Beyond Soft Power
The stakes and configurations of the influence of contemporary Turkey in the world

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A critical approach to soft power: Grasping contemporary Turkey’s influence in the world

Gabrielle Angey-Sentuc and Jérémie Molho

We would like to thank the French Institute of Anatolian Studies for providing the financial and material support for this project in addition to the ANR “Trans-acting Matters: Areas and Eras of a (Post-)Ottoman Globalization”. We would also like to extend our thanks to all the project participants who contributed to the reflections presented in this introduction. We also thank the editorial board of the European Journal of Turkish Studies, and especially Marc Aymes.

I. Thinking Turkish influence in the midst of a dramatic political shift

On 5 April 2015, Joseph Nye, the scholar who first coined the term “soft power”, was quoted in an article published in Today’s Zaman asserting that Turkish soft power had declined over the past few years. According to Nye, as a result Turkey would subsequently have “less soft power, less democracy”. During the 2000s, the concept of soft power became a popular term applied to the perceived rise in Turkey’s global and regional influence. The article in Today’s Zaman not only reminds us of the dramatic internal and external shifts that have affected Turkey since 2013, but also raises questions concerning the capacity of the concept to characterise Turkey’s influence beyond its borders.

This special issue of Beyond Soft Power: Stakes and configurations of the influence of contemporary Turkey’ is the result of a research project initiated in early 2013 at the French Institute of Anatolian Studies in order to question the concept of soft power and develop new perspectives and empirically based research critically examining Turkey’s presence abroad. At the time of the project’s initiation, the regional and domestic configurations of Turkey differed absolutely from the current crisis context. Turkey’s influence in the Balkans, the Middle East, Central Asia and even in Africa, had been
progressively expanding for several decades, a trend also perceptible in Ankara’s increasing involvement in international organisations. The Arab Spring led to a conducive environment for the idealisation of the so-called “Turkish model” of governance. Meanwhile, Davutoğlu’s “zero problem with the neighbours” policy (Davutoğlu 2001) had become well known and was represented as a success. Turkey’s substantial development and growth stood in marked contrast to the economic crisis in EU countries. Turkey’s presence in the media and the broadcasting of Turkish TV shows abroad, particularly in neighbouring countries with shared cultural affinities, was perceived as evidence of the country’s rising cultural attractiveness. The Turkish government itself emphasised the growth of its cultural and diplomatic influence through a self-promoting soft power and Turkish model discourse. However, regional and domestic shifts occurring in the past few years have raised serious questions concerning the legitimacy and authority of this discursive framework. Ankara’s ability to affect neighbouring actors has been limited by a number of internal and external political episodes that have shed light on Turkey’s regional and international presence. Turkey’s military involvement in the Syrian and Iraq war from summer 2015, the declining security situation on its domestic territory, including the bomb attacks in Suruç (20 July 2015), Ankara (10 October 2015; 13 March 2016), and Istanbul (12 January 2016), the reactivation of the war against the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in South-East Turkey following the end of the peace process, the rising authoritarian tendencies of Erdogan’s regime, and the judicial war against the Gülen movement, have cast serious doubts on Turkey’s position. Consequently analysts have stopped glorifying Turkey as a source of inspiration for the region.

3 The shifting political context confirmed our initial intuitions, underlining the inadequacy of the concept of soft power for apprehending the complex dynamics and stakes of Turkey’s commitment beyond its borders. Consequently, through grounded researches on contemporary Turkey’s influence, this special issue makes a necessary contribution by theoretically questioning and redefining the value of the concept of soft power. Our aim is to go “beyond” the use of soft power as an analytical tool by addressing its limitations and suggesting alternative approaches to analysing the transnational and international dynamics of a country.

The soft power concept: a category of analysis or a category of practice?

4 In order to clarify the issues in the debate on soft power, we shall review the genealogy of this concept by introducing Nye’s initial theory and considering its subsequent evolution and spread around the world. From an American-centered perspective to the analysis of the rise of emerging powers, and from a state-centered theory to the emphasis on the role of non-state actors, the various uses of the notion of soft power have demonstrated its malleability. Furthermore, in addition to its function as an analytical device, the concept is often coined as a rhetorical argument in support of foreign policy consultancy.
A genealogy of the soft power concept

At first glance, soft power seems to be a relatively simple concept to comprehend, its reach often extending far beyond the academic field. Usually defined in opposition to hard power (physical and economic coercion), its origins are easy to trace to the Princeton and Harvard-educated political scientist Joseph Nye, the American scholar responsible for coining the term. Since its introduction, Nye has continuously updated and promoted the concept and theory. He has been a Harvard faculty member since 1964, and served as the Dean of the John F. Kennedy School of Government from 1995 to 2004. He held several positions in Washington, including Deputy to the Undersecretary of State for Security Assistance and Science and Technology in the Carter Administration from 1977 to 1979, and Assistant Secretary of Defence for International Security in the Clinton Administration between 1994 and 1995. He is also the head of the Northern American Chair of the Trilateral Commission, a private organisation gathering together influential intellectuals on contemporary politics. Soft power evolved over time as Nye theoretically developed the concept, and as it was adopted to meet the needs of various interests or places.

A genealogy of Nye’s theory shows that it evolved in correlation with the global geopolitical context and in reaction to its critiques. In 1990, Joseph Nye introduced the concept of soft power in the book *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (Nye 1990a), and in an article published in the same year in the journal *Foreign Policy* (Nye 1990b). At that time, the main goal of soft power analysis was to show that America was not a declining power and, in Nye’s view, would retain its position as the world’s leading superpower. Instead of retrenching behind its frontiers, he argued that the USA had to maintain an ambitious foreign policy program through the use of “soft power”. These initial works defined soft power as part of a generalised strategy of the state in an increasingly interdependent world:

“Soft cooptive power is just as important as hard command power. If a State can make its power seem legitimate in the eyes of others, it will encounter less resistance to its wishes. If its culture and ideology are attractive, others will more willingly follow. If it can establish international norms consistent with its society, it is less likely to have to change. If it can support institutions that make other states wish to channel or limit their activities in ways the dominant state prefers, it may be spared the costly exercise of coercive or hard power. (Nye 1990a: 167)"

Nye insists on the importance of soft power for states in the post-Cold War interconnected world: gaining legitimacy for international actions, enhancing a state’s capacity to form international coalitions, avoiding being subject to the influence of others, and preventing military confrontations. A more elaborate theory appeared in his following works, particularly in his book *Soft Power: the Means to Success in World Politics* (2004b), in which an in-depth analysis of the three sources of a country’s soft power was developed: “Its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority)” (*Ibid.*: 11). Finally, in *Powers to Lead: Soft, Hard and Smart* (2008) and *The future of Power* (2011), Nye introduced the term “smart power” to refer to the complementarity that exists between hard and soft power. Through this new concept, Nye advocated a foreign policy that combines military presence with investments in alliances and partnerships with a wide variety of external stakeholders. The most efficient way for a country to enhance its power...
capabilities, therefore, was by combining the possibilities of hard power and soft power strategies.

Ultimately, Nye’s core theory continued to adhere to the idea that states are able to consciously promote their influence.

**Deconstructing the rhetoric of soft power**

Such an approach blurs the lines between political discourse and objective observation. Presented as a scientific concept, soft power is also a term suited to coin the recommendations of foreign policy strategists. Nye’s writings are clearly marked by a prescriptive tone, with regular in-text directives such as “the USA must” or “the USA will have to”. This unclear position that the notion of soft power occupies between the academic and the political field is striking when we consider Joseph Nye’s own multi-positioning as a foreign policy advisor, an influential scholar at Harvard University, and the head of the North American group in the Trilateral Commission. As such, Nye emerges as an entrepreneur of globalisation, constituting a “transnational broker” (Dezalay 2004: 17) whose theoretical propositions are necessarily entailed in its own multi-positioned trajectory. As Dezalay shows, the continued dominance of the USA remains reliant on major investments in state knowledge, leading to the international diffusion of a form of government resulting from a specific history. The field of knowledge appears to be intimately entangled in the field of power, and concepts such as “soft power” can thus be viewed as instruments of American hegemony (ibid.). Consequently, as far as soft power’s use in an academic context is concerned, this blurry borderline between category of practice and category of analysis raises questions (Brubaker and Cooper 2006).

Thus, we can argue that soft power is less an analytical tool than an instrument of expertise for transnational brokers. As such, it competes with other concepts guiding practice, such as public diplomacy or nation branding, which are often used as alternatives to soft power. These terms carry slightly different meanings and are backed by different academic fields. Public diplomacy is a notion that pre-dates the emergence of soft power. Originating from the field of diplomacy, it is primarily a communication strategy for inducing policy change. As Malone (1985) argues, public diplomacy involves “direct communication with foreign peoples, with the aim of affecting their thinking and ultimately, that of their governments” (ibid.: 199). Cultural diplomacy is a subcategory of public diplomacy, which Cull (2008) defines as a state’s endeavour to promote and facilitate the international diffusion of its culture. Nation branding, however, is situated within a specific area of place branding and consists of applying marketing techniques to promote a nation (Fan 2006). In fact, the fields of use of these various terms reveal their differences. Like soft power, the notions of cultural diplomacy and nation branding tend to be mobilised by consultants who propose methods and best practices to help countries promote their influence (Schneider 2003; Anholt 2007).

Confronting these terms with soft power reveals its polysemy. Firstly, public diplomacy can be approached as a component of soft power, which emphasises the fundamental argument that a state possesses the ability to further its interests through conscious self-promotion. In many scholars’ works, both terms are frequently used interchangeably. Secondly, soft power can be considered as a form of nation branding,
underlying the fact that both concepts rely on the idea of attraction. Although it is a strategy, nation branding does not necessarily imply a state-led approach and calls for the further analysis of internal governance issues. Consequently, soft power appears as a “soft” or “uncertain concept” (Leca 2013) meaning that its strength mainly lies in how mouldable and polysemic it is. Hayden (2012) comments on the rhetoric of soft power to argue that it is based on a simple set of assumptions concerning the conditions of a country’s power of persuasion, that has been circulated in a wide variety of countries, at a time when global communication became a key component of foreign policy.

The international diffusion of the soft power concept

The concept of soft power emerged in a specific historical, geographical, and political context, recalled by the opening sentence of Nye’s Foreign Policy article: “The Cold War is over and Americans are trying to understand their place in a world without a defining Soviet threat” (Nye 1990b: 153). The notion enjoyed widespread success among policy-makers, rapidly going on to become a commonly used expression denoting the alternative tools available to a state for the development of its influence. For instance, a Canadian defence ministry official proposed a synthesis of the concept of soft power arguing that it could represent an alternative or complementary means to military power (Smith-Windsor 2000). Similarly, Cooper, an official at the European Council, referenced several historical cases ranging from the Pope’s influence to the Warsaw pact to conclude that “Hard power and soft power are two sides of the same coin” (Cooper 2004: 15), namely that through different means, states pursue the same goals.

An analysis of the publications using the keyword “soft power” reveals that its use has extended beyond the initial geographic context of its emergence. Worldwide, scholars have mobilised the term to analyse a wide range of countries: China (Cho and Jeong 2008; Wang 2008; Bates and Huang 2009; Paradise 2009; Kurlantzick 2007), Russia (Popescu 2006; Tsygankov 2006), Japan (Lam 2007; Otmazgin 2008), Brazil (Lee et al. 2010; Lee and Gomez 2011), India (Malone 2011; Hymans 2009; Thussu 2013), Korea (Hayashi and Lee 2007; Lee 2009). The appropriation of soft power theory across multiple and diverse contexts extended the scope of the concept beyond the immediate concerns of post-Cold War American power to encompass the rising influence of emerging countries. As it was applied to these different contexts, the meanings and lines of debate correspondingly shifted. In the case of China, for example, American scholars such as Vogel (2006) have argued that the country’s power of attraction is derived from its display of a lack of will to link the development of economic cooperation to the spread of its values, which is the exact opposite of what constitutes American soft power according to Nye.

These works tend to draw on the stereotypical components of a country in order to consider their comparative powers of influence. While Nye portrays the USA as the embodiment of democracy and freedom, placing the emphasis on universities and involvement in international organisations, the application of the soft power concept to other country contexts focuses particularly on specific cultural interests such as the manga culture in Japan (Sugiura 2008), Bollywood in India (Thussu 2013), and the Confucius Institutes in China (Hartig 2012).
Table: The diffusion and evolution of the soft power concept

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Within this framework, Turkey, as an emerging power in international relations, has been the object of numerous studies centralizing the notion of soft power, authored both by scholars (Altunay 2008; Altunışık 2008; Oğuzlu 2007; Yörük and Vatikiotis 2013), and by policy experts (Kirişçi 2005; Çandar 2009; Kalın 2011). In the majority of these works, soft power tends to be used in a normative manner: it is regarded as the power of a democratised, economically open Turkey whose ability to combine Islam and democracy is regarded as an inspiration to Arab countries. It does not question the balances of power hidden behind this concept (Altunışık 2008). Furthermore, the term soft power is often used in a reductive way, for example, it has been presented merely as a synonym of “diplomacy” as opposed to “military power” (Çandar 2009). As Gourisse (2015) has shown, current literature on Turkish soft power can be broadly characterised – and criticised – for drawing on widely spread culturalist lines of debate. These academic productions propose to investigate the degree of compatibility between Islam and democracy or explain the difficulties of anchoring democratic values in the region (Halliday 1995; Çarkoğlu and Toprak 2000; Tessler and Altınoğlu 2004; Atasoy 2005; Arat 2007; Kanra 2009), and thus are situated in continuity with Bernard Lewis’ analysis of Turkey’s position as a unique Muslim democracy (Lewis 1994: 47-48).

Through the analysis of the genealogy, evolution, and appropriation of the concept of soft power, we have pointed out its limitations as an analytical tool. From the beginning, it has been embedded in the field of expertise and foreign policy strategy. The ready global acceptance and appropriation of the concept has been favoured by its digestibility and the ease of its applicability to any context. Yet, its international diffusion has also been the result of its use by various analysts, think tanks, consultants and experts located throughout the world. Two lines of critique can therefore be pointed out. Firstly, as the concept has been tailored to expertise and foreign policy strategy, and is prone to becoming a rhetorical discourse. As such it becomes analytically poor because it has to stretch to accommodate the needs of its recipients. Secondly, the analysis of where it comes from and how it spreads shows that it reflects a subjective worldview, which facilitates the emergence of stereotypical and prejudicial meanings. Therefore, the results of its successes paradoxically emerge as obstacles to bringing deeper analytical perspective.

The methodological and analytical consequences we could draw from these observations suggest that such uses of the concept of soft power tend to create shortcuts where the limits between concept and ideology become blurred, where the
labelisation of the dynamic of soft power becomes a political stake, and where analysis, causes and effects, actors and vectors, scales and contexts, theoretical and empirical dimensions lose clarity. This led us to call for a critical appraisal of the concept, rather than taking its assumed value for granted.

II. Challenging the soft power concept: An empirically grounded approach to Turkish influence

Turkey, being at the forefront of the appropriation of soft power discourse, has provided a particularly relevant case study to challenge the concept. Therefore, the objective of this issue was to develop an empirically grounded body of research that started by taking a critical perspective on the concept of soft power as a stepping-stone for investigating the politics of Turkey beyond its borders. Indeed, our ambition was to characterise the different types and modalities of Turkey’s influence to lead to the production of new and more adequate conceptual propositions for analysing Turkey’s current situation. This endeavour gained the attention of scholars and provoked a diverse range of critical questions concerning policy evolution, the interaction between public and private actors, and the role of instruments and discourse in public policies.

Contributions based on field researches

This special issue has gathered together contributions rooted in different disciplines, including political science, sociology, and geography. It covers a wide variety of instruments and actors of Turkish influence, ranging from Turkish soap operas to the Gülen movement, from Kurdish businessmen to the Istanbul art world and emblematic sports events. They share a common grassroots analysis based on in-depth field researches with an emphasis on qualitative methods. The contributors investigated diverse geographic contexts such as Sub-Saharan Africa, North Africa, the Middle East, the Balkans, and East Asia. Through empirical researches, the different articles in this collection shed light on the concrete ways Turkey deploys itself beyond its borders.

