In the context of campaigning against these risks, on October 5, 2012, Turkey approved a parliamentary motion for military action in Syria proposing the dispatch of Turkish military troops to foreign countries. However, a number of developments since the summer of 2015 hampered Turkey's attempts to fill the power vacuum and maximized the security deficit. These vulnerabilities were the disagreement between Turkey and its allies regarding the solution of the Syrian crisis,<sup>48</sup> Russian military intervention in Syria in September and the manifestation of the ISIS/YPG in the Syrian equation. Turkey took measures against the threats of ISIS and YPG by launching Operation Euphrates Shield on August 24, 2016 and Operation Olive Branch on January 20, 2018.

The second indicator of the high engagement strategy was the emergence of flexible/varying formal and informal alliances shaped through security issues. In line with the high engagement strategy: Turkey attempted to fill the power gap and remove the security deficit through flexible/changing alliances, and to set-up a security mechanism through bilateral agreements. In this regard, its relations with the Gulf countries, in particular, were quite striking. Rapprochement between Gulf countries and Turkey occurred as a result of Iran's attempt to increase influence in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Bahrain since these attempts were perceived as threat by the above countries. In May 2013, Saudi Crown Prince of the period, Salman bin Abdelaziz, paid

ember 20, 2017.

48 Galip Dalay, "A difference of opinion? Fissures in US-Turkish relations after Syria" *Brookings*, January 26, 2018.

a visit to Turkey and a Defense Cooperation Agreement was signed between the two parties. Accordingly, Turkey was to manufacture its trademark Anka unmanned aerial vehicle to meet the defense needs of Saudi Arabia, and sell its the other two trademarks, Altay tank and Cirit missile, to this country.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, Turkey providing political, intelligence and logistic support to Saudi Arabia-led “Operation Decisive Storm” decided to participate in the “Islamic Alliance” to balance out Iran. Under this alliance, Turkish Special Forces participated in the military exercise dubbed “North Thunder” in Saudi Arabia in February and March 2016.

Although there was rapprochement between the two sides in the fight against the Iranian threat, Turkey was in a state of serious competition with particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE in the crises of Egypt, Libya and Qatar. The common stance in the crises of Egypt, Libya and Syria played a facilitating role in Turkey-Qatar alliance and the sides formalized the alliance after the diplomatic crisis between the Doha administration and its neighbors in March 2014. A military cooperation agreement was signed between the two countries during a visit by the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al Thani, to Ankara in December 2014. According to the agreement, two countries cooperate in defense industry, particularly in the manufacturing of joint security equipment, military exercises and technology transfer. In line with the document, the sides agreed on the contribution of Turkish army to the strengthening of the Qatari army and on the establishment of a Turkish military base in Qatar.

## Conclusion

Turkey's interest in the Middle East had remained limited over the last century; however, it has gained momentum since the beginning of the new century. Based on Turkey's varying engagements in the Middle East, this study looked for an answer to the following question: Why did Turkey give up soft power oriented approach (prioritizing diplomatic, economic and commercial relations) and embraced the use of military means in order to realize its regional interests? Unlike the existing literature addressing the change in Turkey's engagement in the Middle East at the levels of individual, state and regional-system; this study, focusing on the regional power and security relations, claimed that: In a unipolar system, the format of the grand strategy followed by the pole leader, the U.S, in strategic regions shapes the power structures of the region concerned, and that in turn shapes the agenda and means of Turkey as a regional actor. In this respect, the following two findings were reached in this study:

Firstly, in a strategic region where superpower is over-engaged in a unipolar system, the power vacuum drops to minimum but the security deficit

49 “Turkey, Saudi Arabia Sign Defense Industry Agreement” *World Bulletin*, May 21, 2013.

(resulting from the superpower) increases to maximum. In this case, regional power competition that drives power relations among regional actors, such as Turkey, and the security dilemma that determines security concerns they have about each other, weaken the conditions. The structural implication of this limited maneuvering area on the behavior of regional powers is that it allows them to develop political, economic and trade relations in a way not to disturb the superpower. This brings along a relatively stable regional order. This is the structural variable that pushed Turkey, as a regional power, to follow low engagement strategy in the Middle East during the period of 2000-2010 when the U.S. was over-engaged in the region. Secondly, in a unipolar system, both power gap and security deficit maximize in a strategic region where the superpower is passively engaged. In this case, the power competition, which determines the interaction nature of the regional actors, increases and the security dilemma that determines security perceptions of regional countries about each other, is intensified. In this area of expanded maneuvering, regional powers, on the one side, act to fill the emerging power gap and eliminate the emerging security threats, on the other.

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