The world is in the grip of a multitude of global crises. In the areas of security, economy, social justice and climate change, our globalizing world is in turmoil. Increasing uncertainty and risk are aptly characterizing the present nature of global affairs. Severe global economic crisis and European sovereign debt problem, coupled with the Arab Spring and the fallout from transformation in the MENA region, exacerbates the uncertainty and risk in global, regional and national affairs. This dismal global outlook necessitates new strategies from global actors. Turkey, in this respect, is expected to play a decisive strategic role in diffusing some of these global challenges through its proactive and multidimensional foreign policy.

Three conditions must be in place in order for the foreign policy of a sovereign state to yield the desired outcomes. First, the global political environment ought to be conducive to the implementation of state’s foreign policy agenda. Second, the state must have the capacity to realize its goals. Third, it must have a strategy. In today’s nebulous state of world affairs, Turkey meets nearly all three of these conditions. The Arab Spring and the uncertainty in the West provide Turkey with the suitable environment to interject with the developments in and beyond its region. Turkey’s valued role in the transatlantic alliance, its potential to join the European Union (EU), and the historical, cultural and economic roots in the broader Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are key components of its capacity. These values may also attest to Turkey’s soft power. However, for the reasons that will be discussed further in this paper, Turkey must transform its soft power into smart power in order to amplify its pivotal role in the region and world. For that, Turkish foreign policy needs an effective strategy in responding to the global and regional challenges.

In developing this strategy, the Turkish foreign policy must be mindful of three central tenets. First, Turkey needs the support of its traditional Western partners in tackling the political transformation and security issues in its neighborhood. Turkey must understand that only through the reaffirmation of its transatlantic ties can it project its soft power. Turkey’s active
diplomacy in its neighborhood is not against the U.S. or European interests. Nor is the nature of
the relations between the two actors reminiscent of the Cold War years. Today, Turkey is not
only an ally to the West, but it is a strategic partner. It is capable to execute a multi-vectored
foreign policy. That is, Turkey can work with France on containing the Assad regime, while it
criticizes the French position on Libya. Similarly, Turkey can disagree with the United States
regarding Israel’s Palestine and Mediterranean policies, while cooperating with Washington on
Syria and other security dimensions of the Arab Spring. In fact, strategic reassurance between
the West and Turkey equips the latter with much-needed tools to respond to security threats and
bolsters its proactive diplomacy. The visit by the U.S. Vice President Joe Biden supports this
view. Biden’s praise for Turkey’s positive contributions to the region as a secular democracy
and a viable U.S. partner demonstrates peaking, multi-vectored Turkish-U.S. relations, despite
the differences with Israel.

Second, Turkish decision makers should be careful not to fall into the trap of populism
while trying to project Turkey’s soft power. Domestically, Turkey should lead by example in
terms of its democratic practices before preaching these values to the rest of the world. Externally,
it should move beyond economic determinism and bilateral trade relations with its
neighbors, and focus more on the demands of the revolutionaries for democracy and fundamental
rights. Third, it should not waver from a pro-secular democracy message in its engagement with
the emerging Arab governments and the West.

The Arab Spring and the Permissiveness of Environment for Turkish Foreign Policy Goals

The Arab Spring will go down in history as one of the most powerful people’s movements for
fundamental freedoms and rights. The successful revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya not
only brought the oppressive regimes to their knees in these countries, but they have also inspired
the masses in Syria and Yemen to fight for their democratic and fundamental rights. In fact, the
breadth and impact of the Arab Spring go beyond the boundaries of the Middle East. Inspired by
righteous struggle of their peers on the streets of Tunis, Cairo, Tripoli and Damascus, protestors
in the UK and the United States “occupy” strategic zones in key cities and call for the end of
corrupt government and economic policies. They demand universal human rights, equality, and
just financial practices. For the first time in history, a democracy movement that sprang up in the East has had profound impact on the West.