Although the papers are all united by the common desire to depart from the theoretical and methodological constraints of a soft power approach, they do so from different perspectives. On one hand, some papers challenge the concept on an empirical level, by taking soft power as a discourse of Turkish policymaking, or by showing the limitations of the theoretical premises of soft power when applied to the Turkish case. On the other hand, after demonstrating the internal contradictions or inadequacies of the concept, other contributors have extended the argument to develop alternative theoretical frameworks informed by other conceptual approaches. Rather than accepting its presuppositions, the idea behind this issue was to deconstruct the theoretical reach of soft power, articulate its stakes, and evaluate its relevance to the case studies offered by the authors. Thus, despite the individual positions adopted in this special issue, the contributors highlight different sets of criticisms, which is hoped will fuel further academic debate on the topic.
III. A critical approach to the concept of soft power through the Turkish case-study

21 Through their diverse undertakings of empirically grounded critical research, the contributors highlight the multiple weaknesses of the concept thereby providing a unique analytical perspective on soft power. Three core criticisms may be drawn from the recommendations and conclusions that were reached by the authors. Firstly, the papers extend beyond Nye’s state-centered approach by investigating not only the complex interrelation between public and private actors, but also the dynamics of relations between international and domestic politics. Secondly, they criticise the mechanic and unidirectional approach that is derived from soft power, emphasising the importance of an interactionist perspective. Thirdly, they deconstruct the interests and power structures that lie behind soft power rhetoric, placing the emphasis on discourse analysis.

Beyond a state-centered soft power: Opening the black box of Turkish foreign policy

22 Firstly, the core principle of the concept of soft power is predominantly focused on the role of the state, which is considered the main actor and beneficiary of influence. This makes soft power dependent on the ability of the state to mobilise a diverse range of tools in order to expand its power on the international scene. Even if transnational actors are taken into consideration, the focus continues to remain on the state and its intended politics of influence. Soft power theory approaches the state as a homogeneous and coherent body. It does not take into consideration its divergent internal contradictory trends and voices (Hall 1993). This general criticism seems particularly relevant to our case study. Although the Turkish state is often described as strong and centralised, Aymes, Gourisse and Massicard (2015) have demonstrated that it lacks autonomy from the rest of the society, is characterised by its private appropriation by political parties, and remains permeable to partisan issues.

23 Furthermore, an analysis in terms of soft power tends to elude the complex relations that exists between state actors and private actors. Different types of interactions between private and public actors can be identified: collaborative, conflictual or discharged (Hibou 2004). Therefore, a study of the coalitions of actors with different agendas and fields of possibilities should be at the centre of any study on a country’s devices of influence beyond its borders. In the case of Turkey, intermingled interactions between social elites and the state, the army and religious groups have been pointed out. These can result in private initiatives that go against the interests of the Turkish state. Reciprocally, struggles with private actors can lead Turkish diplomacy to act in contradictory ways to the interests of Turkey’s influence (Angey 2015). In this conception, international space becomes a “political arena” of contestation and negotiation between groups competing to promote their own agendas while claiming the monopoly of the legitimate representation of Turkey beyond its borders. As Bourdieu has argued, “International struggles for domination [...] have their more certain foundation in the struggles within each national field, struggles within which the dominant definitions of the national, the foreign are themselves at stake, as weapons and as issues” (Bourdieu 2002: 8). Following Bourdieu, Dezalay (2004)
shows the importance of the national field in the international positioning of transnational brokers. It relates to actors who become enrolled or instrumentalise themselves to negotiate their role in internal politics.

The internal stakes of “transnational brokers” have been clearly identified in Merve Özdemirkiran’s article on the commercial activities developed by Kurdish businessmen from Turkey in Northern Iraq in order to reinforce their bargaining position within domestic politics. The ties that these businessmen previously fostered in the region became an asset after the Turkish Government started to develop its relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government. Likewise, Yohanan Benhaïm introduces the notion of the coproduction of foreign policy, involving both public and private actors. By investigating the changing modalities of the involvement of Gülen schools in Iraqi Kurdistan, the paper analyses the decline of the security paradigm in Turkish foreign policy in the course of the years after 2000. The paper rejects the claim that Gülen schools are the instigators of this policy shift, or even the conveyors of a soft power paradigm, to argue that rather they utilised the opportunity created by this shift to participate in the coproduction of Turkish foreign policy as part of a “complex web of reformists”.

From the unidirectional perspective of soft power to an interactionist approach

Nye’s theory relies on a mechanical chain of action. According to his theory, when a country adopts “soft” tools, it increases its attractiveness towards its foreign peers, which in turn enhances its power. This supposes that attraction can be converted into power. This special issue challenges the assumption of a mechanical link between culture and state power in two ways: First, by showing that an increase in a country’s cultural influence may not necessarily translate into diplomatic outcomes; and secondly, by adopting an interactionist approach that takes into consideration the appropriation of a given message by its recipients.

On the one hand, Todd Hall’s (2010) processual approach has underlined the difficulties in measuring attractiveness and securing with certainty a resulting increase in power; the fact that people wear jeans, Hall argues, does not lead them to endorse American foreign policies (Ibid.). Jana Jabbour’s contribution in this issue demonstrates the limitations of the soft power model in the Turkish case. Her work on the exportation of Turkish soap operas to the Middle East suggests that in spite of the undeniable commercial success of the diffusion of Turkish shows, a correlative growth in political power cannot be automatically assumed. She shows that there is no systematic relation between the rate of consumption of television serials in Arab countries and the level of support towards Turkey’s foreign policies, and significantly in terms of interstate negotiations. This refers back to differences in the intrinsic nature of these initiatives that tends to become obscured by soft power. Indeed, the convertibility of capital gathered in the cultural field into political capital remains dubious. If it does not translate into actual power, the very relevance of the notion of soft power can thus be questioned. The difficulties in assessing the impact of sport on the image or influence of a country is a comparative point made in Jean-François Polo’s article on the concept of sports diplomacy, defined as the use of sport as a tool to serve diplomatic objectives, such as conveying a message, facilitating links prior to a policy shift, or cooling
tensions. In the case of football matches held between Turkey and Armenia and Syria, the author shows how sport was employed as a strategic tool of Turkey’s “zero problem with neighbours’ policy”. However, the paper suggests that sports diplomacy can only be effective when the political context is favourable to a warming of relations. This approach is therefore non-deterministic and alerts us to the analytical imperative of affording greater attention to the time frames in which these initiatives are implemented.

On the other hand, the soft power approach reveals a lack of interest in the reception of a country’s initiatives in a foreign country. Yet, the sociology of reception in media studies has already approached the idea that a media message can be “decoded” and twisted in its use by its recipients (Hall 1973), and in a way that might contradict the intended project of the message’s producers (Le Grignou 2003; Englund 2015). More generally, any initiative (cultural, political) can be re-appropriated by the recipients, which deploy “arts of doing” (Certeau 1984) according to their own agendas. This anthropology of reception has been deepened, notably in the framework of development projects in Africa (Bierschenk et al. 2000).

In this perspective, any initiative instigated by a Turkish actor beyond its borders, whether public or private, should be studied through an interactive approach between the targeted individuals and the producers of the initiative. In this issue, Gabrielle Angey’s work on the Gülen movement introduces an interactionist perspective. Departing from the widespread view that the development of Gülen schools in Africa signifies the success of Turkey’s soft power, Angey investigated the trajectory of African students coming to Turkey after having studied in these schools. Her study reveals that conflicts can arise between the divergent agendas of African students and the quest for influence pursued by Turkish actors in the Gülen movement. Rather than increasing Turkey’s attractiveness to the future African elite, who are represented as all but passive recipients, such conflicts conversely lead to sentiments of rejection.

**Beyond a culturalist perspective: Deconstructing the soft power discourse**

Finally, this special issue has contributed to the deconstruction of soft power discourse as emerging from a culturalist position that essentialises countries’ values and culture. In Nye’s (2011: 81) theory, “political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad)” are considered as one of the three primary resources of soft power alongside culture and foreign policy. The USA would “by nature” be attached to democracy and human rights, and supposedly be “more universal” than other countries (for instance Japan or China in Nye 1990a, 2013). As a consequence, Nye tends to consider any policy contradicting this vision, such as Bush’s invasion of Iraq in 2003, to be a demonstration of “hard power” and a subversion of American “real” values (Hall 2010). This infers a hierarchy: some countries are implicitly viewed as being essentially endowed with “more” universal values than others. This perceptual ordering requires reintegration into a reflective framework of analysis to link it to the field in which discursive knowledge productions on soft power is inserted. As Dezalay explains, the dominating position of the USA has been largely dependent on important investments in the field of state knowledge, which enabled the global diffusion of a particular form of government as the product of a specific history. The field of knowledge would thus be
intimately interrelated with the field of power (Dezalay 2004: 17), and the production of concepts such as soft power would be situated as part of the hegemonising process of the USA. This vision appears all the more ethnocentric considering that Joseph Nye, an American thinker who believes in the leading role of the USA, advocates it. In order to depart from this culturalist view, several contributors to this issue analyse the context of production of soft power discourse.

Indeed, one way to avoid the trick of considering the “political values of Turkey” as culturally fixed is to focus on the discourses of soft power and analyse them as such. Previous scholarly analyses of the Turkish soft power have seldom questioned the political stakes related to the use of soft power discourse by think tanks or by political actors and the academic community. Kerem Öktem and Yohanan Benhaïm’s contribution illustrates the political interests behind the “soft power label” in Turkey. They highlight the key role played by multi-positioned individuals in introducing soft power discourse to Turkey at the triadic junction of think tanks, academia and foreign policy. Öktem and Benhaïm’s article demonstrates the geostrategic stakes behind the promotion of the Turkish soft power discourse as a proxy for America’s power and image. In continuity with the construction of the idea of “Orient” by the West (Said 1978), soft power’s academic productions and political discourses focusing on Turkey would consequently constitute a projection of the West on Turkey, either as a barrier or a peace keeper in the region. Ultimately, from a Saidian perspective we could argue that the soft power discourses concerning Turkey (both academic and expertise-driven, centered on Islam, secularism democracy, capitalism), would be more revealing of Western identity and fears than of Turkish reality.

Jérémie Molho’s contribution deals with the performative effect of the construction of discourse. Through his analysis of the Istanbul art world as a complex system of actors comprising galleries, auction houses, art fairs and art institutions, Molho argues that strategies to develop international networks are based on beliefs constructed through processes of place-framing. The emphasis of key gatekeepers on the cultural proximity of contemporary cultural productions to the Middle East and the rise of Istanbul as an emerging regional cultural capital, for example, is considered by Molho to have encouraged the development of ties between the Istanbul art scene and neighbouring countries.

Furthermore, the theory of soft power implies cultural or political transfers moving from one territorial entity to another, each of them having their own set of cultural values, to another linked by specific sets of cultural values. This conception reduces the scope and stakes of the circulations of individuals, ideas, and “arts of doing”. The inference of transferal simultaneously facilitates a temporal discrepancy between countries that “don’t get [...] soft power” (Nye 2013), and countries that embody it and are considered global models in the course towards progress. This normative approach seems to imply that soft power corresponds to a higher level of development. Reactions towards the Gülen movement by African students in Istanbul studied by Gabrielle Angey, contest a uniform understanding of Turkey: the gap between the discourse on Turkey and the complex realities the students encounter is at the root of their discontent. Beyond the cultural transfer approach implied by soft power theory, this special issue has therefore tried to contribute to the analytical endeavour of undertaking a “trans-actings” approach: deconstructing the idea of blocks, focusing on the streams, the circulations, and examining what it produces.
Concluding remarks

By examining what has been often presented as the tools of the Turkish soft power, the contributors of this issue have not only challenged its effectiveness, but unveiled the specific appropriations and unexpected consequences of the concept. The authors have thereby established the basis for further researches in International Relations and other fields. This issue calls for further critical inquiry into the stakes of the promotion of the notion of soft power, the interconnected power dynamics between public and private actors, and the circulations and blockings of its use. Without presupposing the existence of fixed cultural entities, this special issue encourages further studies on the articulation between international and domestic spaces. We hope this special issue of Beyond Soft Power: Stakes and configurations of the influence of contemporary Turkey will provide new insights into the complexity of Turkish influence and stimulate further debates.

By way of concluding our introduction to this special issue, we close by suggesting some possible research directions on concerns that we have been unable to cover in the scope of this issue or that warrant further investigation.

Firstly, this issue did not include studies focused on state-agencies that develop international economic and cultural programs, such as TİKA [Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı] or Yunus Emre Institutes. An empirical analysis of such organisations could benefit from an understanding of the way in which national strategies of influence are implemented within organisations that are organically related to the Turkish state.

Secondly, approaches drawing on Gramsci’s theory of cultural hegemony could help unpick the relations of power that exist between influence and coercion. Without treating it directly, the contributions to this issue brought us to question of hegemony: the absence of military action or paying-off does not necessarily entail the corresponding absence of coercion. While the soft power approach tends to separate sources of power, an approach in terms of hegemony brings coercion back into the equation (Bayart 2008). While the literature on “model” and “soft power” operates depoliticise the reality of power relations, the notion of hegemony inscribes it within an analysis of the global dynamics of domination.

Finally, following the sociology of the “transnational brokers” of the discourse on Turkish soft power discourse, introduced in Öktem and Benhaîm’s discussion, could contribute to exposing the circulation of ideas and the internal stakes of the international positioning of intellectuals. Beyond the concept of soft power itself, the way for a better understanding of the role of the field of knowledge and expertise in the construction of the Turkish foreign policy could be opened up.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. The article was published in *Today’s Zaman*, a newspaper close to the Gülen Movement, over a year after the Turkish Government began its crackdown on the Gülen movement. To read the article see, Nye (April 5, 2015).

2. The main initiators of the project include Gabrielle Angey, Yohanan Benhaim, Élise Massicard, Jérémie Molho, Elshan Mustafayev and Julien Paris. The organisation of an international research workshop held at the French Institute of Anatolian Studies on 8 and 9 January 2014, formed the basis of this special issue.

3. The Gülen movement is a powerful Muslim movement in Turkey, particularly in the economic and the education fields. For further information concerning the conflict between the Turkish government and the Gülen Movement, see Balci (2014a, 2014b).

4. After the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, the perception of decline was due to the USA’s diminishing share of world product and its excessively large commitment beyond its frontiers. See the introduction of *Bound to Lead*, op.cit.

5. Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan (1993: 13) defines an arena as the place “where strategic heterogeneous groups compete, moved by (material or symbolic) interests that are more or less compatible (où des groupes stratégiques hétérogènes s’affrontent, mê par des intérêts (matériels ou symboliques) plus ou moins compatibles).

6. In the *Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), de Certeau argues that ordinary people can develop defensive tactics when subjects of a dominant organisation. This act of creative resistance is referred to as the arts of doing (*arts de faire*) and corresponds to routine activities such as walking or reading.

7. Parallel to this quickly evolving reality was “the rise and fall of soft power discourse” in Turkey at the junction of a triad involving think tanks, academics, and foreign policy actors. The main stages of these triadic productions are introduced in Yohanan Benhaim and Kerem Öktem’s article.

8. Abstract from the ANR Project Trans-actings: « Penser par “transferts”, disions-nous, revient à penser la mise en circulation comme étape subséquente à la production localisée de “cultures”. Parler de “transfaire” c’est au contraire étudier ce qui est (re)produit par la circulation de savoirs et de pratiques. S’astreindre à comprendre des relations sans avoir préjugé de leurs termes ».

9. The idea of cultural hegemony was developed by Antonio Gramsci to argue that a state’s domination is achieved through cohesion, active consent, and coercion (Gramsci 1971). Although it is thought of in terms of an internal purpose (the way in which a society holds together), it subsequently becomes used in external relations of power and is inserted into national frameworks (Said 1978; Bayart 2004, 2008). Therefore, it can be presented as an early and alternative theorisation of the soft power dynamic, but with the aim of denunciation. According to this approach, soft power would appear as a depoliticised, positively presented version of hegemony (Yörük and Vatikiotis 2013). On the other hand, cultural hegemony has been used to deconstruct the cultural dimension of domination. One can mention, for example, Harvey (2003: 41) on American imperialism: “The emulation of US consumerism, ways of life, cultural forms,
and political and financial institutions has contributed to the process of endless capital accumulation globally.” Finally, cultural hegemony starts with the same observations but draws opposite conclusions. It underlines the link between force and cultural tools contradicting its “soft” dimension by inserting it in imperialistic contexts (Said 1978).

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The rise and fall of Turkey’s soft power discourse
Discourse in foreign policy under Davutoğlu and Erdoğan

Yohanan Benhaïm and Kerem Öktem

Introduction

Since the early 2000s, Turkey’s profile on the world stage has been significantly transformed. From a doctrine of realism and Western orientation, Turkey’s foreign policy elites as well as the leading cadres of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) have changed the country’s foreign policy outlook to one of active engagement with the world. The desire for regional leadership, patronage of the Muslim world, and presence in many of the major conflicts in its neighbourhood, however, soon turned into episodes of overstretch, hubris, and foreign policy debacles (Akkoyunlu et al. 2013). From the “Zero Problems Policy with Neighbours” and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu’s commendable “Strategic Depth” doctrine to a more belligerent stance towards Israel – temporarily boosting then Prime Minister Erdoğan’s image in the Arab world – to Turkey’s involvement in the Syrian War and its downgrading of diplomatic relations with Egypt it has only been a few years.

