Introduction

Turkey and the Middle East: Axis Shifting or Re-tuning?

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When the call for contributions for a themed issue of MEJCC with the title *Turkey and the Middle East: Axis Shifting or Re-tuning?* was distributed to various scholarly networks in March 2011, the initial aim was to further investigate the aspects underpinning Turkey’s intensifying political leadership aspirations in the Middle East in the context of its social and cultural affairs with the countries of the region. In the background, the most significant international development was of course the quickly spreading of Arab Spring demonstrations and riots from December 2010 onward. In Turkey, the alleged ‘departure’ of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) from the country’s long standing foreign policy urging the nation turn its face to the West not East was being fiercely debated. Turkey’s increasing involvement in the affairs of the Middle East sharpened controversies between the secularists who regarded this orientation as another form of Islamization and a desertion from the EU cause, and the pro-AKP circles promoting the AKP’s story as a success for inspiring moderate Islamist groups in the region. Various terms such as ‘axis shifting’ and ‘neo-Ottomanism’ in regard to Turkey’s increasing visibility in the Middle East were first coined at a time when the AKP government embraced ‘zero-problems with neighbors’ as a core principle of its foreign policy rhetoric and deliberately pursued an active third party role in the region’s conflict resolution arrangements. Establishing closer links with Iran, Iraq and Syria, contributing its military power to international forces in Afghanistan and Lebanon and acting as the mediator between Arabs and Israelis were all presented as the natural outcomes of this role.
As of October 2012, it is evident that Turkey’s foreign policy principle of ‘zero-problems with neighbors’ is no longer functioning. Turkey came to the brink of war with Syria and its relations with Iraq, Iran, Israel, Armenia and Cyprus are deteriorating. The AKP government’s foreign policy can in fact no longer manage to serve as a successful anti-thesis of the policy preferences of previous ruling cadres. In this sense, even the hype around ‘neo-Ottomanism’, very often articulated by the supporters of the AKP’s foreign policy, lost ground since the AKP’s reorientation proved to be limited to the Muslim realm, leaving other regions aside. Turkey is now dealing not only with the Syrian problem along its border but also with a variety of domestic issues ranging from lack of freedom of the press to increasing violence against women and of course the war with the PKK. Turkey’s credibility in the region and the broader international fora is in fact very much dependent on how it resolves its own issues within its own borders.

It is within this framework that this themed issue on Turkey and Middle East aims to take on the analytical challenge of examining various issues related to Turkey’s current position as an international actor. In terms of the contributions in this issue, there is in fact no overarching theme that links one with another; however, the articles individually deal with various important contradictions that dominate the political and cultural sphere in Turkey. In doing so, this selection of research has the potential to trigger fresh research questions in the field.

The opening article of this issue by Tezcan Durna and Burak Özçelik offers a discourse analysis of religious conservative daily newspapers’ response to the Israeli attack on the Gaza Freedom Flotilla on 31 May 2010. The incident, named the Mavi Marmara case in the international press, drew reactions against the Israeli forces due to the utilization of excessive force, which resulted in casualties. Israeli-Turkish relations reached its lowest ebb after the attack and anti-Israeli reactions peaked in Turkey. In their article, Durna and Özçelik look at how the major Islamic newspapers in Turkey constituted the reality—or ‘work on’ it as they put it—and produced a biased and partial journalism. Given that Islamic newspapers in Turkey are rather under-researched, the analysis offered by the authors is important, as it reveals how different ideological positions are articulated in religious-conservative segments of the media, which do not in fact assume a single position. As the authors suggest, this variety mainly manifests itself in these newspapers’ oscillation between the ways in which they undertake anti-Zionist and anti-Semitic positions, i.e., the hardliners (Anadolu’da Vakit and Milli Gazete) who use these positions interchangeably, and the moderate newspapers (Zaman and Yeni Şafak), which are cautious to distinguish the two. According to the authors, a similar oscillation