Due to its close proximity to the epicenter of the Arab Spring and strong historical and cultural linkages, Turkey absorbs much of the fallout from the revolution. In spite of its cautious approach and inclination to stay on the sidelines earlier in the year, Turkey soon asserted itself in the developments with determination and rigor. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) government exercised more pressure on the Hosni Mubarak regime to resign than any other Muslim leadership in the region. It put its full political weight behind the NATO operations that helped Libyan rebels oust the former dictator Muammar Qaddafi. Ankara is actively engaged in democratization of Libya through its ongoing dialogue with the National Transition Council. With respect to Syria, Turkey voices some of the harshest condemnations of the atrocities committed by the Assad regime. Turkish officials have recently sanctioned the dire measures that the Arab League proposed to isolate Bashar Assad and his cronies. Furthermore, Turkey has kept its transatlantic allies in a tight loop vis-à-vis Syria. The frequent discussions between Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu and Secretary Hillary Clinton’s offices is foretelling of a comprehensive strategy to interject with the conditions in Syria, not ruling out the military option. Apart from engaging via direct foreign policy, Turkey has also provided democracy assistance to the revolutionaries in Libya as well as safe haven for the victims of the bloodshed committed by the Libyan and Syrian governments.

Nonetheless, the Arab Spring continues to put the crucial faculties of Turkish foreign policy to a formidable stress test. Ankara’s performance in responding to the events in North Africa and the Middle East has reignited the debate on Turkey’s status as a “regional power.” Turkey’s close relations with some of the toppled oppressors prior to the Arab Spring, and their sudden fall from grace in the aftermath of this event, feeds the skepticism about Davutoğlu’s “zero problems with neighbors” policy. Moreover, the projections on Turkey’s influence over the transition in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya also bring the scope and breadth of its soft power into scrutiny. While many in the region appreciate Turkey’s considerable experience in good governance, they are far less willing to embrace the “Turkish model.” At this juncture, it is important to take a closer look at the components of Turkey’s soft power. The issues that should be explored further are the fine line between soft power and populism, the capacity to convert its
soft power into smart power, and regional leadership. In this context, it is also important to acknowledge that Turkey’s time-honored role as a reliable partner of the transatlantic alliance is the basis of its soft power.

Transatlantic Relations as an Integral Component of Turkey’s Soft Power

Turkey’s close relations with the West and its status as an EU accession country reinforce Ankara’s influence in the region. Since the Cold War years Turkey has been an indispensable ally to the transatlantic alliance. By joining NATO in 1952, Turkey not only proved its Western credentials, but it also accepted an uneasy role as the southern bulwark of the alliance against the Soviet Union. The fear of creeping communism and Turkey’s geographic proximity to its source motivated Turkey to strengthen its association with the West. Especially under the Democratic Party rule from 1950 to 1960, “Ankara increasingly identified its national interests with those of the West, particularly with the United States.” Over the next decade, Turkey solidified its association with the West by signing the Ankara Agreement with then-European Community (EC) in hopes of one day becoming a full member of the EC.

At the expense of its relations with the Arab Street Turkey aligned its foreign policy more closely with that of the Western alliance in some of the most contested issues of the era. Turkey became the first Muslim country to recognize Israel. It voted in favor of France at the United Nations during the Algerian war of independence, and allowed American armed forces to use the Incirlik air base during the Lebanese crisis of 1958. Moreover, Turkey ascribed itself the role of an enforcer of Western interests in the region. In 1955, Ankara openly threatened Jordan that unless it joined the Baghdad Pact (which was comprised of Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, and the UK to deflect the Soviet threat and was never realized for lack of the U.S. support), it would side with Israel if the two went to war. In 1957, Ankara mobilized its troops on the Syrian border amidst the fears of a communist takeover of the Syrian regime. Similarly, the Turkish government urged Western military intervention in Iraq to restore the monarchy after its overthrow in 1958.