Parallel to this “rise and fall” dynamic of Turkey’s foreign policy (cf. Bilgin 2015; Öktem 2015; Almassian 2014; Samaan 2013; Keyman 2012), the discourses surrounding actual policy have gone through comparable cycles. In this paper, we trace the boom and bust of Turkey’s soft power discourse, which created a veritable dynamic of its own, particularly among academics and Turkish and American think tanks, and also in the media more generally. By doing so, we seek to understand the extent to which the discourse on “Turkish soft power” has been used in different ways by different actors and constituted a discourse of legitimization of AKP rule in the international arena as well as in Turkey.

We suggest that this discourse has gone through cycles of transformation according to the uses and interpretations of actors investing in this narrative during different
political episodes, not only during AKP rule, but also in the period prior to this, following the end of the Cold War. The Turkish “soft power” discourse resembles an amorphous body of overlapping ideas and activities (also termed hyper-activism or pro-activism; cf. Keyman 2012), which eventually became generalised in academic circles and think tanks after its emergence in 2001. It is grounded in the idea that Turkey’s civilian rule, democratic norms, and economic success are key elements for the diffusion of a positive image of the country abroad with the aim to create power capabilities where military power is not a viable option. Our aim is to critically reflect on how this branding strategy of “Turkey as a model” operated, when and on what scales it proceeded, and which goals it served. We are interested in the generation, modification, and operation of discourse in a mutually constituted field involving the academic and think tank community and political actors. We do not consider any one site of discourse production as the origin of this discourse or the main driver of its diffusion. These three poles can be considered as interconnected hubs of discourse production on Turkish “soft power” and the “Turkish model” and we can note the simultaneity with which they are promoting these discourses. We analyze the concomitance of discourse production in these different sites in order to highlight the mutually reinforcing dynamics of this triadic field. Our hypothesis is that academics, experts within Turkish and US think tanks, and AKP government officials have different interests in the promotion and dissemination of this discourse. This article paves the way for future research on the actual circulations of resources and agents structuring the relations between these three poles that we do not have the space to develop here.

4 On an international scale, the projection of soft power is of course not specific to Turkey’s foreign policy. The very idea of soft power originates from the US within American foreign policy debate, and particularly from its realist version with Joseph S. Nye as its paragon (Nye 2015; 2004; 1990). From there, it was warmly received and gladly taken up by foreign policy analysts in other emerging middle powers like Brazil, Russia, India and China (the BRIC countries) as well as by Turkey. Meanwhile, the concept operates as a political indicator of the international league a country plays its diplomatic games in: it is aimed at indexing Turkey among other global leaders whose influence is grounded in soft power. If not on a par with the US, which according to Nye remains the one and only superpower in the world, and whether soft or hard (Nye 2015), Turkey has been trying to emulate the European Union and other emerging powers like the BRIC countries.

5 The specificity of the discourse on Turkish “soft power” is that it operates as a multi-relational discursive tool. This discourse has often pertained to Turkey’s function as a role model for its relations between the United States/the European Union and a fourth world region for which western appeasement is required. The Turkish model first emerged with reference to Central Asia after the Cold War. After a period of relative silence, which attested above all to Turkey’s internal crises in the 1990s, the discourse made a forceful reappearance after 9/11 towards the Middle East (İğsiz 2014). It subsequently peaked with the popular uprisings that shook the Arab world after 2011.

6 In Turkey, the use of “soft power” discourse has served the AKP’s political agenda on multiple levels. Laying the emphasis on Turkey’s leadership in the Middle East, and increasingly in the Muslim world, the ruling party has been able to reassert itself on the domestic scene. Discourse on the devotional of the AKP’s external actions to the rise
of Turkey’s place in the world through the promotion of its values and the reconstruction of its national identity epitomizes the way in which foreign policy was turned into a campaign argument for Erdoğan’s party throughout the 2000s, and particularly after the 2011 elections. Beyond its vote-winning aspects, “soft power” and leadership discourses were also a function and visible manifestation of what especially pro-AKP observers have called the demilitarization of Turkey’s foreign policy. It legitimized the military’s decreasing influence in domestic politics, while helping to marginalize the former bureaucratic elites.

Even if the “soft power” discourse, as it is discussed here, is not exclusive to the AKP’s period in power, its central role in the political project of AKP power is. We can even go a step further and argue that the “soft power” discourse and its role in constituting a core linkage between two other discourses – domestic democratization and civilianization of politics – has occupied an existential place in (the now President) Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s strategy to establish a hegemonic political system and deepen his grip on power. As part of the aforementioned triad of interconnected discourses, the discourse of “soft power” helped obfuscate global views on the so-called civilianization process, which instead of democratising society led to new forms of authoritarianism, and in turn proved detrimental to the positive promotion of the country’s image abroad.

Foreign policy failures and growing authoritarianism in Turkey since the beginning of the 2010s have rendered the discourse of “soft power” largely irrelevant. The emergence and diffusion of such a discourse in addition to its potential – if only for a limited time – to impress foreign policy elites at home and abroad and divert attention away from more pertinent domestic developments in Turkey remains a highly relevant question for consideration. Turkey under the AKP has never been the regional order-setter that the former Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu has repeatedly claimed (Davutoğlu 2013, 2001; cf. Grigoriadis 2010; Murinson 2006). But it was able to project the discourse of its foreign policy for a few years, during which period the country did indeed amass symbolical power in the Middle East and beyond, even if, as we now know, this was a very shallow discourse that had the attraction of novelty, but little power of persuasion in the real world.

The empirical basis of this paper has been formed by a set of explorative case studies involving the institutions active in foreign policy debates and the outputs of think tanks and academic institutions in the period between the early 2000s and September 2014. Members of an interdisciplinary working group on “Turkish Soft Power” carried out these case studies.1 The research was based on a mixed methods approach with a particular emphasis on content analysis. This research method is content-sensitive and is used to describe and quantify phenomena (Miles, Huberman 1994; Denzin, Lincoln 2011; Schreier 2012). Content analysis can be used in an inductive or deductive way, with the former approach allowing for categories to be derived from the empirical field. We use this inductive trajectory to locate the places of production of “soft power” discourse, to understand the conditions of its production, and scrutinize its content. We have chosen to focus on “soft power”, even though we use the related discourse of “Turkey as a model” as a comparative frame. As we demonstrate in our analysis, while “soft power” is above all an academic discourse, the “model debate” has remained limited in scholarly discussion, despite its significant presence in foreign policy and public debates on Turkey.
We worked with a research design based on the three steps of preparation, organization, and reporting. The first stage of the process begins with the selection of the unit of analysis. In our case, the units of analysis were the texts made available on the websites of think tanks and government institutions, as well as on Internet search engines, such as Google and Google Scholar. Focusing on the Internet as a primary source of empirical evidence may arguably introduce biases into the process, which are almost impossible to control. In each of these units of analysis, we searched for literature referencing the two interrelated notions of “Turkish soft power” and “Turkish model”. We searched texts in both English and in Turkish in order to examine the nature of the producers and to specify the publics targeted by these discourses.

More specifically, concerning the analysis of academic productions and the discourses of government institutions, we chose to explore regional and thematic categories. This allowed us to map the regions centralised by this discourse and the themes contained within it, as well as ascertaining the differences emanating from the divergent nature of the sources. These themes were visualised with the help of qualitative research and visualisation tools like Tagxedo.

We also have to acknowledge that our focus on terms like “soft power” and “Turkish model” constrains our analysis to foreign policy texts. The spread of the concept through other texts dedicated to public policy, cultural matters, Neo-Ottomanism etc., which implicitly describe soft power processes and therefore also contribute to this discursive thread without explicitly using the term (see, among others, Bingöl Macdonald 2012), cannot be accounted for in this study. While we are thus limited to the foreign policy literature in Turkey and abroad that explicitly cites the concept of “soft power”, we do assume that such limitations are manageable for the analytical purposes of this paper.

Due to its exploratory character, the mixed methodology approach taken in this paper does not allow us to establish a full genealogy of Turkey’s “soft power” discourse. It rather seeks to provide starting points for the analysis of how Turkey’s “soft power” discourse has been constructed, which actors have been involved in this construction, what its most important contents have been, and to what extent this discourse contributed to the legitimization of AKP power.

The paper consists of three main sections each corresponding to the three sites of discourse production that we identified earlier. We first discuss the academic discourse of Turkey’s “soft power” as it has been reflected in the global academic literature. We then examine the role of think-tanks inside and outside Turkey in the dissemination and adaptation of the discourse. Finally, we look into its use among foreign policy actors in Turkey, particularly by AKP governmental actors, specifically the former Foreign Minister (now Prime Minister) Ahmet Davutoğlu and the former Prime Minister (now President) Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

I. The emergence and rise of “soft power” as an academic discourse

Turkey’s “soft power” discourse has been clearly predicated on Joseph Nye’s influential 1990 book Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power. Yet, it has taken more than a decade for Nye’s ideas to trickle down into the foreign policy debate, which may
have probably required a reminder in the shape of Nye’s (2004) follow-up publication, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. When we examine the period from 2001 through academic publications made available on Google Scholar⁴, i.e. the period corresponding to the AKP in power, we see a very slow rise in the number of published academic papers (in Turkish and English combined) on Turkey’s “soft power”, beginning in 2005, accelerating in 2009, and reaching close to 80 papers in 2013 (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Academic articles containing the term “Turkish soft power”

This general trend is not surprising. Turkey’s foreign policy actors became increasingly engaged in world politics and more visible, particularly after Ahmet Davutoğlu took over the office of the Foreign Ministry in 2009. With the increased outputs of pro-government think-tanks like SETA [Siyaset, Ekonomi ve Toplum Araştırmaları Vakfı, the Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research] and through gatekeepers, such as Ibrahim Kalın (see box below), soft power-related terms gained much wider currency in foreign policy outlets. These gatekeepers are characterised by their ability to produce the narrative of “soft power” while participating in the construction of a complex institutionalized system of public and private partnerships charged with promoting it. Their circulation in Turkish and American think tanks and the position of their fields of expertise in public institutions is indicative of the personal interests that may become invested in the promotion of this discourse. They have also published academic or near-academic papers in journals such as *Insight Turkey* and *Perceptions*, and the journal of SAM [Stratejik Araştırma Merkezi, the Center for Strategic Research], the think tank of the Turkish Foreign Ministry.

Ibrahim Kalın graduated from Georgetown University and is a specialist in Islamic studies and International Relations. He was one of the first opinion leaders to promote the discourse of “soft power” from as early as 2006 in an article published in *Zaman* (Kalın Feb. 24, 2006, see also Kalın 2011). At the time of publication he was the founder and general coordinator of SETA, a leading pro-government think tank. In 2010, he was appointed to the Coordination Agency for Public Diplomacy [Kamu Diplomasisi Koordinatörüğü, KDK], launched under the Prime Minister in order to coordinate government efforts to promote Turkey’s image. Between 2009 and 2012 he served as Senior Advisor to the Prime Minister Erdogan, before becoming the
Deputy Undersecretary of the Prime Minister. In 2014, he became the spokesman for President Erdoğan.

It is worth comparing the evident presence of “soft power” discourse in academic works to the related discourse of the “Turkish model”. While “soft power” was mentioned in 371 articles from 2001, references to the “Turkish Model” can only be found in 49 entries for the same research period (Figure 2). There is no comparative upward trend in the number of publications, even though there is a significant hike between 2011 and 2013, suggesting the start of an academic debate on the role for Turkey as a model for the future of countries destabilised by the Arab Spring. This number can be expected to remain at a relatively high level as the output of papers is likely to rise given the current political context and the failure of the discourse on the “Turkish Model”, particularly in Syria, and following the Gezi protests in May-June 2013 and the breakdown of the Kurdish peace process in Turkey. For a comparison, please also consult Figures 3 and 4.

Figure 2. Academic articles on the “Turkish Model”

In terms of the content of these articles, a perfunctory reading suggests that most academic papers on soft power involve more than one country, that is to say, they deal with Turkey’s “soft power” in a particular world region combined with the role of the United States or Europe. Turkey’s “soft power” discourse appears to be connected to the interests of the United States, and to a lesser extent the European Union, to influence parts of the world beyond their direct control via a more trusted regional leader, i.e. Turkey.

We can further explore the content of these publications by looking at the titles and words used in them. Figure 3 conveys a sense of the main constituents of “soft power”
discourse. The results do tend to surprise to some extent as some of the key concepts one would expect to find – democracy, equality, justice – are largely absent from the studies. Rather, the most commonly used concepts are “foreign policy” and “foreign relations”, and the most frequently referenced regions are the “Middle East”, followed by the “European Union” (as a composite of “Europe” and “Union”), and the “Arab world”. In terms of vocabulary, the following words are widely used: security, economy, strategy, culture, and energy. These results seem to corroborate the idea according to which the Turkish “soft power” discourse, as reflected in academic papers, is more concerned with promoting stability and security and with Turkey's role as moderating influence particularly in conflict-ridden third party contexts.

Figure 3: Frequency of key words used in academic publications on “Turkish soft power”
A comparison between the content of “soft power” discourse and “Turkish model” discourse here is quite insightful (Figure 3 and Figure 4). The former is much more widely spread both in terms of world regions and conceptual references with Europe, the Middle East, and Africa represented. “Turkish model” discourse, as represented in Figure 4, is concerned with democracy and democratization in the Middle East after the Arab spring with extensive references made to Islam, Islamism, and secularism, and the role of Turkey as moderator. This figure thus confirms our working hypothesis that a central dimension of the “Turkish model” discourse is its role within US and EU debates concerning Turkey’s role in the Middle East after the popular uprisings in the Arab world. One of the possible explanations for the growing importance of Turkish “soft power” and “model” debates in the 2000s may be the increasing mutual dependence between academic institutions, think tanks, and government agencies. This interdependence seems to have contributed to the blurring of lines between non-partisan scholarly research, academic research with a (hidden) political agenda, and outright partisan work to the point of devaluing the academic endeavour as a whole.

II. Turkish and American think tanks advocating for the “Turkish model”

As we established in section one, “soft power” discourse and the “Turkish model” debate are two distinct if interrelated discourses on Turkey and its foreign policy. Discursive developments since the 1990s provides us with an insight into the workings of US-Turkey bilateral relations and the mode whereby this field of expertise is structured in these two countries.
The rise of the “Turkish model” discourse is, above all, a product of the geopolitical reconfigurations of the post-Cold War era. During the Cold War, Washington’s containment policy against Moscow was defined by a reactive doctrine, described by the International Relations (IR) theorist Georges Kennan as an “adroit and vigilant application of counter-force at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points, corresponding to the shifts and manoeuvres of Soviet policy” (Kennan 1947). Due to its location, Turkey represented one of these geostrategic points and maintained strong economic and military ties with Western institutions, such as NATO, and especially with the United States. The end of the Cold War, hence, constituted a critical period of uncertainty for Turkish decision makers, as it put into question the “strategic rentier” (Bozdemir 1991) position of their country. In the same period, Turkey also experienced two main setbacks to its European ambitions in 1987 and 1989. As a countermovement to these challenges, Ankara was also able to take advantage of the implosion of the Soviet Union to reaffirm its strategic importance on the international scene and especially to the United States.

The collapse of the Soviet Union led to the independence of five Turkic republics in Central Asia and the establishment of new states in the Caucasus. American and Turkish foreign policy actors quickly labelled Turkey as a model for these countries on the basis of three elements: firstly, Turkey was seen as a model of development for Central Asian economies willing to embrace capitalism after seventy years of a centrally planned soviet economy; secondly, it was suggested as a model of democratization; and thirdly, Turkey was represented as a secular model of modernization for Muslim-majority countries, unlike other actors such as Iran (Aydogan 2003; Balci 2005). In addition, the underlying argument of shared history and culture between Turkey and the Central Asian Republics coincided with Huntington’s emphasis on civilizations in world politics, an influential perspective among decision makers and analysts in the US, particularly under Presidents George H. W. Bush and later George W. Bush. This may have thus played a role in the popularity of the notion of the “Turkish model” during the early 1990s. Nevertheless, it quickly became apparent that Turkey lacked the capacity to fulfil this role due to its own domestic political and economic instability.

Despite the disillusionment over Turkey’s failure as role model for the Central Asian states, the idea of a Turkish model had spread to other areas by the late 1990s. As in the case of Central Asia, it was possible to witness the development of this discourse in regions where US interests were at stake and where the State Department remained wary of the influence of non-allied states. While the “Turkish model” was promoted in Central Asia to counter Iranian influence and isolate the former Soviet republics from Moscow, in the Muslim world it was promoted as an alternative to the attraction of political Islam. In a speech held in 1999 at the Washington Institute, the Turkish Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit stated:

Turkey is, I believe, a model for Islamic countries (...) I believe that Turkey’s example has played an important role in this respect, because the Turkish experiment has proven that Islam can be compatible with modernity, with secularism, and with democracy. (Ecevit 1999)

It is important to note that Ecevit gave this speech in Washington with the intention of strengthening Turkey’s economic partnership with the US after the devastating earthquake that struck the country earlier in the year. In the American context, the welcome reception of Ecevit’s words was facilitated by Washington’s increasing
concern about the potential threats posed by “Islamist terrorism’. The two attacks on the US embassies in Nairobi and Dar Es Salam in the previous year led to strategic discussions on the Muslim world and Turkey’s role as “pivotal state” within it.\(^5\)

Figure 5: American think-tank publications on “Turkish soft power” and “Turkish model”

The geographic shift from Central Asia to the Islamic world correlates to the reorientation of Turkey’s globally promoted identity from Turkishness to (Turkish Sunni) Muslimhood. It also suggests that this shift is part of the structural pattern of Turkish-American relations, which develops in response to the international and domestic challenges faced by the two partners. The “Turkish model” cycle is consequently an expression of the evolving nature of this bilateral relation. The post-9/11 international context in combination with the first AKP government in Turkey and the US invasion of Iraq, opened a new phase in the evolution of the “Turkish model” discourse. Here, it is worth drawing attention to the frequency with which this concept appeared in the publications of leading American foreign policy think tanks (Figure 5). The debate on Turkey’s role model status was at the time oriented towards finding a resolution to the so-called “clash of civilisations” with Turkey positioned as a “bridge country between West and East” (İğsiz, 2014). In the late 2000s, the debate progressed and the first reports and articles on “Turkish soft power” were published, alongside the development of the discussion on the “Neo-Ottomanist” reorientation of Turkish foreign policy. With the Arab uprisings at the beginning of 2011, the debate on the “Turkish model” peaked reaching a new level. The majority of articles debated whether Turkey and the AKP could represent a model for Tunisia, Libya or Egypt and their respective Islamist parties. Since mid-2012, discourses on the
“Turkish model” and “Turkish soft power” seem to have overlapped, albeit in the form of a critical discussion against the viability of both approaches. In particular, the deteriorating situation in Syria and Ankara’s inability to provide a constructive answer to the crisis have called into question their relevance. The harsh repression of the Gezi Park demonstrations by the Turkish police in spring 2013, triggered further critical publications describing the AKP government’s increasingly authoritarian stance as a threat to Turkey’s stability and influence in the Middle East, as well as its reliability as an ally of the US. Finally, the AKP’s authoritarian shift and its decision to terminate the peace process with the Kurdish movement in Turkey has led even the most proactive supporters of the ruling party to abandon the discourse on Turkey’s “soft power”.

The study of the publications of leading Turkish think tanks is enlightening in this context. When we compare the occurrence of the concepts of “model” and “soft power” we see that the notion of the “Turkish model” still dominates (Figure 6). It is possible to witness a similar and even more accentuated trend in American think tank production. To explain the scope of the debate on the “Turkish model” among American think tanks we can hypothesise that beyond Turkey, it is the American model that is at stake in an important part of this literature: the promotion of democracy, capitalism, and secularism via the example of Turkey is first and foremost a way for the United States to promote its interests. This has been especially true of the praise of the “Turkish model” in American think tanks by neo-cons of the George W. Bush administration like Paul Wolfowitz. During a speech at the Fifth Turgut Özal Memorial Lecture at the Washington Institute in March 2002, a few months after the beginning of the ISAF operation in Afghanistan, Wolfowitz stated:

In the United States, we understand that Turkey remains on the frontlines of the war on terror. And we also understand that Turkey is a model for those in the Muslim world who have aspirations for democratic progress and prosperity. Turkey gives us an example of the reconciliation of religious belief with modern secular democratic institutions.

This relationship between US foreign policy and the discourse of the “Turkish model” at a time when the neo-cons were promoting a vision of American hegemony in the Middle East, contributed to paranoia in Turkey about the influence of Washington in the region and its alleged support of the AKP government. However, such judgement fails to account for the complexity of this discourse, which cannot be reduced to a simplistic expression of the domination of the centre over the periphery. Indeed, the producers of discourses on Turkey within Turkish and American think tanks are characterized by their mobility. There is a remarkable pattern of circulation between different institutions located both within the United States and in Turkey. A rapid glance at the analysts working in American think tanks on Turkey indicates that the majority are of Turkish origin and move between universities and think tanks in the US and Turkey. Some analysts could qualify as gatekeepers of this particular field of expertise as they have been responsible for producing reports on Turkey for several American think tanks since the beginning of the 2000s. In addition, this system is characterised by its permeability and especially by its connections with academic and political fields, which further enhances the circulation of actors and thoughts within this system of knowledge production.

This articulation between the political field and the local context also explains the comparative differences between publications on Turkey produced by American and Turkish think tanks. When the first revolts started in Tunisia and Egypt, Turkish
officials refrained from promoting the vision of Turkey as a model. In a conference organized by the Abant Platform in December 2011, Erşat Hürmüzülü, the Middle East special advisor to the then Turkish President Abdullah Gül, stated that Turkey should not be considered as a model, but as a source of inspiration to neighbouring countries (Radikal December 3, 2011). This insistence on the fact that Turkey should not represent a model for the countries experiencing the “Arab Spring” may have been based on the determination not to repeat the mistakes made in Central Asia in the 1990s, when Turkish foreign policy failed to live up to its ambitions of regional leadership.

This cautious attitude also marked an attempt to promote Turkey’s “soft power” capabilities. Contrary to the model narrative, “soft power” discourse promoted Turkey as a dynamic player in regional politics, rather than as a country distinguished by its essence as Turkish or Muslim. Laying the emphasis on Turkey’s “soft power” could be interpreted as an expression of preference of what Turkey does rather than what it is, as remained the case until the authoritarian and identitarian turn in Turkey after the 2011 elections. This was also a way of enhancing its actions and autonomy towards other major actors in world politics such as the United States. Indeed, this also constituted the main paradox of this discourse: while the “model” and “soft power” discourses were framed by the mutual interests of Turkey’s American ally, one of the main sources of Ankara's popularity continued to reside in its ability to emancipate itself from Washington and act as an independent power vis-a-vis Israel. While the debate on the “Turkish model” within Turkish think tanks was oriented towards a Turkish-speaking audience, the “Turkish soft power” debate was conducted in English in order to reach an international public (Figure 6). This discrepancy allows for some preliminary conjectures to be made: Turkey’s foreign policy actors have been cautious to avoid the model debate in outputs geared towards an English-language audience, which of course also includes readers in the Arab and Muslim world where Turkey has been seeking to build-up its power capacities. For the Turkish-speaking audience, however, Turkey’s role as model has been used much more permissively and sometimes in a nationalist context.
Finally, “Turkish model” and “Turkish soft power” discourses are not equally dispersed among Turkish think tanks. Indeed, TEPAV and SETA represent the two think tanks are at the forefront of promoting the idea of Turkish “soft power”. This is certainly not a coincidence. TEPAV is the think tank of the Turkish Union of the Chamber of Commerce, a body that is benefiting from the development of trading state foreign policy (Kirişçi 2009) and willing to develop a positive image of Turkey in order to attract foreign investments. SETA on the other hand is known in the domestic arena and especially in Washington for its strong connections to the AKP government and its foreign policy. The entangled relationship between economic and political interests and think tank productions also serves as a reminder of the lack of autonomy of a large part of the Turkish think tank community from the state. Such a lack of autonomy is, of course, a phenomenon not limited to Turkey alone. Yet, since the authoritarian shift of the AKP government in 2011, it has become particularly accentuated. Therefore, the growing importance of “Turkish model” discourses in Turkish and American think tanks seems to be directly related to the fact that some of the experts promoting this discourse were committed to the foreign and domestic political agendas of Ankara and Washington.

III. The promotion of “soft power” discourse by Turkish foreign policy actors and the AKP government

Having discussed the emergence of “soft power” discourse in academia and think-tanks, we shall now turn to examine its use by Turkish foreign policy actors and the AKP government. Specifically, we will focus on the use of this concept in the speeches of the former Foreign Minister (and current Prime Minister) Ahmet Davutoğlu, and the
former Prime Minister (and current President) Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. We chose these two actors as they are the most authoritative actors of the AKP government and Turkish foreign policy abroad. We will firstly examine the presence of the term “soft power” on the websites of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA).\footnote{33} In a second step, we will submit Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu’s speeches to closer scrutiny. In both cases, the content associated with “soft power” is shallow, but a remarkable distinction can be made between a language concerned with IR theory on the one hand (Ahmet Davutoğlu), and one that is much more openly nationalist, imperialist, and pan-Islamist on the other hand (Recep Tayyip Erdoğan). On the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Turkey’s “soft power” is primarily characterised as consisting of three key characteristics: Democracy, Economy and Trade, and European Soft Power, with the first two voiced consistently and independently of the audience and location of its author. Other constituent elements or sources of Turkey’s “soft power” are presented as Turkey’s liberal visa regime, its inspiration for and influence in the Muslim world, the role of history, and Turkey’s actions as an ‘emerging donor’. In (only) one background paper, the key actors of “soft power” are mentioned as the Turkish Radio and Television Corporation’s (TRT) foreign language programmes, Turkish Airlines, the Turkish Development and Cooperation Agency (TIKA), and the Presidency for Expatriate Turks.

A truly intriguing aspect of the “soft power” debate, which may also hint at the rather wide applicability of the term by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ahmet Davutoğlu, is perceptible in the emphasis on a new discourse and diplomatic style in Turkey’s Foreign Policy in the following quote:

We do not make threats... (but use) a language that prioritizes civil-economic power. (Ahmet Davutoğlu, Foreign Policy, May 20, 2010).

Davutoğlu seeks to distinguish himself from earlier more conventional forms of foreign policy and the militaristic mind set, which dominated Turkey’s relations with the world before 2002.\footnote{34}

**Democracy and economy**

The following two quotes illustrate the consistent references to Turkey’s democracy and its assumed power of attraction for countries in its neighbourhood:

We are cognizant of the fact that our democracy is our biggest soft power. (Ahmet Davutoğlu at a meeting with EU Ambassadors, May 8, 2009).

Though there is ample room for improvement, our democracy inspires many in our neighbourhood and constitutes the backbone of our growing soft power. (Naci Koru during a lecture at Stanford University’s Business School, February 13, 2013).

The commitment to the advancement of democracy and economic development is also apparent in Ahmet Davutoğlu’s interview with the American University in Cairo Review, conducted before President Mohammed Mursi’s ascent to power. He combines many of the sources of Turkey’s “soft power” in one single sweep, prioritizing location, economy, culture, and democracy.

Our geostrategic location, booming economy, ability to understand different social and cultural dynamics in a vast geography and commitment to advance democracy... domestically and internationally are all important assets... The key word defining Turkey’s relations with the Arab countries is not “hegemony” but...

Note here that Davutoğlu also rejects allegations that Turkey may be interfering in Arab affairs.

**European and Turkish soft power**

Turkey-EU relations and European “soft power” as both a condition and result of Turkey’s prospective membership is also prominent on the MFA’s website. However, it is crucial to consider that all speeches and articles referring to this relationship are geared exclusively towards European audiences. One exception aside, MFA documents do not mention Turkey’s relationship with the EU when audiences outside the EU are in question.

The relation between Turkish and European “soft power” is well represented in the below quote, which is also used verbatim in several other speeches in the samples taken of Davutoğlu and others:

> Europe and Turkey… share a truly common vision for the future of our continent: A Europe that strengthens its soft power and advances its universal values; that promotes diversity: that is much more influential in global politics. (Davutoğlu during a speech at the Nueva Economia Forum in Madrid, November 16, 2009).

The importance of Turkey for the EU and vice versa can also be found in the speeches of the former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ali Babacan:

> Turkey's EU membership will considerably increase its soft power and appeal in expanding civil and human rights in the Islamic world. ... Turkey will become Europe’s gateway to a wider world and a portal for our common values and shared ideals that will have a more receptive audience in the Middle East. (Ali Babacan, October 2, 2007).

Babacan discusses the role of Turkey’s EU membership as a source of “soft power” for the EU as well as for Turkey by employing the “gateway to the Middle East” metaphor. In this reading, Turkey’s “soft power” will rise as the direct result of EU membership, Turkey will become a hub of attraction for the Middle East and will assume responsibility for “translating” European values to the Muslim world. In exchange, the EU will be able to better understand and cooperate with the Middle East thanks to Turkey’s “more receptive audience in the Middle East”.

**Beyond Europe**

As one would expect, MFA representatives adjust their examples to suit their audiences. While they do not refer to the European Union when speaking in Brazil or Africa for example, they do emphasise other issues such as Turkey’s role as a donor of development assistance and its liberal visa regime.

> We used our visa policy as a tool of increasing soft power capability, lifting visa requirements with more than 30 countries in the last 5 years. In addition to its political and cultural benefits, these agreements boosted our tourism. (Naci Koru, during a meeting with Turkish Honorary Consuls in North and South America, April 15, 2013).
Finally, a recurring theme is the historical foundations of Turkey’s “soft power”. An MFA paper on Turkey and NATO explains Turkey's importance for NATO in the following fashion:

Turkey mobilizes its “soft power” by means of using its deep historical ties with populations and countries in the wide geography where NATO acts.

The quote here refers to NATO’s missions in Bosnia, Kosova, Macedonia, and Afghanistan, conflicts in which Turkey has indeed been able to use its religious and cultural identity to establish relations of trust with local Muslim populations.

A closer look at Davutoğlu’s speeches

Based on an analysis of all 75 publicly available speeches of the Foreign Minister, we can see some degree of overlap with the “soft power” discourse of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in addition to some points of deviation. Figure 7 represents his core vocabulary. While the economy and cooperation tops the list, the emphasis on democracy is comparably less pronounced than on the ministry’s website, and it is used with the same frequency as Islam.

Davutoğlu’s vision emerges as less Euro-centric and is certainly not geared towards the promotion of democracy. Economic and political cooperation and security are at the heart of his engagement with the world, not democracy or the rule of law. There is no reference to human rights, and most interestingly neither to the explicit terms “soft power”, nor “strategic depth”. His speeches, however, can be seen as operationalizations of these concepts, which are implicit in his public statements.

Seeking to break down Davutoğlu’s understanding of Turkish foreign policy, the frequency of city names referred to in his speeches are examined (Figure 8). What is truly striking here, is that the most often cited city by the Foreign Minister in his programmatic speeches is in fact Istanbul. Considering that Ankara is the country's
capital and only comes second, a strong emotional attachment to Istanbul as the symbol of something larger than the Turkish Republic and its capital may be detected here. Istanbul was the capital of the Ottoman Empire and, at least in Davutoğlu’s mental map, is the leading city of Islamic cosmopolitanism, the desired conceptual image Turkey wishes to represent to the world. The faint hint of the capital of the Islamic Caliphate is inherent in the notion of Muslim cosmopolitanism. Davutoğlu himself has never explicitly talked about the re-establishment of the Islamic Caliphate as a foreign policy goal, but several commentators in newspapers close to the AKP government, such as Yeni Akit and Yeni Şafak, have made this connection quite aggressively (i.e. Köse August 26, 2014).

48 The political geography and the ideological frame emerging from this analysis is compelling: it is an extended universe of overlapping spheres of influence with Istanbul at its centre. After Ankara, Brussels and New York come third and fourth, reflecting the relative importance of Turkey’s two leading allies. The remainder are a mix of capital cities located in Turkey’s neighbourhood with Jerusalem, Baku, Cairo, Sarajevo, and Damascus the most cited. Their relative importance accurately reflects the key areas of Turkish foreign policy interests under the Justice and Development Party, ranging from the issue of the occupation of Palestine to close petro-ethnic ties with Azerbaijan, criticism of Egypt after the ouster of President Mursi and the suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood, the “emotive” relation with the Muslim element of Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the conflict with Syria’s President Bashar Al Assad.

49 The mental map of Ahmet Davutoğlu, visualized in Figure 8, also reminds us of the continuities and ruptures of Turkey’s foreign policy and its strategic alliances. The United States and the European Union have been strategic allies since the end of World War Two – if now contested and disliked – while Azerbaijan became an ally in the 1990s due to successful Azeri policies based on ethnic ties and energy dependence. Jerusalem, representing both occupied Palestine and Israel’s policies, is a core theme of Davutoğlu’s Islamist ideology, while Sarajevo stands for the re-imagining of Turkey’s sphere of influence through a Neo-Ottomanist and Pan-Islamist conceptualisation of geopolitics.
Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as Prime Minister

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s speeches differ from those found on the MFA website in language, content, and emotional appeal. His language is emotive, suffused with neo-Ottomanist references and adorned with nationalist fervour. “Soft power” emerges as one of many ideas, which he appears to use with relatively little interest in detail. In two out of three speeches, he highlights the agencies under his control as prime actors of Turkey’s “soft power”.