Although Turkey made a few attempts to revitalize its relations with its neighbors throughout the 1970s and 1980s, it never strayed from its Western course. During the Özal administration, Turkey applied for full EU membership in 1987. In 1991, when the first Gulf
War broke out, Turkey lent unequivocal political and economic support to the U.S. military campaign to remove Saddam Hussein’s forces from Kuwait. The burden of the war on the Turkish economy was of epic proportions. Turkey cut off significant Iraqi oil flow exported through Turkish pipelines in compliance with the UN sanctions, which translated to $35 billion in pipeline fees and commercial losses with Iraq.\textsuperscript{6}

The 1990s were turbulent years for Turkey’s transatlantic affairs. The escalation of PKK terrorism in the southeast region strained Ankara’s relations with Washington and Brussels. The general view among the Turkish public at the time was that Washington had neglected Turkey in the aftermath of the Gulf War. The U.S. failure to compensate the losses Turkey had accrued in the Gulf War, coupled with the escalation of Turkey’s Kurdish problem, contributed to the unfavorable public opinion of the United States. Worse, the majority of Turks believed that the United States conspired with a number of their neighbors—i.e. Russia and Syria—to support Kurdish terrorism in the country’s southeastern region. Similarly, Turks felt alienated from Europe due to the pro-PKK stance of a few influential European countries. Safe havens provided to the terrorist organization primarily by Germany, France, and Denmark contributed to the ill feelings against Europe. Such resentment was also exacerbated by subsequent rejections of Turkey’s bid to join the EU in this era. Parallel to these developments, the rise of the Islamist Welfare Party to power in Turkey further complicated relations with the West. Under the leadership of Necmettin Erbakan and his Welfare Party Turkey turned its back to its traditional allies and instead engaged the Islamist regimes in Iran, Libya, Malaysia and Indonesia. The period that followed Erbakan’s subtle removal from the office through what is dubbed as Turkey’s post-modern coup was tainted with similar search for alternatives to the West. A few strategists of the time pinpointed the Turkic nations of South Caucasus and Central Asia as such substitutes, albeit to no avail.

With AKP’s landslide victory in the 2002 elections, Turkey’s relations with its friends in the West swerved in a more constructive and progressive direction. Departing from the traditional Turkish foreign policy, which focused only on the West at the expense of deteriorating relations with Turkey’s Muslim neighbors in the Middle East, the new AKP doctrine—dubbed as “Neo-Ottomanism” despite protests from the pioneers of this strategy within the party—embrace both the West and East. Under this vision, the AKP leaders claim
that they reach out to the East “to complement their ties to the West, not replace them.” Shortly after the elections, the AKP demonstrated its commitment to Turkey’s pro-Western stance by throwing its full support to the negotiations with the European Union. Those efforts paid off in the short term and Turkey started negotiations in October 2005. Similarly, Erdoğan included Washington among the first destinations of his official visits to reassure the public on the importance his government attached to the strategic partnership between Turkey and the United States. Although the ties between Ankara and Washington weakened during the Iraq war, due to the Bush administration’s renewed commitment to help Turkey eliminate the PKK and President Obama’s recognition of Turkey as a regional power broker and indispensable strategic partner in his famous Ankara speech in 2009, the relations appear to be on a steady incline.

In light of the Arab Spring, both Turkey and the West appear to better comprehend the significance of their time-tested, constructive relations in exerting Turkey’s soft power over its neighbors. More important, the West realizes that it needs a regional actor with Turkey’s credentials in solving some of the direst issues in this region. In this regard, one of the most significant outcomes of the Arab Spring was the exposure of the declining capacity of the United States and Europe in developing effective and actionable strategies to diffuse regional crises of such grand scale.