In the last eight and a half years, we have emphasised this soft power dimension in foreign policy. Inspired by the unique resources of our history, our culture, and our civilisation, we are engaged in a hard struggle to have an impact on processes, to contribute to solutions for all questions on the regional and global scale. ... In addition, we disseminate Turkey’s soft power, Turkey’s message of peace to the whole world through TIKA, the Yunus Emre Institutes, the TRT, the Presidency of Turks Abroad and Related Communities. (Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan at the conference of trade attachés, April 25, 2011).

In another context, Erdoğan extends the term “soft power” to re-frame Ottoman history as an example of flexible power:

Next to hard power, there is now soft power or with a more correct term, “flexible power’. ... The term flexible power may be a new, modern term, but we have believed throughout our history that the pen is mightier than the sword and the doors that cannot be opened by the sword can be opened with a pen. Our historical buildings, scattered over three continents, our tokens from the past, are the most concrete expressions of this. (Erdoğan at the 144th year celebrations of Turkey’s Red Crescent Society, August 11, 2012).
And finally, at a Meeting of the High Council for Science and Technology, he distances himself from the idea of Turkey as a solely “soft power” actor and calls for the rise of a national arms industry with the potential to amass greater deterrent power.

A soft power claim that is not supported by deterrent power is only talk. Turkey is now in a period in which potentials are transformed to action. (Meeting of the High Council for Science and Technology, January 15, 2013).

The three quotes suggest primarily that for Erdoğan, “soft power” is not an indispensable ingredient of his political vocabulary: “soft power” can become “flexible power”, and “flexible power” can become “deterrent power”. In Erdoğan’s speeches, it is the overarching importance of the Ottoman Empire and the role of civilization (read religion) that makes for Turkey’s “unique” place in the world.

All in all, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as represented in this sample, perceives Turkey’s “soft power” as emanating largely from Turkey’s democratic credentials, its vibrant economy, and its relations with the European Union, even though the latter seems to be an argument reserved for European audiences only. Turkey is represented as a responsible, “virtuous” power (former President Abdullah Gül) that mobilizes history, culture, identity, and geographic location to advance democracy and the economy in Turkey and abroad. References to Turkish aspirations for regional leadership are muted and the language is generally diplomatic and well considered. Significantly, the terminology of “soft power” is employed coherently throughout the research period and it is only the references to Europe that have declined in frequency over the last few years. With this quality, the MFA website stands in contrast to both the public speeches of Foreign Minister Davutoğlu, which depict Turkey as a civilizational power particularly in the Balkans, and to the speeches of then Prime Minister Erdoğan, which are steeped in neo-Ottomanist references, nationalist fervour, shifting terminology, and changing realpolitik choices. Intriguingly absent is any reference to the United States, which we earlier identified as one of the main drivers of the Turkish model discourse.

Since the Gezi protests in May and June 2013, much of the foreign policy language emanating from Ankara has, of course, changed considerably. This change has been much more profound in the case of Foreign Minister (and later Prime Minister) Ahmet Davutoğlu, who made a full volte-face from a language of win-win thinking and soft power to zero-sum games and strongmen aggression. In comparison to Davutoğlu’s IR language, Erdoğan’s language comes across as consistently uninfluenced by “soft power” discourse, remaining steadfastly nationalist on the one hand, and committed to Realpolitik in the extreme (or perhaps more accurately, to the politics of mere survival) on the other hand.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have sought to trace the emergence and the rise and fall of Turkey’s “soft power” discourse, and its differential uses by various actors since the beginning of the millennium. We have located the historical roots of the “model” discourse in Turkey’s re-orientation towards Central Asia and the Caucasus after the end of the Cold War and situated its re-emergence with an even more extended geo-strategic vision under the Justice and Development Party in the early 2000s. We have highlighted the prominence of American interests in the Turkish model discourse and outlined the
changing interdependencies between Turkey, the United States, and the European Union in the formation of the discourse. We have flagged the role of Turkish and American think tanks in the process of discourse formation and the centrality of Turkish gatekeepers within this system. And finally, we have shown the overlapping and contradicting elements in this complex discourse involving a range of Turkish and global actors from decision-makers to think-tanks and academics.

The discourse under scrutiny is not only complex, shallow, and at times contradictory, it also demonstrates the extent to which different actors within it have been able to advance their own goals by using it, even if their goals have often been irreconcilable. Particularly at the height of the AKP’s power, “soft power” discourse created a discursive space for the regional autonomy of Turkey that was not necessarily in the interests of American foreign policy actors, who above all thought about Turkey’s “model role” in self-interested terms, seeking the promotion of American power in the “Arab Spring” countries. This Turkish quest for autonomy and regional hegemony, however, was frustrated by the course of the Arab uprisings and the robustness of the autocratic non-Islamist regimes in Egypt and Syria. It was further undermined by Turkey’s domestic challenges and the recent authoritarian turn of the AKP government. Turkey’s stellar rise in the Middle East, chided particularly by American and Turkish realists as being too thinly spread and too idealistic, has long surpassed its peak. The consequences of the Syrian conflict, which now play out within the territory of Turkey, and domestic challenges alongside a volatile economy are dampening Turkey’s newfound pride and hegemonic ambitions in the region.

With the benefit of hindsight, we now see that the discourses of “model” and “soft power” were shallow and by no means reflective of the real power capabilities of Turkey. Despite the hype created around AKP Turkey that continued well into 2011 and even beyond, Turkey never really came close to becoming a “regional hegemon” or an “order setter” in the Middle East. What Davutoğlu and many foreign policy analysts almost succeeded in establishing, however, was a moment of discursive hegemony, in which an informed foreign policy analysis on Turkey could not be written without ample references to fashionable concepts such as “zero problems with neighbours” or “strategic depth”, even though its pan-Islamist and imperialist underpinnings have been discussed in detail (Özkan 2014).

As a final point, we would like to draw attention to the role of academia in the promotion and diffusion of the “Turkish model” and “soft power” discourses. In this paper, we have discussed the generation, modification, and operation of a discourse in a mutually constituted field involving academia, the think-tank community, and foreign policy actors. Neither think tanks, nor foreign policy actors have a mission to deconstruct, enlighten, explain and elucidate power relations, and indeed they have not done so in this case. Academics, at least in the academic tradition the authors of this paper adhere to, do have such a mission. As students of Turkey’s foreign policy we are not able to escape the chains of the overarching – if not hegemonic anymore – discourses that shape the field we are studying. What we can do, however, is to maintain a critically informed perspective that allows us to see the connectivities and dependencies that the Turkish “soft power” discourse has created. In this sense, the study of Turkey’s “soft power” discourse and its “model” role also raises questions about the independence of academic thinking in an intellectual environment structured by overlapping and sometimes contradicting political interests and power.
plays. A significant section of a generation of authors on Turkey’s foreign policy have written their papers on Turkey’s rise as “soft power” without such second thoughts.

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NOTES

1. The working group met at IFEA from December 2013 to March 2014. The authors would like to extend their thanks to Julien Paris, whose Google Scholar research has made a major empirical
contribution to this paper. Gabrielle Angey, Élise Massicard, Jean-Baptiste Le Moulec, Merve Özdemirkuran, and Jean-François Polo have been of great assistance in the preparation of the empirical references and the broader intellectual framework of this paper.

2. Two methodological biases need to be taken into consideration here: firstly, the self-selection on official websites; and secondly, the self-selection of research engines. To analyse the speeches of Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu for instance, we downloaded all the speeches available on the Foreign Ministry’s website. The selection, therefore, is not based on all speeches Davutoğlu has ever given, but on those speeches selected for the website. As for the second bias, we worked with Internet search engines, such as Google Scholar, which have their own algorithms and data gathering methodologies, which we cannot explain or criticise, but only take as a point of departure for the survey exercise.

3. We used Google Scholar for this search, as this is the most widely used search engine for academic publications. A methodological issue that arises here pertains to the publication date, which in more than 100 cases was not given or was unclear (category “N.C.” in Figure 1).

4. In 1987, the EU Parliament declared our recognition of the Armenian genocide and in 1989, the European Commission issued an unfavourable statement towards Turkey’s candidacy.

5. The outcomes of this strategic engagement with the Muslim world lead, inter alia, to the “Pivotal States Project” of the United States Institute of Peace, for Turkey were published in Graham Fuller’s 2007 book The New Turkish Republic: Turkey as a Pivotal State in the Muslim World. The term “Pivotal State”, however, did not form a discursive dynamic of its own accord and remained a technical term.

6. The Turgut Özal Memorial lectures were instituted in 1997 by the Turkish Research Program of the Washington Institute, founded in 1995. The Turkish Research Program aims to analyze the Turkish political scene and its impacts on both US interests and American-Turkish bilateral relations.

7. The Abant Platform is a non-state institution organizing meetings and forums on socio-political issues. The Abant Platform is supported by the Journalist and Writers Foundation, an organization known to be supportive of the Gülen Movement and hence losing its government connections after a fall out between the movement and the ruling party in December 2013.

8. A search through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website’s internal search engine revealed 32 entries for the period between 2007 and 2013. Most of these entries are speeches, interviews, and newspaper articles by Ahmet Davutoğlu, Naci Koru (Deputy Foreign Minister since 2012), ambassadors located in five world capitals, and former Foreign Ministers Ali Babacan and President Abdullah Gül. There are also some background papers on the MFA and two speeches by counsellor generals. While the documents on the website are clearly selected, and hence not necessarily exhaustive, we can assume that they were chosen by the MFA and, therefore, can be considered as representative of the messages the MFA intends to project. In contrast, the Turkish-language website of the Prime Minister’s website only delivers three entries, which are also discussed.

9. We need to note here, that coinciding with the development of the Syrian crisis and the AKP government’s decision to take a more belligerent stance towards Syria and its own Kurdish movements, the promise of a consensus-seeking language has been abandoned in favor of the language of threats.

10. The data analysis was executed with voyant-tools.org as part of a quantitative discourse analysis. The initial analysis was carried out based on a word document containing a total of 75 speeches available from the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The word list was simplified by combining synonymous entries, plural and singular forms of the same word, as well as nouns and adjectives (i.e. peaceful and peace; Bosniak and Bosnia; Islam, Muslim and Muslims). Additional search terms, which were expected in the initial analysis of voyant-tools but did not produce any results, were subsequently searched manually in the text. The initial outcome of the
first analysis can be found here in form of a comprehensive word cloud, URL: http://voyant-tools.org/tool/Cirrus/?corpus=1392658211629.6145&query=&stopList=stop.en.taporware.txt&docIndex=0&docId=d1392613252590.fe54cb51-b0ae-83dc-320c-d758cf849d98.

11. A comparable diagram with the countries mentioned does not give a meaningful insight as it is biased towards political crises and conflicts (hence the three top countries are Syria, Palestine, and Iraq), and less so towards underlying interests or ideological choices.

ABSTRACTS

Since the coming to power of the Justice and Development Party [Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP] in 2002, Turkish foreign policy has witnessed significant changes. After the euphoric years of foreign policy pro-activism geared towards the global expansion of Turkey’s influence, domestic and regional developments have raised questions concerning Ankara’s capacity to achieve its ambitious foreign policy goals. Parallel to the “rise and fall” of Turkish foreign policy, a similar cycle can be observed regarding the discourse on Turkey’s “soft power”. This paper seeks to appraise Turkey’s “soft power” and “model” discourses by establishing the chronology of their emergence and highlighting the multidimensional structure of their production. The authors argue that the discourses on Turkey’s “soft power” are created within a triadic system of discourse production. This system works through the domains of think tanks, academia, and foreign policy actors in Turkey and beyond. These domains are bound to each other through reciprocal relations of interest and are negotiated by gatekeepers, i.e. well-connected persons of influence. Turkey’s “soft power” discourse is as much a product of Turkish foreign policy itself as it is a product of Turkey’s relations with the United States (US). Circulating through these different domains, and being appropriated by a large number of actors with differing and sometimes contradictory interests, these discourses, reconstructed by the authors in this study, are highly permeable, diverse, and unstable. For a brief period, they did, however, collectively contribute to the emergence of an almost hegemonic discourse on Turkey’s soft power, thereby reinforcing the AKP regime at the beginning of the 2010s.

INDEX

**Keywords:** Soft power, foreign policy, Turkish model, think tanks, discourses, Neo-Ottomanism, Islamism, Justice and Development Party

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For the first time in its fifteen years of brilliant yet unsuccessful candidacies to host the Olympic Games (OG) and the Football European Championships (Euro), Turkey was admitted into the elite group of countries capable of staging sports mega-events. Although it failed in the last round for the 2020 Olympic Games (beaten by Tokyo in 2013), and for the Euro 2016 (beaten by France in 2010), it has since been tipped as the strong favourite to host Euro 2024. International matches have been simultaneously utilized by the Turkish government as an opportunity to publicly demonstrate its willingness to resolve historically problematic issues with other countries, notably Armenia, Greece, and Syria. It will be argued that Turkey’s ambitions to host sports mega-events and its politicization of specific matches (against Syria and Armenia) can be interpreted as a strategy of the state to diffuse a positive image at home and abroad, and consolidate its role in the region.

This issue aims to assess the applicability of Nye’s (2004) concept of soft power to a description and explanation of Turkey’s foreign policy and its regional impact in the last decade. It is tempting to participate in this debate by focusing on the political uses of sport. Nye’s concept of soft power has been frequently employed in studies seeking to establish a correlation between the growth of international influence and the use of sports diplomacy, including hosting sports mega-events and achieving national recognition through sporting success. This approach raises the question of the links between sport and politics, a theme that is as recurrent in common reasoning as it is in the academic field.¹

Before outlining the limitations of Nye’s concept of soft power, the relationship between sport and politics will be firstly considered. Although the neutrality of sport is often claimed by the sporting world (Defrance 2000) through statements asserting its difference from politics, numerous potential implications of the impact of sport on political issues remain (Polo 2005), and particularly from an International Relations

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¹ Before outlining the limitations of Nye’s concept of soft power, the relationship between sport and politics will be firstly considered. Although the neutrality of sport is often claimed by the sporting world (Defrance 2000) through statements asserting its difference from politics, numerous potential implications of the impact of sport on political issues remain (Polo 2005), and particularly from an International Relations
perspective. According to Pierre Milza (1984), the international significance of sport encompasses three areas: Sport as a part of and reflecting the international stage; sport as a signifier of public feeling; and sport as a means of foreign policy. It is the latter dimension of sport as an instrument of foreign policy that requires elaboration in relation to Nye’s concept. International competitions continue to constitute a quest for the recognition of national power (Elias and Dunning 1994: 307). Numerous examples across history have illustrated the ways in which states have striven to demonstrate their power through the achievement of international sporting success (Boniface 2002; Houlihan 1994). International sport is deeply impregnated with nationalism, which has often reached spectacular degrees. From Nazi propaganda in the 1936 OG (Brohm 1983) to the Beijing Games in 2008 (Collectif anti-Jeux olympiques 2008), the consequences of the political uses of sport has served at best to boost national pride, and at worst encouraged nationalism. However, international sport has not only been a means used by states to show off their power; it can also simply be a way of achieving international recognition of its existence and increasing legitimacy. International sports authorities, such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the Football International Federation Association (FIFA), and the Union of European Football Association (UEFA), have the capacity to act as effective parallel channels for international diplomacy. Awarding the organization of an international sports mega-event to a country, such as the Football World Cup or the OG, signifies international recognition, the implications of which is amply demonstrated by the fierce competitiveness of candidate countries. Events have been utilized by authoritarian states as a means of legitimizing their political systems, or at least improving their international appeal, as can be argued in the cases of the Argentinian FIFA World Cup in 1978 and the Moscow Olympic Games in 1980. In other contexts, fulfilment of the bid criteria represents an implicit acknowledgement of the high standard of development attained by a country, such as the OG in Seoul, 1988, Barcelona, 1992, Athens, 2004, and Rio, 2016. Similarly, the political progress of South Africa’s peaceful transition from apartheid was translated into recognition by FIFA through its award of the 2010 World Cup.