In the heyday of the revolution in Egypt, as the chants of freedom and human rights rattled Tahrir square, the American diplomats at the U.S. Department of State and the strategists in the White House were engrossed in a debate about whether to support the Mubarak-regime, viewing “the Egyptian crisis through the lens of American strategic interests in the region.” By the time the pragmatists, who assert that the U.S. interests are served better by preserving the status quo in the Middle East, and the idealists, who are in favor of the U.S. support for the revolutionaries in the Middle East, finished debating, Mubarak had already stepped down. The end result was a tainted image of the Obama administration that had belatedly chosen to side with Egyptians that wanted change, having supported the Mubarak regime for the last two years. The United States repeated this mistake with Libya by first staying completely on the sidelines and then supporting a disproportional NATO force that helped rebels capture and kill Qaddafi, but failed to give him a fair trial—an essential attribute of the rule of law that the Libyan revolutionaries aspire to bring to their country. Not unlike the United States, the European
coalition acted in an unorganized way. With the French President Nicolas Sarkozy in the
driver’s seat, the European response was one of confusion and inaptitude, distracted by the oil
and gas interests of France and Italy. In fact, it is not a coincidence that the NATO missions in
Libya gained momentum after France secured the lucrative deal with the interim government that
would share 35 percent of the Libyan oil revenue with the Europeans.

Soft Power versus Smart Power

Against the backdrop of the Western struggle in developing coherent policy for the region, the
United States and Europe are increasingly looking at viable regional powers to work with. The
Obama administration has been among the first to acknowledge this. In his 2009 inaugural
address, President Obama said, “Our power grows through its prudent use; our security emanates
from the justness of our cause, the force of our example, the tempering qualities of humility and
restraint.” No sooner did the Secretary of State Hillary Clinton elaborate on this new principle
of U.S. foreign policy: “America cannot solve the most pressing problems on our own, and the
world cannot solve them without America. We must use what has been called ‘smart power,’ the
full range of tools at our disposal.”

Joseph Nye, an influential American political scientist best known for his brilliant work
on soft power, explains “smart power” as “the ability to combine hard and soft power into
effective strategies.” Nye acknowledges that neither resources of a country nor its set of values
and principles are sufficient by themselves to command change in other sovereign nations in
today’s conditions. Without an effective strategy and will, resources and the set of limited policy
options will not yield the desirable outcomes. This view counters the traditional, realist approach
to relational power, as well as the more subtle way of influencing the policy choices of sovereign
nations through an agenda of limited policy choices. While the former manifests hard power, the
latter implies soft power of nations. The first stage of relational power is constructed upon the
resource-based approach to balance of power. Simply put, sovereign states employ their military
and economic resources to influence each other to do the things that they otherwise would not
wish to do. The second stage, also known as the agenda setting, involves efforts by one party to
convince the other to choose from a constrained set of policy options, making it believe that the
cost of not choosing one of them is greater. A good example of this is promoting an open trade system, free markets, democratic governance, human rights and the rule of law as the only virtuous goals through democracy assistance and aid.\textsuperscript{13}

Today, hard power by itself is not enough to command political change in societies. The post-9/11 world is full of examples of the limits to hard power. For instance, the U.S. invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan as the manifestation of American hard power successfully changed the regimes in these countries, but had very little impact on the voluntary acceptance of democracy, human rights and the rule of law by the general Afghan and Iraqi publics. A more current example of this would be the resentment against Western ideals among the newly liberated Arab countries, in spite of the military and financial support the United States and Europe provided for their cause.

Nye also establishes that in the absence of credibility of the nation projecting influence, soft power loses its purpose and is “merely perceived as manipulative, and information is seen as propaganda.”\textsuperscript{14} He asserts that although culture, political values, and foreign policy of a country constitute its soft power, none of these items on their own can influence other sovereign states to act in a desired way. “Great powers,” Nye states, “try to use culture and narrative to create soft power that promotes their advantage, but it is not always an easy sell if the words and symbols are inconsistent with domestic realities.”\textsuperscript{15}

Smart power in this sense widely differs from the first and second stages of relational power. Rather than getting actors to do the things they do not want to through raw force, or imposing a restricted group of policy choices on them, smart power helps to create and shape the actor’s basic beliefs, perceptions and preferences. When smart power is used appropriately, the actors that have been exposed to a sovereign nation’s influence can seldom realize that the policy choices they make are actually tailored to the interests of the nation that exerts the smart power. Rhetoric that is often used by the Turkish leadership vis-à-vis Turkey’s EU accession process offers a convincing illustration of this. Whenever the negotiations with the EU come to an impasse, Turkish officials often assure their domestic and foreign audience that Ankara will not waver from implementing the reforms (in the areas of human rights, free markets, rule of law, and freedom of speech, etc.) a candidate country must realize in order to meet the Copenhagen Criteria to join the European Union. In situations like these, Turkish officials often project
confidence to their constituents that they are truly undertaking these reforms for the greater good of Turkey, and if necessary, they would not be afraid to rename them the Ankara Criteria to continue down the path of reformation. With this in mind, it is no longer discernable to what extent these changes in Turkish attitude are “the result of attraction to Europe’s successful economic and political system.”

**Overview of Turkey’s Soft Power**

Turkey too can exert similar influence over its neighborhood with the advent of the Arab Spring for a number of reasons. Turkey enjoys positive relations with a majority of the countries in the region. With its cultural ties, political values, and foreign policy that promotes further engagement with the Middle East, Turkey has the capacity to convert its soft power into smart power. More importantly, a war-weary United States and a European Union that is distracted by the problems of its own Muslim community are reluctant to get too involved in the crises haunting MENA. Rather, they are willing to cooperate on equal footing with a regional power broker like Turkey, which enjoys the respect of the people in the region and has rare credentials of a dependable transatlantic partner. It is in the interests of the United States and Europe that Turkey, as a democratic and secular country, strives to bring order to the region and contribute to its security. More important, Turkey radiates a rare structural power in the region as a hub both physically and geopolitically.

With respect to Turkey’s capacity and resources to stimulate transformation in neighboring countries, the tenets of the new Turkish foreign policy have provided the much needed means. Davutoğlu’s “zero problems” strategy has been instrumental in improving Ankara’s political, economic and diplomatic relations with the former Ottoman sphere of influence. Under this vision Turkey made formidable progress in normalizing its relations with two of its traditional rivals, namely Syria and Iran. Although the rapprochement with Syria came to an abrupt halt as a result of the Assad regime’s bloody crackdown on protestors since the beginning of the Arab Spring, relations had considerably improved between Assad’s first visit to Turkey in 2005 and 2011. At the time, “Syrian authorities approved more than 30 Turkish investment projects in the country with a total value of over $150 million. Bilateral trade was
around $1.5 billion in 2007, more than triple the figure when the AKP came to power in 2002. Ankara and Damascus agreed in 2006 to establish a free-trade zone; and with Damascus encouraging Turkish investment in Syria, the two countries established a joint company for oil exploration.” In 2009, Turkey and Syria formed a Strategic Cooperation Council and abolished visas. Syria also pledged to help Turkey eradicate the PKK in the heyday of the affairs.

During that time, Turkey also achieved significant milestones in improving its relations with Iran. Again, a joint strategy to counter the PKK threat was at the forefront of the normalization of relations with Iran. In 2004, Ankara and Tehran signed a security cooperation pact in which Turkey and Iran jointly declared the PKK and PJAK—the Iranian faction of the PKK—terrorist organizations. The progress in security relations was emulated quickly in bilateral trade relations. In February 2007, Turkey and Iran entered into two strategic energy agreements in spite of the international sanctions on Iranian goods. The framework of this agreement allowed the Turkish Petroleum Corporation to explore for oil and natural gas in Iran and transfer of gas from Turkmenistan to Turkey and on to Europe via a pipeline that passed through Iran. In 2006, volume of trade between the two countries nearly doubled, reaching $6.7 billion.