Studies of sport as a diplomatic tool frequently cite the concept of soft power (Gillon 2011; Freeman 2012; Champagne 2012; Huish, Carter and Darnell 2013). However, the majority of the time the assumed relevance of the term is employed without sufficient appraisal of its practical applicability. References to the definition of soft power developed by Nye usually offer case studies that claim sport to be an efficient medium of soft power in the international arena, but without elaboration through relevant supporting examples. Other authors have argued for a more strategic use of soft power, even urging its exercise in a more prescriptive way (Verschuuren 2013). Nye himself argues that as part of popular culture “sport can play a role in communicating values... National Basketball games are broadcast to 750 million households in 212 countries and 42 languages. Major League Baseball games flow to 224 countries in 11 languages. The National Football League’s Super Bowl attracted an estimated 800 million viewers in 2003. The number of sport viewers rivals the 7.3 billion viewers worldwide who went to see America movies in 2002” (Nye 2004: 47). For Nye soft power is defined as “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country’s culture, political ideals, and policies” (Nye 2004:
x). However, use of the term soft power to denote the instrumentalization of sport in foreign policy evokes critical questions around two main issues:

- The first relates to the actors that constitute the soft power of sport (i.e. the states, sports federations, and athletes) and whether they share the same expectations. The preeminent actors, the way in which they interact with one another, and their international role in sport firstly requires determining.
- The second question concerns the relationship between national success and mega-events and any subsequent benefits that could be achieved in terms of foreign policy, for example, to what extent has the Super Bowl has had a positive impact on the image of the United States? Furthermore, the way in which the desirability of a country might be affected requires consideration, that is, whether the concept of soft power offers a useful approach to analyse, for example, the successes of the Beijing OG, 2008 or Sotchi OG, 2014.  

3 The concept of soft power should be approached with a great degree of caution. As Jean Leca has suggested it is an “uncertain concept” (Leca 2013) due to its polysemy and concrete uses, since soft power is often only considered as an attribute of powerful countries with the capacity to mobilize hard power. Undoubtedly, over that last decade Turkey has tried to manoeuvre its position to increase its regional influence, largely thanks to its economic growth and its relationship with the European Union (EU), despite the ongoing ambiguities of the membership process. In particular, the government of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) has endeavoured to develop the means and arguments for asserting its regional power, in all probability feeding a collective imaginary drawing on the nostalgia of the former power of the Ottoman Empire, albeit the pursuit of a neo-Ottoman strategy is refuted by Ahmet Davutoğlu. Notwithstanding the recent tumultuous developments, Turkey has played a significant part in the Middle Eastern political scene over the last few years. Yet, how is its relative influence to be evaluated? Can it be asserted with certainty that Turkey’s so-called positive regional image has enhanced its interstate relationships to the extent that it has enabled decisions to be made in its favour? And if so, what were the desired images that the Turkish authorities intended to promote and what role have they played? 

6 In this paper, I will make a distinction between the use of sport, more accurately football matches, as a tool of diplomacy (in which the state remains the main actor of the process in the context of bilateral relationships) and the use of sports events which includes also the involvement of sports actors for more diffuse ends. Rather than referring to the concept of soft power, the notion of sports diplomacy will be utilised in the first part to analyse Turkey’s influence through the strategic use of sport:

Today sports diplomacy is associated with governments employing sports people to amplify a diplomatic message, or with states using sporting events to enhance their image among global publics, to cool tensions in flagging diplomatic relationships, or simply to test the ground for a possible policy change. Sports diplomacy transcends cultural differences and creates opportunities for alternate avenues for overcoming hostilities, official dialogue and people-to-people relations, uniting separate nations through a love of sports. More specifically, sports diplomacy involves representative and diplomatic activities undertaken by sports people on the behalf of, and in conjunction with, their governments (Murray 2013: 12).

7 Thus, sports diplomacy may be understood as a policy implemented by political authorities to rationally and strategically exploit football matches and its media coverage in order to achieve its diplomatic goals. In the second part of the paper, mega-event bids, and particularly the Istanbul OG bid, will be analysed as a more complex use
of sports diplomacy. Indeed, the political uses of sports exemplified through the bid process reveals the degree of collusion that occurs between political, sport, and economic elites for the promotion of state and individual interests. Specifically, through the comparative analysis of successive bid proposals to host the Istanbul Games, the AKP’s strategy to promote Turkey’s image will be critically appraised.

The study is based on interviews, newspaper analysis, and personal observations that I have carried out in Turkey throughout the last fifteen years. While reluctance to discuss their activities has problematized the sociological analysis of interview data gathered from diplomats – a comparatively less restrictive issue with sports authorities – the media has been crucial to the study, not only as a source of information, but primarily as a raw material itself. Of particular relevance to the methodological approach undertaken in this paper is the active involvement of the national media in the political strategy of sports diplomacy, which has aimed to increase the prestige and recognition of the Nation. Sporting events facilitate broad media and public consensus as a result of the support of pro-government newspapers and because of the difficulties the opposition media face in criticizing events, which create a sense of pride and often feed off a strong sense of nationalism. Indeed, only in the wake of the Gezi events in June 2013 did some rare media commentary emerge welcoming the failure of Istanbul 2020. In a sense, rather than focusing on sports diplomacy in policy-making per se, this paper critically examines the significance of its uses and implementation through the provision of specific case examples.

I. The strategic use of sport: Sport as a tool of diplomacy in interstate bilateral relations

This section analyses the way in which sport as a diplomatic tool is conceptualised and used by political authorities. As Norbert Elias (1994) has asserted, sport has the capacity to euphemize the political competition and rivalry that exists between nations. However, the strategic positioning of sport to resolve political problems illustrates its more expansive role than the euphemization described by Elias. By emphasizing the symbolic signification of certain matches and appealing to the goodwill of the populace for reconciliation through sport, political authorities are able to display their capacity to overcome a political impasse. In this process, the state is the main actor and sport becomes the tool for unlocking difficult situations, or at least functions as the means of facilitating bilateral interstate relationships. The most famous example of sports diplomacy is the Ping-Pong diplomacy between China and the United States in 1971, which eventually led to the first official visit to the People’s Republic of China by an American president (Xu 2008). This use of sports often occurs through matches between two national teams within the framework of bilateral interstate relations.

In the last decade, Turkish authorities have utilized the opportunity offered by sporting competitions between the teams of countries with historically difficult relations to display its benevolence towards reconciliation. However, the question is raised as to the intended ends of these strategies. There are multiple possible explanations: national security concerns over its borders, a means of demonstrating its compliance with EU membership requirements, or alternatively, an act made by a regional power demonstrating its commitment and generosity towards populations outside of its borders. Participation in international sports matches have provided opportune
occasions for the implementation of Turkey’s “zero-problem with neighbours policy”, developed by the then Foreign Minister Davutoğlu. The way in which the government appropriates these events will be outlined before the effectiveness of the strategic use of sports diplomacy is assessed.

**From Aleppo to Yerevan, the capacity to use sport as a diplomacy tool: Scoring goals**

Turkey’s strategic use of sport as a tool of diplomacy was observable in two recent football events: The friendly Aleppo match between Fenerbahçe of Turkey and Al-Ittihad of Syria in 2007; and secondly, the two football matches held between the Turkish and Armenian national football teams in 2008 and 2009 respectively. The matches represented an occasion for the demonstration of Turkey’s goodwill towards establishing relations with its former enemies, a strategy that corresponded to its wider aim of strengthening its role in the region.

**Aleppo, April 2007**

On the April 3, 2007, Prime Minister Erdoğan joined Syrian President Bashar-al-Assad in Aleppo to watch a friendly match between Turkey’s Fenerbahçe and Syria’s Al-Ittihad to mark the opening of the new stadium. According to Today’s Zaman (April 2, 2007), Erdoğan convinced Fenerbahçe officials to hold the match after receiving a personal request from Assad. Occurring during a period of comparative stability in Turkish-Syrian relations, the match provided an advantageous occasion to publicly demonstrate the progress of reconciliation that had been achieved by the two countries. Up until the 1990s, relations had remained particularly tense, dominated by water disputes – Syria complained that Turkey’s massive development program in the border region, which included dams, power plants and irrigation systems, diverted valuable water resources away from its agricultural lands – and Syria’s support for Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), the separatist movement fighting for an autonomous Kurdish region in Turkey. Although escalating to the brink of war, the arrest of the PKK leader Öcalan in 1998 following his expulsion from Syria facilitated a diplomatic opening for a dramatic strategic realignment, including a period of cooperation between the country’s new leaders Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Bashar al-Assad from 2002 to 2010. Under Turkey’s new “zero problem policy with neighbours,” Erdoğan’s government sought to pursue investment opportunities in Syria and secure assurances from Damascus regarding the PKK. For his part, Assad required new allies in the context of renewed tension with the United States over Syria’s role in Iraq and Lebanon. Meanwhile, Turkey was playing a mediatory role between Syria and the international community concerning Syrian-Israeli relations. Regular visits between both leaders were continued until the invitation was extended from Assad to Erdoğan for the stadium opening.

Despite difficulties in accessing direct information about the organization of the match, it nevertheless remains important to bear in mind that it was the direct product of a political decision in so far as the prospect of the two teams being drawn in a match against each other were impossible given that they belonged to different regional football federations; Turkey to UEFA and Syria to the Asian Football Confederation. According to the mainstream Turkish media, the match was a friendly watched by 75,000 supporters inside the stadium and 150,000 outside in celebration of the two
countries and its leaders with slogans and flags. At a press conference held in anticipation of the Aleppo ally, Erdoğan emphasized the strength of historical and cultural ties that existed between the countries and reiterated the capacity of the match to foster relations and intensify contact between their populations. He went on to welcome “the unbelievable friendship wind blowing from a country with which Turkey had been on the verge of a war” (Cemiloğlu April 4, 2007). Erdoğan was accompanied by his wife and the Minister of Energy and the Minister for Women and Family Affairs. Ahead of the game signs of friendship were signalled as Assad pledged their mutual support of the opposing team. An official meeting was held at the presidential palace in Aleppo to correspond with the match and facilitate discussion about regional geopolitical issues – Iran and Lebanon, the Israel-Palestine conflict, and energy trade – and the promotion of bilateral ties. Future possibilities for cooperation on natural gas, water and energy trade were explored, including the planned construction of a joint dam project on Orontes [Ası] river: “A friendship dam.” (Çetin April 4, 2007) Therefore, it can be argued that the Aleppo match offers a useful example of the instrumentalization of sport by political authorities for the benefit of its leaders. The event and its media coverage were utilized as platforms for the public affirmation of the political will behind the desire to overcome past tensions and build new forms of co-operation. With regard to Turkey, the visit coincided with a favourable political climate towards a Syrian rapprochement. The match served to endorse Davutoğlu’s doctrine and strengthened Turkey’s regional image. Between 2008 and 2009, after Erdoğan made a stance against Israel, the Turkish Prime Minister continued to promote a positive image of Turkey in the Middle East, or at least until the events of the Arab spring played out. In the Aleppo case, the political exploitation of the match served to engender an image of peace. However, although these benefits were the cumulative product of diplomatic overtures, the match failed to have a significant impact on Turkish-Syrian relations. On the contrary, the example of the Turkish-Armenian football matches discussed below is a very different case.

Turkey-Armenia football matches, 2008 and 2009

While points of comparison may be drawn with the Aleppo match, the example of Turkey and Armenia offers an alternative understanding of the uses of sports diplomacy. In particular, three notable points of departure can be discerned: Firstly, the occurrence of the Turkey-Armenia football matches were not of pre-determined by politics; secondly, they were held in the context of non-existent official diplomatic relationships; and thirdly, the Armenian issue constituted a critical political issue for Turkey at both domestic and international level.

An intervention of fate resulted in the drawing of Turkey and Armenia in the same group for the qualifying rounds of the 2010 FIFA World Cup (European zone), the matches scheduled to be played in Armenia, 2008, and Turkey, 2009. However, since Armenia’s establishment as an independent state following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the two states had no official diplomatic relationships. In addition, Turkey’s territorial border with Armenia had been unilaterally blocked since 1993, in reaction to international pressure for the recognition of the Armenian genocide, and in expression of Turkey’s solidarity with Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, Armenia’s occupation of a fifth of Azerbaijan’s territory. Although in all likelihood the matches would have continued irrespective of the diplomatic situation, Turkish-
Armenian relations entered an unprecedented period of conciliation from 2008. According to Cheterian (2010: 39-40), four new elements contributed to the resumption of dialogue. Firstly, in August 2008, the Turkish AKP government launched its “regional stability and cooperation platform in the Caucasus” as an instrument of its new foreign policy orientated towards its eastern borders. Ankara wanted to be perceived as a peacemaker and subsequently sought opportunities to expand its influence in the East and South. The objectives of the policy were inconsistent with the continued blockade of Armenia and the refusal to establish diplomatic relations. Secondly, during his presidential campaign, Barack Obama pledged to recognize the Armenian genocide and the new American administration pressed Ankara to normalize its relations with Armenia. Thirdly, the desire to improve its problematized image in the wake of the Russo-Georgian war in August 2008, resulted in the favourable modification of Russia’s strategic position towards a Turkish-Armenian rapprochement. Finally, and by no means least, following the election of Serzh Sargsyan, as Armenian President in February 2008, it was announced that he wanted to initiate new relations with Turkey and establish an Armenian opening. Actually this latter point might have constituted the decisive factor in triggering the football diplomacy. Elected under the suspicion of committing fraud, Sargsyan had been resolutely criticised by western governments, the EU, and non-governmental organizations, such as Human Rights Watch, for the bloody repression that followed his controversial election. According to Galstyan (2010: 246), the Armenian President had to find an original means of legitimizing his presidency and credibility in the eyes of his international critics. Within this context, initiating a process of conciliation with Turkey and creating an Armenian opening with the West were crucial factors in the consolidation of his position (and besides which the Turkish issue had been a key campaign point of his presidential rival). During a Moscow state visit on June 23, 2008, Sargsyan surprised the international community with an invitation to his Turkish counterpart, Abdullah Gül, to attend the Turkey-Armenia World Cup qualifying match in Yerevan. The official invitation was delivered two weeks later via a Wall Street Journal article:

And just as the people of China and the United States shared enthusiasm for ping-pong before their governments fully normalized relations, the people of Armenia and Turkey are united in their love for football – which prompts me to extend the following invitation. On September 6, a World Cup qualifier match between the Armenian and Turkish national football teams will take place in Yerevan. I hereby invite President Gül to visit Armenia to enjoy the match together with me in the stadium. Thus, we will announce a new symbolic start in our relations. (Sargsyan July 9, 2008)

The question of attendance provoked fierce debate in Turkey throughout the summer among political actors, intellectuals, and “civil society” (Polo 2012a). The leaders of the main opposition parties, the Republican People’s Party (CHP) and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), argued that this so-called invitation should be declined. However, Erdoğan, pro-government newspapers, and liberal intellectuals broadly supported the gesture, with some even urging Gül to pay a visit to the Genocide Monument in the Armenian capital. At first, the Turkish president reserved his reply by specifying that he would study with benevolence this invitation. While he had not given his officially answer, Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan indicated on September 1st that Gül would travel to Yerevan. Finally, on September 3rd Gül announced that he accepted the invitation of President Sargsyan to visit Yerevan and to attend to the match. In a statement, Prime Minister Erdoğan expressed his satisfaction at Gül’s
acceptance. In underlining the potentially negative consequences of refusal, Erdoğan lends credibility to the sports diplomacy dimension of the invitation:

President Gül’s decision to accept or reject an invitation from Armenia will have a considerable impact on the improvement or deterioration of Turkey’s image in the international arena. If he had declined to go to Yerevan, everyone would have criticized Turkey for refusing to improve its ties with Armenia. If Armenia had ulterior motives when inviting Gül to the soccer game, then Gül spoiled their plan by accepting the invitation [...]. If the first dimension of Gül’s planned visit to Armenia is to improve ties with this country, the second dimension is the Caucasus platform. (Ünal September 6, 2008)

Thus, Gül, accompanied by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, became the first ever Turkish President to make an official visit in Armenia in 2008. The visit, comprising joint meetings in addition to the match, took care to avoid any potentially contentious political issues; the visit was to resolutely convey an image of mutual peace and cordial dialogue. For example, although taking place during the holy month of Ramadan, President Gül suspended his fast in honour of the pre-match meal offered by President Sargsyan. The two Presidents exchanged signs of mutual friendship and benevolence. The pretext of the game opened an unprecedented dialogue in daylight, making almost forget that the contacts had never been completely suspended. Following the match, the symbolic significance of Gül’s visit was perpetuated by the media and politicians. The political import of the event totally eclipsed the football event, including the national win achieved by the Turkish team. Before his departure, Gül returned the invitation to President Sargsyan to attend the away match in Turkey in 2009.

Although the two cases presented above are indicative of the presence of sports diplomacy in a manner reminiscent of Ping-Pong diplomacy, they in fact exemplify two very different uses of sports diplomacy. In the case of the Aleppo match, the official process of reconciliation had already been initiated prior to the meeting; the event was therefore organized as a symbolic demonstration of this process as a tool of real power. Conversely, and comparable to the situation that had existed between the United States and China, Turkey had no diplomatic relationships with Armenia. The draw therefore presented an opportunity for the dramatic reversal of this situation, offering a pretext for the initiation of an official process of reconciliation. Here, sport operates as a performative diplomatic tool transcending its symbolic value. In a constructivist perspective (Wendt, 1995), it contributes – or at the very least marks an attempt – to redefine the mutual interests of state parties, facilitating new opportunities and constraints in their bilateral relations. In the following section, the impact of diplomacy on Turkey’s regional position and influence will be examined.