Turkey's improving relations and its dramatically enlarged commercial activity with Iran have been especially alarming to the West, which have sought to diplomatically isolate the Islamic Republic because of its support for terrorism and suspicions over its nuclear program. Turkey, meanwhile, has sought to use its new relations with Iran to position itself as a bridge between Europe and the pariah state. In January 2011, the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, plus Germany—also known as "P5+1"—met with the Iranian delegation in Istanbul to discuss Iran's nuclear program upon Turkey's invitation.

The Istanbul talks were intended to build confidence between the parties and to achieve an agreement that Iran would trade some of its low-enriched uranium for nuclear fuel for Tehran's Research Reactor. Turkey and Brazil were the chief proponents of this plan. In 2010, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu had traveled to Tehran with his Brazilian counterpart to negotiate a deal that would entail Iran storing its spent nuclear fuel in Turkey in exchange for enriched uranium to be used for nuclear medicine and research facilities. The deal failed when the United States and the other involved parties rejected the amount Tehran agreed to transfer to
Turkey. The West contended that the amount the Iranian government agreed to release still left sufficient enriched uranium to put together a nuclear weapon. Turkey subsequently protested the West's decision to use its veto at the UN Security Council meeting in June 2010 on the sanctions proposed for Iran.

Turkey also utilized its economic, diplomatic, and cultural resources in revitalizing its relations with the rest of the Arab world. Since the AKP’s ascension to power in 2002, Turkey has actively sought to play a bigger role in mediating conflicts in its region. In 2006, it hosted the leader of Hamas’s military wing, Khaled Mashaal, in Ankara. Though the government claimed that its intentions were pure, Ankara’s move elicited harsh criticism from Washington and Tel Aviv. Nonetheless, Turkey continued to assert itself in heralding peace between Israel and Palestine, and between Israel and Syria, through arranging a number of high-level meetings. In 2007, Shimon Peres and Mahmoud Abbas met in Ankara to discuss economic cooperation between Israel and the Palestinian authority. Turkey implemented shuttle diplomacy between Syria and Israel from 2007 to 2008. Especially during the summer of 2008, the Turkish Foreign Ministry committed its full resources and support to four rounds of talks between the parties in hopes of making leeway in normalization of the relations between Israel and Syria. The peace negotiations came to halt when Israel launched its infamous operation “Cast Lead” on Gaza. The relations between Turkey and Israel went only downhill from that moment on. At the 2009 Davos Summit, Erdoğan confronted Peres on Israel’s disproportionate use of force on the Palestinians. In May 2010, the Turkish ship Mavi Marmara, carrying humanitarian relief to Palestine in spite of Israel’s warnings that it would not be allowed to disembark, was raided by Israeli commandos in international waters. The incident ended with the killing of 9 Turkish activists by the Israeli forces. Following this incident and Israel’s refusal to apologize, the Turkish-Israeli diplomatic relations have frozen, while the war of harsh rhetoric between the leaders of the countries continues to escalate in the aftermath of the Goldstone report.

Turkey also improved its relations with key North African countries since the early 2000s. Shortly after its victory in the 2008 elections in Morocco, Moroccan Justice and Development Party acknowledged that it was very much inspired by AKP’s successful political agenda while developing its own election strategy. Similarly, in 2010 the slain dictator of the old Libyan regime, Muammar Qaddafi, awarded Erdoğan with his “International Prize of Human
Rights.” Before the Arab Spring took hold of Libya, Turkey’s commercial relations with this country had flourished to nearly $2.3 billion in trade by 2010. Turkey also signed a strategic economic partnership with Egypt in March 2007 during Mubarak’s visit to Ankara.

The positive diplomatic and commercial relationships with the Middle East and North Africa also project Turkish culture onto the region. Nowadays, Turkish soap operas are among the most popular TV shows on the Arabian Peninsula. The number of tourists visiting Turkey from neighboring countries expanded almost by 85 percent in the last couple of years. Turkey also serves as a popular destination for Arab activists to hold conferences on the future of their countries. Turkey’s burgeoning secular democracy, maturing rule of law, and struggle to improve human rights encourage many in the awakening Arab countries to visit this country and examine these institutions on site. The recent international conference with the interim Libyan national council and previous gatherings with Iraqi and Afghan governments are testament to such Turkish appeal.