**Football diplomacy challenged by realpolitik: Game over**

Assessing the impact of diplomatic strategies is a complex endeavour because of the different parameters of impact (domestic and international), the difficulties of measuring the extent of impact, and the variable temporalities of impact in terms of its short and long-term outcomes. In addition, judging sports diplomacy to be a failure would be misguided since instruments of traditional diplomacy may prove to be equally unsuccessful. A final point for consideration is the evolving nature of the political environment, which has the capacity to radically alter the balance of international relations in favourable or negative ways, particularly given recent events in the region.
The prospect of Turkey taking advantage of its growing economic and political growth to assert its position as a regional power remains not only contingent on the conduct of its foreign policy, but on potential and emerging regional and international dynamics on which it does not have any grip. Turkey’s remarkable reconciliation with Syria offers a case in point. While the freeze in bilateral relations experienced a period of thaw, including the initiation of cooperative projects and the belief that Turkey could play an intermediary role in the Israeli-Syrian conflict, the Arab revolts presented a profound challenge to Davutoğlu’s strategy. The Aleppo match represented a celebration of reconciliation as a mutually self-serving process largely conducted in pursuit of the interests of its leaders. However, decline into civil war following the Syrian revolt in 2011 and Turkey’s ensuing support of the opposition, considerably altered relations. Yet, it would be misguided to assume that this unfolding of events represented a failure of sports diplomacy. Rather, the Aleppo match offers an understanding of sports diplomacy reduced to its simplistic expression of an extension of friendship.

Conversely, it could be argued that the matches between Turkey and Armenia had a real diplomatic impact, at least in the short-term. The European Union and the United States publicly supported Gül’s visit to Armenia (Today’s Zaman September 5, 2008). Olli Rehn, the European Commissioner for Enlargement, warmly welcomed the visit, humorously adding that if Turkey played in Yerevan as it had in Euro 2008, “it would cause a new diplomatic incident.” (Hürriyet Daily News September 6, 2008; Rehn October 13, 2008). International acknowledgement of the visit was marked in other ways. The Monaco based Peace and Sport organization distinguished Turkey and Armenia with the “Peace and Sport Image of the Year Award” on December 4, 2008, for the photograph of the historic handshake between Gül and Sargsyan taken at the Yerevan match as embodiment of the image of fraternization through sport. The award was jointly presented to the Armenian Minister of Youth and Sport and the President of the Turkish Football Federation.

Notwithstanding the historic accomplishments of Yerevan, the most momentous outcomes were achieved in the political events that followed, without which the visit would have remained a simple meeting of state representatives and limited to a basic level of diplomatic exchange. What assumes significance here, therefore, is that the pretext of the match and the Gül’s trip to Yerevan allowed the Armenian President apply diplomatic pressure to ensure on Turkey by conditioning his presence at the return match to the signing of two diplomatic protocols. The protocols envisaged the establishment of diplomatic relations and the founding of an intergovernmental commission to address the political issues that existed between the two countries, including the institution of a sub-commission on history. Of course, the negotiation process sparked a harsh backlash from the Armenian diaspora, the Armenian opposition, Azerbaijan, and nationalist circles in Turkey. The content of the protocols was passionately debated in both countries and negotiators had difficulty in reaching an acceptable compromise that would be agreeable to both parties. President Sargsyan, irritated by the slowness of the discussions, declared at the end of July 2009, “I will only accept this invitation if previously made agreements are fulfilled, if there are real steps.
I will visit Turkey if we have reopened the borders and if we are on the verge of an end to the blockade” (Hürriyet Daily News July 29, 2009). As for the visit of the Turkish President to Armenia the previous year, the presence of Armenian President for the return match on 14 October 2009 became an issue for the two actors but in a different context: in 2009, the symbol of the match (and the visit of Sargsyan) must be preceded by diplomatic agreements. Indeed, it could be argued that the symbol creates a diplomatic constraint. However, the contested content of the protocols created political fracture lines and tensions continued to remain high in both countries and in Azerbaijan. The protocol was finally signed in Zurich on October 10, 2009. The terms stipulated the opening of the borders post-ratification and engagement in Zurich the protocol which stipulates the next opening of the borders (once the protocol ratified by both parties) and the implementation of “a dialogue on the historical dimension with the aim to restore mutual confidence between the two nations, including an impartial scientific examination of the historical records and archives to define existing problems and formulate recommendations” (Protocol [October 10, 2009]). Sargsyan attended the return match between Turkey and Armenia on October 14, 2009, alongside President Gül, who declared that “Turkey and Armenia are not writing history but making history” (Kanlı October 14, 2009). Therefore, in a context of non-existent official diplomatic relations and where a meeting of heads of state was highly improbable, the matches created a valuable opportunity for staging a commitment to reconciliation at the highest level.

23 Seeking a definitive answer to the question of which signatory gained the most out of the protocols is difficult to ascertain. Both states moved to secure their own interests: On the one hand, Armenia, having initiated the process, obtained the promise of the opening of the border; while on the other hand, Turkey capitalized on the process by publicly demonstrating, especially to the EU, its readiness to engage in a process of dialogue and reconciliation. As France was holding the rotating presidency, French President Sarkozy welcomed the protocols on behalf of the EU as “courageous and historic”, later praising Turkish efforts to reach a peace deal between Israel and Syria at the Damascus summit. However, such benevolent rhetoric did little to indicate a fundamental change to Sarkozy’s oppositional position vis-à-vis Turkey’s EU candidacy. In addition, the prospective long-term success of the reconciliation process remains uncertain due to the failure to ratify the protocols and implement its terms, including the opening of the borders. In this regard, Azerbaijan has played a critical role as the real referee of the match, its relations with Turkey pivotal to the progress of normalizing relations with Armenia. As a result of its cultural ties and the issue of energy, Turkey has been ill able to afford alienating its key strategic partner in the Caucasus. Irritated by the rapprochement between Turkey and Armenia, Azeri President Aliyev put pressure on his Turkish allies to mobilize Ankara into securing a resolution on the Armenian occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh as the sine qua non condition of the ratification of the Turkish-Armenian protocols.9

24 However, at the domestic level it can be argued that the real outcome of the match has been the lifting of the Armenian taboo in Turkey (Polo 2013). Debates concerning relations with Armenia have intersected with other events, such as the murder of the Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink in 2007, which unleashed a powerful emotional reaction, and discussions addressing historical issues, such as the deportations and massacres of the Armenian populations in 1915, that have been increasingly engaged with across a variety of academic, media, publishing, and civil
society platforms. Of course, this shift has not necessarily been translated into an official recognition of the 1915 genocide, but it rather signals that the taboo of its dark history has been lifted (Insel and Marian 2009). In 2014, for the first time in state history, a Turkish Prime Minister offered his condolences for the 1915 Armenian massacre.

Thus, sports diplomacy may appear to offer a means of endowing bilateral interstate relationships with a more spectacular, publicised, and attractive dimension. At times, this may also go further, as illustrated by the signing of the diplomatic protocols between Turkey and Armenia. However, the real scope of these diplomatic strategies is dependent on both the political context and realpolitik. In 2007, which unleashed a powerful emotional reaction, and discussions addressing historical issues, such as the deportations and massacres of the Armenian populations in 1915, that have been increasingly engaged with across a variety of academic, media, publishing, and civil society platforms. If sport mega-events have the potential to fulfil a comparable role in diffusing beneficial images, this is not totally the same process as they are not bilateral interstate relations.

II. Hosting sports mega-events as a means of promoting a positive image abroad

In the last twenty years Turkey has dramatically increased both the number of sports international events it has organised and the number of bids it has made to host sports mega-events, such as the OG and the Football Euro. The impetus behind this process has been initiated and predominantly driven by Turkish sports federations. Although due to the large budgets, logistical support, and urban planning developments required to host a mega-event, very little can be achieved without strong local and national political backing. In this regard, there is a continual degree of overlap between the political and sporting spheres of activity. Although the sports field has its own agendas and interests, which may fit (or not) with political ones, hosting a mega-event requires the collusive collaboration of both sporting elites and political actors. What is of interest in the bid process is the necessity of creating an imaginary around the candidate city (or country) in order to persuade decision-makers. This refers both to the bid content and the technical specificities of each application, and also to the symbolic images candidates wish to construct and communicate to an international audience. Through a consideration of Turkey’s bids to host the Istanbul OG, it will be argued that the process may be analysed as a branding strategy implemented through a communication policy. At least between the 1990s and 2005, when the values of secular republican political elites collided with those of sporting elites, the strategies aimed in part to claim belonging to Europe. In an appraisal of the images promoted during the candidacy for the 2020 OG, prepared under the auspices of the AKP government, the comparative continuities and discontinuities of the bid process will be considered. The paper will ask whether the 2020 bid was the product of foreign policy changes, and whether its use of other images marked an attempt to redefine its values. However, obtaining the OG or FIFA World Cup is dependent on the capacity of an applicant city to attract and seduce decision-makers, i.e. to secure the votes of the International Olympic Committee. In a sense, therefore, the bid process already constitutes a tangible
means of measuring the perceived attractiveness of a country or, in other words, the so-called "soft power" of a country.

**International sports events in Turkey: A passport to Europe?**

27 From the 1990s, hosting international sporting events has been a means of the Turkish state, founded on the principles of “modernity, secularism, and nationalism,” to demonstrate its modernity and organizational capabilities, and thus to legitimize its EU candidacy. Prior to the 1980s, Turkey had only hosted wrestling competitions (in 1974 and 1977 respectively); and perhaps unsurprisingly, its first successful bids were in disciplines that are part of Turkish traditional sports practices and in which Turkish athletes have a proven track record of success in (wrestling, weightlifting). However, from the 1990s, as bids became progressively more frequent, the increasing diversity of sports bids can be observed: not only sports which have a tangible international and media impact, and in which Turkey has begun to have some success in (football, basketball), but also in other disciplines (swimming, motor racing, archery, etc.). To date the most prestigious applications submitted by the Turkish state has been its bids to host the Summer Olympic Games.

28 From 1992, Istanbul has repeatedly bid to host the Olympic Games, though without success; Turkey was perhaps unlucky not to have been awarded the co-organisation with Greece for the UEFA Euro 2008 and Euro 2016 Football Championships. Not all bids have been unsuccessful: In 2000, Istanbul hosted the thirty-fifth European Karate Championships (EKF); in 2001, Turkey hosted the International Basketball Federation’s (FIBA) European Basketball Championships; in 2005, Istanbul hosted the final of the UEFA Champions League and the first Turkish Formula One Grand Prix; in 2010, it held the FIBA World Basketball Championships and the Judo world championships; in 2011, The International University Sports Federation (FISU) held the Winter Universiaide (World Student Games) in Erzurum; between 2011 and 2013 Istanbul host the Women’s Tennis Association Tennis (WTA) Tour Championships; in 2012, the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) World Indoor Championships in Athletics was held in Istanbul followed by the Swimming World Championships (FINA); in 2013, the Mediterranean Games were held in Mersin; and in 2014, Turkey hosted the Women’s Basketball World Championships. In addition, the European Capitals of Sport Association (ACES) selected Istanbul as the European Capital of Sport in 2012.

29 Bids to host sports mega-events were initiated in the 1990s in the context of economic growth and neo-liberalism alongside the emergence of powerful business groups with the financial capacity to back these bids. In a sense these bids reflected the new economic potential and power of Turkey in the 1990s. Turkey’s numerous bids to organize international sports events may be regarded as a means of demonstrating the nation’s modernity and its organizational capabilities, and thus the legitimacy of its application for EU membership. This strategy was particularly apparent in the period prior to the AKP’s assumption of power. Candidate for EU membership since 1987, Turkey continues to claim its anchorage to the West, thereby pursuing the work of its founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. However, this western polarization is questioned both inside and outside its borders. Although Turkey applied to the EU before the new Eastern European members did, negotiations for its membership were formally opened.
only in October 2005, and are set to continue for a while, given the strong reluctance of some member states (including France and Germany) to admit Turkey to the EU.

International sports authorities, such as FIFA, UEFA and the IOC, define the application criteria for candidate countries, including the quality of sports infrastructure, security, communications and media, financial guarantees, transport system, environmental quality, and accommodation, etc. In addition to the more technical specifications, which have a symbolic value insofar as they are an indicator of a country’s level of development, applicant countries are required to specify the particularities of their candidacy assets. For bidding cities, this presents an opportunity to build a vision of a strong national identity in the image of the Olympic ideals. In this regard, the focus placed on multicultural diversity was remarkable given the controversy surrounding Turkey’s human and minority rights issues as grounds for contesting its EU candidacy.

The values of tolerance and generosity have played a role in the imaginative construction of the country’s image by the Istanbul Olympic Bid Committee (IOBC), the body with overall responsibility for the city’s candidacy. All Istanbul application files have emphasised the city’s unique geographical location. From its first Olympic bid to host the 2000 Olympic Games in 1994, Istanbul’s logo depicted two interlinked rings with the slogan “The Meeting of the Continents” (although the logo was later changed for the 2020 OG bid). The two rings invoked the stylised image of the Olympic rings to represent the continents of Europe and Asia linked by the two Bosphorus bridges. Istanbul was thus presented as a metaphorical “bridge between the cultures and civilizations of Asia and Europe. [...] It is a city of culture where religions and languages have merged over thousands of years of co-existence”. The bid book claimed that Istanbul “is home to 26 ethnic groups and its people speak ten different languages. The very existence of “Olympist Istanbul” is a challenge to prejudice and sectarian divide.”

It is of interest to note that these statements made at the end of the 1990s, sharply diverged from the official state line towards multiculturalism, national belonging being firmly situated in a homogenous conception of identity that failed to recognize ethnic minorities. By insisting on diversity and pluralism, the authors of the Istanbul Olympic bid were striving to portray an image of a peaceful and tolerant country.

Beyond its domestic audience, bids to host sports events also present an opportunity to extend the image of peace to its regional neighbours. This was the goal of Turkey and Greece’s unsuccessful joint bid in 2000 to host the Euro 2008. In the context of the complex and conflictual (if improving) relationship between Turkey and Greece, the Turkey initiated bid was represented as the inauguration of a new era of peaceful cooperation and “greater mutual understanding” between the two countries. Following the example set by the 2002 FIFA World Cup Finals between Japan and Korea, Şenes Erzik, then FIFA executive committee member, Korea-Japan World Cup Finals Organization Committee member, and the Vice-President of UEFA, considered that the event “would help to build a better relationship between Turks and Greeks.” The Turkish Football Federation’s proposal to Greece in February 2000, was enthusiastically accepted by the Greek Football Federation and supported by the foreign ministers of both states. In under eighteen months, a joint bid committee was instituted to prepare the official bid for submission to UEFA in November 2001. The change of parliamentary majority following the first AKP victory in the general election, of November 2002, did little to change the political momentum behind the project. On the contrary, just days after the AKP’s historic victory, Erdoğan delivered a speech to UEFA members to coincide with the selection day for the Euro 2008 host nation. However, it is interesting
here to distinguish the political support to host Euro 2008 from the bilateral diplomatic use of sport described above. Euro 2008 was initiated exclusively by sports elites and the Turkish Football Federation who reasoned that they stood a better chance of securing the Euro through a joint bid with Greece. Reconciliation with Greece was not viewed as a politically invested endeavour, but was rather a means of lending a symbolic dimension to the bid. Of course, politicians lent their support, however they did so while remaining largely in the background. Despite some persisting diplomatic disputes with Greece over the status of Cyprus and Aegean rivalry, the continuity of relations between Turkey and Greece has never been seriously interrupted. Indeed, Greece even supported Turkey’s EU membership. Turkish sports bids thus strive to promote the image of Turkey as a European country on the verge of becoming an EU member: “At present, Istanbul is the largest city in a country that is preparing for membership of the EU” (Bid document for the 2008 Olympic Games).

Finally, hosting an international sports event, or the victories of Turkish teams in international events, are presented and celebrated as true national successes, and a step closer to Europe: “Now, we are Europeans!” claimed Turkey’s former President, Suleyman Demirel when Galatasaray won the UEFA Cup in 2000 (Sonntag June 9, 2000). Indeed, these victories are all the more so celebrated precisely because of their achievement on the sports field. According to Ehrenberg (1991), the sports field is a condensation of the democratic society ideal in which competition is equal and the winner is the best. In other words, sport establishes a hierarchy based on merit rather than on human ranking or categorisation. The focus of Turkey’s policy is based on the understanding that through sporting successes the nation can achieve the European recognition it so desires, even while the European political system continues to refuse it.