This brief overview of Turkey’s set of diplomatic, economic and cultural tools to exercise influence over the region must also take into account the positive perception of Turkey’s close relations with Europe, the United States and Israel by surrounding countries. A recent poll taking the pulse of Middle Eastern public opinion by the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV) indicates that the sympathy for Turkey in the region hovers around 85 percent. And more than half of the participants who admire Turkey’s role in the region link their positive attitude to Turkey’s potential EU membership. However, the same study also finds that the impact of Turkey’s EU prospect on the favorable opinion of the country diminished in the past year.

Similar to its relations with the EU, Turkey’s strong alliance with Israel was once regarded by the other Middle Eastern countries as a significant resource of Turkey’s leverage in the region. In the middle 1990s, Turkey procured from Israel key military equipment that was often denied by the West due to Turkey’s human rights records. “The partnership sent a strong signal to Syria and also strengthened Turkey’s hand against the powerful Armenian and Greek lobbies in Washington. As Turkey’s relations with Europe and its neighbors—Syria, Iraq, and Iran—worsened, Israel and the United States increasingly came to be seen as its only reliable partners.” It is also important to note that “it was Turkey’s military alliance with Israel that
helped to prompt an intimidated Syria to kick out the PKK’s military leader, Abdullah Öcalan, in 1998.”

Today, the Assad regime hardly takes the warnings issued by the highest cadres of the Turkish government seriously. The threats to Assad issued by the Syrian opposition leaders in the refugee camps of Hatay might not fall on deaf ears “had Turkey maintained its military ties with Israel.”

**Soft to Smart: Challenges to Turkey’s Power Conversion**

When combined, the political, cultural, and economic values of Turkey and its unique position as a “bridge” between East and West bring Turkey one step closer to harnessing its “integrative power.” Nye tells us that the nations that serve as networks or hubs in the twenty-first century possess “an important type of structural power.” Furthermore, “those who can bridge or exploit structural holes can use their positions as a source of power by controlling communication between others.” Turkey fits in this definition, and furthermore, as an efficient network between the West and MENA, it helps with cultural intermediation. Turkey’s rare set of resources and skills in projecting Western values onto its Middle Eastern counterparts should not be underestimated. Instead, they should be cherished as indispensable components of Turkey’s soft power.

As much as Turkey possesses the right set of resources to convert its soft power into smart power, it has yet to achieve this outcome. In this regard, it must be mindful of the impediments down the road. It is important to recall Nye’s wisdom at this juncture: “Whether the possession of power resources actually produces favorable behavior depends upon the context and the skills of the agent in converting the resources into behavioral outcomes…Smart power goes to the heart of the problem of power conversion…. Some countries and actors maybe endowed with greater power resources than others, yet not be very effective in converting the full range of their power resources into strategies that produce the outcomes they seek.”

The Arab Spring offers a few lessons for Turkey in this respect. The most important one perhaps is not to confuse soft power with populism. It appears that the latter has dominated the agenda of the AKP leadership more than the former. Nowadays, Prime Minister Erdoğan receives a hero’s welcome when he tours the Arab capitals. He voices support for the Arab
awakening and offers the secular and democratic Turkish government as a viable model. He also flexes Turkey’s muscles at its old partner in the region, Israel, through harsh rhetoric. Though such behavior exponentially increases adulation for Erdoğan’s persona and raises Turkey’s regional standing, it achieves very little in getting the new Arab governments to want the same outcomes as Turkey. For example, no sooner did the Muslim Brotherhood reject Erdoğan’s recommendation than the prime minister voiced his opinions about the implementation and benefits of secular democracy in a Muslim country.27

The images of Turkey’s amicable relationships with former and current oppressors are still fresh in the minds of many revolting nations in the region. Many remember that less than twenty four months ago, Erdoğan “went out of his way to cultivate Assad—and even went on holiday with him.”28 Now all the options, including the military, are on the table for Assad’s removal. After a recent visit to Turkey by the U.S. Vice President Joe Biden, there is increased chatter regarding a buffer zone and “peace corridor” between Turkey and Syria. Such plan is likely to involve Turkish troops crossing the border. Similar inconsistency in relations with Iran also sends mixed signals to those who watch in Tunis, Tripoli, Cairo and Damascus. In the midst of lucrative oil and gas deals, the mass demonstrations—provoked by election fraud in 2009 and resulted in killings and torture of many protestors—slipped under the AKP government’s radar. Today, “friendship with Iran soured after Turkey agreed to let NATO deploy parts of its missile shield on Turkish soil.”29 And nor does the Arab Street seem to have missed the agreements that Erdoğan signed with the military custodians of the Egyptian government to expand trade between the countries from $3.5 billion to $5 billion. The emerging Arab revolutionaries also appear to have noticed Turkey’s heavy investment in Qaddafi’s Libya and plans to increase the volume of trade between Turkey and Libya from $2.3 billion to $5 billion in the next five years.30

Furthermore, the ongoing abuse of democratic and fundamental rights within Turkey creates a formidable gap between Turkey’s alleged soft power and its commitment to the principles that generate it. On the Kurdish issue, the government has responded to the increased PKK attacks on civilian and military activists by putting nearly 3500 Kurdish activists behind bars since 2009.31 They are charged with being member of the PKK’s urban arm, known as the KCK.32 The detainees make up an eclectic mix, including Büşra Ersanlı, a well-known
constitutional law professor who was sitting on the parliamentary committee for constitutional reform until her shocking arrest in November. In addition, around 76 journalists are in jail, a greater number than in China. Although they are charged with terrorist crimes, most of them are yet to be indicted on any of these charges. In brief, unless Turkish decision makers address such democratic and human rights deficits, Turkey’s soft power will hardly cross beyond pure rhetoric. The message will not resonate with the Arab people, who remember vividly the abuses of democratic rights in recent Turkish history under military tutelage. And they are adamant on not going through similar experiences.

In summary, the Turkish government may not have the obligation to coerce the other governments in its region. But it does have duty to the newly liberated communities of the Arab Spring to use its resources in promoting democratic government, the rule of law, freedom of speech and fundamental rights in its neighborhood. Moreover, it has the responsibility to remember from time to time that it cannot achieve these ends by acting unilaterally. Turkey must resume its multi-vectored foreign policy. It should consider relying on its traditional alliance with Western actors such as NATO, the EU, United States, and Israel in deflecting security threats. It must continue to work with the European countries in erecting a unified front against the oppressors in the region. By the same token, Turkey should continue to employ its proactive diplomacy and assist the victors of the Arab Spring in steering clear of the “Arab Winter.” While doing so, the AKP government ought to put its house in order. Only by staying cognizant of these key principles, Turkey can exercise its smart power in its neighborhood, and only through its smart power, it can assert itself as a regional power.

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5 Ibid., 8.
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7 Ibid., 14.
9 Ibid.
13 Ibid, 10-20.
14 Ibid., 83.
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16 Taspinar, “Turkey’s Middle East Policies,” 24-25.
19 Mensur Akgün, Sabiha Senyücel Gündoğar, Jonathan Levack, and Gökçe Percinoğlu, “Ortadoğu’da Türkiye Algısı” (İstanbul: Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation, 2010), 14.
20 Taspinar, “Turkey’s Middle East Policies,” 10.
22 Ibid.
23 Coined by the eminent political scientist Kenneth Boulding, “integrative power” refers to the abilirt to create networks of trust that enable groups to work together toward common goals. In Joseph S. Nye, The Future of Power (New York: Public Affairs, 2011), 17.
25 Ibid., 17.
26 Ibid., 22-23.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.