If sport is considered only as a means of diplomatic action, or as an instrument serving political strategies or ideologies, then a full comprehension of the complex relationship that exists between sport and politics in Turkey would be neglected. Of course, political actors have to refer to sport: Sport is a valuable political resource. Sport can glorify youth, – one of the most popular themes of the young Turkish Republic – and facilitate patriotism in a country where May 19, is a national day for “sport and youth,” with ceremonies organized in stadiums full of children, featuring poems and speeches made in honour of the glory of young people, the Republic and Atatürk (Yurdsever 2003). The political authorities in Turkey have always supported bids and tried to profit from victories, whether they are derived from sporting victories achieved on the field or from the victories won through hosting sports events. However, sport is not utilized by Turkey in the same way and to the same extent as it was in the former Soviet Union or in China for example. Even if the relationship between sport and politics is a particularly entangled one in Turkey, it cannot be merely reduced to a politically exploitative one.

Sporting elites are closely interrelated with the political elite, sharing the same republican values, at least prior to the AKP’s assumption of power, and possessing the implicit knowledge that they can draw support from them. This phenomenon blurs the lines between sport and politics in Turkey. Sporting elites acknowledge that they want their teams to win competitions, but that they also want to see Turkey become a member of the EU. Demirel’s exclamation following Galatasary’s UEFA Cup Final victory is not an isolated example, but an assumption commonly shared by sporting and
political elites: “now, I hope you understand that we are Europeans!” claimed Sinan Erdem the president of Turkish National Olympic Committee (TNOC) following a traditional Turkish dinner (with fish and raki) to IOC members during an official visit to Istanbul in 2000.

However, even if sporting elites believe that their sports project will prove advantageous to Turkey’s application for EU membership, they are more often than not convinced to the contrary that the opposite is likely: Barcelona and Athens hosted the Olympic Games only after their acceptance into the EU (six years later for Spain, and 22 years later for Greece). However, focusing on the country’s political image is a strategic way of realising other specific goals, such as the agenda of supporting sports development in Turkey. Istanbul’s bidding efforts are also a means of building national sporting infrastructure, as defined by the IOBC, the General Directorate of Youth and Sports, and the Greater Istanbul Municipality, as well as by private bodies. Through urban policy-making, Turkey has been able to attain European standards in terms of its infrastructural development, and to subsequently justify expenditure in this area. Sporting elites also aspire to promote sport among young people, not only from a health perspective, but with the aim of producing a future generation of champions. Sporting elites consider themselves to be the vanguard of sport, using sport to build the image of a modern Turkey in order to procure vital support and financial investment from political elites for the proposal of serious bids to host international sports competitions. Furthermore, the sports sector draws important benefits from the support of political elites. An astonishing example of the extensity of goodwill towards sport is manifest in the Turkish Olympic Law. Istanbul's Olympic bid is endorsed by a special law, near-unanimously passed by the national parliament in April 1992, making Turkey the first (and so far only) country to have enacted a legal instrument in its support. The Turkish Olympic Law (No. 3796) established the Istanbul Olympic Games Preparation and Organisation Council (IOBC) and authorised it to “take all necessary action in the pursuit and organisation of the Games”; and “recognises and respects the supremacy of the IOC in all Olympic matters”. The law requires all public institutions and agencies, including local government bodies, to give “priority to the requests of the IOBC in relation to the pursuit and organisation of the Games”. The Olympic Law guarantees a continuous flow of funds for the pursuit and organisation of the Games. It is also of interest to note here that this law was devised and prepared thanks to the strength of relationship between Sinan Erdem, president of the TNOC, and Erdoğan Teziç, the famous lawyer, Chancellor of Galatasaray University, and latter day president of the Council of Higher Education [Yükseköğretim Kurulu, YÖK]. Both were graduates of the renowned Galatasaray High School [Galatasaray Lisesi] and the Faculty of Law, Istanbul University. Sinan Erdem, who went on to become a professional volleyball player and captain of the national team, coached Erdoğan Teziç during his time at Galatasaray. Both individuals belong to the Kemalist elite and share the political project of the westernization of Turkey. Beyond the pursuit of their own interests, political and sport elites shared the same vision throughout this period: To be recognised as Europeans and to strengthen the European identity of Turkey. It could be asserted that the bid process constitutes a political claim for recognition and Turkey’s acceptance as an equal by their Europeans counterparts.
Istanbul 2020 Olympic Games: A sports mega-event to celebrate the “new Turkey”?

36 The Istanbul 2020 Olympic Games bid will be addressed through the analyses of the bid book, published in January 2013, and the personal observations that were carried out during the IOC delegation’s assessment visit to Istanbul in March 2013. It will be demonstrated that although the 2020 Istanbul bid retained the use of the majority of images and symbols and was very much in line with previous bids, subtle changes can be observed. These points of divergence require contextualizing within a broader perspective of the images that the government intended to promote over its decade in power, claiming the rise of the news power of Turkey.

37 Followings its failed candidacy attempts to host the 2012 OG (awarded to London), the TNOC took the pragmatic decision to postpone its next bid until the 2020 OG, based on the rule of rotating continents every Olympiad and its assessed need to prepare a flawless application. The Istanbul 2020 OG bid, the fifth consecutive bid to be made after the 2000 OG, was indeed the best presentation given to date due to the strength of its candidacy assets. As a result of the Olympic Law, Istanbul has been equipped with modern sports venues in accordance with IOC requirements. Since the last candidacy for the 2012 OG presented in 2005, the TNOC underwent a series of significant changes. The former TNOC President (1989-2003) and spiritual father of the Istanbul OG candidacies, Sinan Erdem, passed away in 2003. Erdem was the man responsible for initiating this (his) dream of the Istanbul OG. His same generation successor left his post in 2011 to be replaced by the President of the World Archery Federation, Uğur Erdener. During this period, Turkey enjoyed a sustained period of economic growth and relative political stability with the AKP continuing to retain its position of power following its successive electoral successes from 2002.

38 In November 2009, the head of the International Sports Organisation of the Turkish Republic and senior consultant to Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, announced that Istanbul would bid for the 2020 OG. It was officially confirmed by Erdoğan himself in July 2011, during a speech presented before a cheering crowd of more than 20,000 to mark the opening of the European Youth Olympic Festival. An initial appraisal of Erdoğan’s declarations and the Istanbul bid book results in the observation of comparable themes to earlier bids, however, closer attention reveals an alternative tone. For instance, in a jointly signed letter by the Prime Minister, the President of the Republic, and the Minister of Youth and Sports, addressed to the IOC President in the introduction of the Istanbul bid book, reiterates that Tukey is “a democratic and modern nation with its ongoing European Union Candidature negotiations.” The location of the city is restated as the point where the “East literally meets West [in our city], where Europe and Asia are metropolitan suburbs, separated only by the spectacular waters of the Bosphorus.” According to a journalist specializing in sports events, the Istanbul bid book does the best to embrace...

... the jargonistic and portentous lingua franca of the Olympic Movement. [...] Within a few pages of the first volume, it has seamlessly interwoven an array of phrases and ideas that sum up why taking its flagship product to Istanbul is such a tempting idea for the Olympic Movement. “The first-ever Games host in the Muslim world;” Turkey’s Olympic law “in place now for 20 years;” the potential for sponsors in “leveraging a spectacular city;” “Europe’s youngest population.” All are phrases just crying out to be highlighted in fluorescent marker pen. And then there is the
obvious point about the city being where Europe meets Asia (Owen January 13, 2013).

Yet, what these ironic remarks fail to comprehend is the emphasis placed on the new power of Turkey. The Istanbul 2020 bid book claims that “This bid holds a unique place within the vision of the new Turkey and the region’s development.”17 This “new Turkey” referred firstly to its economic growth:

Turkey has made great strides in all fields in recent years. Significant reform and stability have strengthened our large and expanding economy. Our record of economic growth continues in spite of the ongoing impacts of the global crises for our region.18

Furthermore, the bid book develops an argument which aims to prove the financial viability of the delivery of the Games:

Driven by a stable democracy and economic growth averaging 5.2% annually between 2002 and 2011 (more than three and a half times Europe’s average for the period), the visionary 2023 Master Plan for Turkey has been delivering transformational development in Istanbul’s physical and social landscape for the last five years. Already billions of dollars have been invested in programmes to deliver Istanbul’s new transport network for the twenty-first century, with further major investment programmed to 2020. These and other development programmes will drive, and in turn be accelerated by, the Games. The city has become a multinational financial and enterprise hub. With its stock market growing by 26% in 2012 and foreign direct investment in the city jumping 110% in 2011, Istanbul is the financial capital of a Turkish economy forecast to be in the world's top 10 by 2023 (ranked by GDP).19

The use of economic statistics not only evidences Turkey’s low-risk delivery strategy, but also enables Turkey to play a broader role in the region:

The momentum of Istanbul’s development fuelled by Turkey’s prosperity and youthful populace, offers the Olympic and Paralympic Movements a number of long-term strategic, commercial and operational benefits. The Olympic objective of universality will be reinforced by embracing the Muslim culture, adding distinctive value to the Olympic and Paralympic brands, as a new chapter in Games history is opened. Benefits will also arise from Istanbul’s status as a multinational hub of business, sport and culture for markets in Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Africa, enabling penetration into new and sustainable markets.20

Finally, the decision to change Istanbul’s logo, was unveiled by the Prime Minister in July 2012, may also be invoked as indicative of the shifting uses of images. In comparison to the former logo, which underlined the geographical position of Istanbul, the new logo, allegedly chosen by popular vote from a selection of five alternatives, combines a tulip with the world-famous skyline of Istanbul to encompass its monuments and mosques.
Hasan Arat, leader of Istanbul 2020, stated his belief that the new logo metaphorically symbolizes what Istanbul is capable of offering the Olympic Movement:

A vibrant and young nation, a bridge between Europe and Asia, a modern and spectacular setting steeped in history – these are the ideas we wanted the Istanbul 2020 Candidate City logo to represent and our people have not let us down with their vote. Our new logo has been chosen by Turkey’s young population to act as a symbol of inspiration for our Olympic dream. (Gamesbids July 22, 2012)

It is significant to recognise the performative role of the motif of the tulip as an evocative reference to a symbol of the Ottoman period, and the annual International Tulip Festival organized by the Metropolitan Municipality of Istanbul.

Thus, the Istanbul 2020 Olympic Games has been represented by the political authorities as a constitutive element of the momentum towards Turkey’s destiny, its grandeur, and its renaissance as they “prepare to celebrate the centenary of the Republic in 2023.” During the IOC evaluation visit in March 2013, the Istanbul Olympic Bid Committee invested a comparable level of confidence in its Istanbul bid thanks to its new role in the region. From discussions with international journalists who followed the IOC’s delegation visits to the three candidate cities, it became clear that some of them found the Turkish presentation to be too austere and even a little bit arrogant. An impression was imparted that the Turkish authorities were publicising a message that suggested any decision other than a favourable result for Turkey would not only be an incomprehensible injustice, but might even be received as a humiliation for the wider Muslim world.

It is important to bear in mind that Turkey invested substantial resources in its bid to convince IOC members of its intended new regional and international role. Sporting elites and political authorities have actively promoted Turkey broadly, and the Istanbul 2020 OG specifically through the numerous international trips that were undertaken between 2012 and 2013 (New York, Saint Petersburg, Dakar, Abidjan, Doha, Paris, Barcelona, etc.). Turkey’s ability to develop an ambitious foreign policy and to extend the reach of its influence, particularly in the Balkans, the Middle East, and Africa, is largely a result of its economic prosperity. In Africa, for example, Turkey has opened more than twenty new embassies since 2009, and Turkish Airlines currently operates services to 28 African countries. Turkey has become a solid investor in the continent as well as a generous donor for humanitarian crises. In 2013, Erdoğan visited several African countries, such as Niger, Gabon, Senegal (in January), Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco
(in June), accompanied by businesspeople and journalists. Although primarily motivated by political and economic concerns, the trips have also served to promote Turkey abroad. However, when a Turkish delegation travelled to the Ivory Coast to attend the General Assembly of the Association of National Olympic Committees of Africa (ANOC) in July 2013, the aims of the visit were far more transparent. The Turkish delegation was led by the Istanbul Bid Committee Chairman and the President and Secretary General of the TNOC. The delegates were accompanied by the former Ambassador of the Turkish Republic for Cameroon (also advisor to the Istanbul 2020 Bid Committee) and the Ambassador of the Turkish Republic for the Ivory Coast. Speaking before travelling to Abidjan, the Istanbul Bid Committee Chairman asserted with the intonation of a third world leader that:

Istanbul is in a region that has never hosted the Games, just like Africa. We understand the challenges of African sport – and we understand the huge ambition of other nations that have not hosted the Games. In the city where the continents meet, Istanbul 2020 will meet that ambition and help connect Africa with the full power of the Olympic Movement... Istanbul 2020 is committed to providing the most comprehensive support package for National Olympic Committees and their teams. For the first time in Olympic history, every athlete from every nation will have access to a free-to-use Olympic Training Precinct and Recovery Centre on the same site as the Olympic Village. So in Istanbul, the sportsmen and women of Africa will have a better chance of realising their full potential than ever before – perhaps the best chance they will have until the Games come to the continent. (Sportcal July 10, 2013)

This statement well illustrates the strategic use of Turkey’s new foreign policy in the service of Istanbul 2020.

While it is commonly assumed that the Olympics are an instrument of “soft power” (which has yet to be demonstrated), the question remains whether the impact of this new Turkish foreign policy can be measured through its ability to promote and bring the Games to Istanbul? The rapid analysis and interpretation of the awarding process for the 2020 Olympics may provide guidance as to the scope of this new foreign policy. In other words, before we can regard the Olympics as an instrument of soft power, the question firstly needs to be asked whether the award of the OG in itself is a tangible indicator of this so-called soft power.

Evaluation of Istanbul’s 2020 candidacy, which had many points in its favour, was well documented in the IOC delegation report, released in April 2013. Firstly, the IOC, ever eager to embrace the “new world” in the image of Beijing 2008 and Rio 2016, cast a watchful eye over the candidacy of an applicant Muslim country, aware that very few major sporting events had been held in the region. The IOC delegation stressed the quality of the application, an impression shared by other state observers, such as the UK and Greece who announced their support for Istanbul 2020. Since its release ten years ago, the internet website Games BidIndex has become the “industry standard” measurement of the competitiveness of OG bids. For example, in the last two bid campaigns, BidIndex correctly gauged the successful outcomes of Olympic host cities Rio de Janeiro and Pyeongchang. In February 2013, Istanbul was ranked slightly ahead of Tokyo in first place: Istanbul’s high score (61.78, up 1.58 points) was calculated on a combination of over 100 fundamental evaluations carried out by BidIndex. Highlighted among them was Turkey’s strong economic growth compared to its rivals and Istanbul’s Olympic bidding experience that had included four recent campaigns. Istanbul also demonstrated strong public support coming from a country and region
that had “never hosted an Olympic Games” (Gamesbids February 28, 2013). Thus, at the beginning of 2013, Istanbul’s was tipped as the favourite nation to host the 2020 Games.

However, the choice of an Olympic city is a combination of factors outside the pure rationality of the inherent quality of a candidate city’s application file. Beyond unofficial rankings and official reports, it is ultimately the IOC members who vote according to their personal convictions. Obviously there are strong political pressures, the risk of corruption exists, and until the last moment uncertainty remains a considerable factor. On September 7, 2013, in Buenos Aires, the CIO elected the city to host the 2020 OG. After defeating Madrid to reach the final round, Istanbul lost the final ballot to Tokyo by 60 votes to 36. The results of the IOC vote is indicative of the persuasive power of Tokyo’s proposal. Of course, it is very difficult to point out with any certainty the reasons behind the failure of the Istanbul bid, and it will not be attempted here. The comparative successes and failures of various other previous bid applications have shown the demonstrative need for candidate cities to expand their sphere of influence in the international arena and position their country in international sporting bodies, including in the IOC. Despite the considerable mobilization of resources and the support of the political authorities and sports elites to launch an effective lobbying campaign – and indeed despite being tipped as host favourites during the selection process – the Istanbul bid resulted in a heavy loss during the final round. This failure may appear to constitute a genuine deficit of “soft power”; a failure of capacity to capably convince IOC members to vote for Istanbul. The failure of successive Turkish bids to host sports mega-events often evokes a bitter response from those involved in the projects (Polo 2012b). The failure of Istanbul 2020 was received with great resentment, particularly as Erdoğan had been so publicly engaged in supporting the bid. Never before had a Turkish Prime Minister been so personally involved in fostering a bid for a sport event. Following the domestic and international turmoil of 2013, the attribution of OG to Istanbul would have been celebrated as a personal victory for Erdoğan, evidence that under his leadership Turkey had been successfully guided into occupying a new position on the world stage. His involvement in the biding process may explain why for the first time in its history the Istanbul Olympic bid was no longer the consensus dream it had previously been (Polo, 2011). The urban projects behind the Olympic bid had already generated a negative backlash from the AKP’s hard-line critics in Turkey. In the wake of the Gezi events, opponents rallied against Erdoğan’s authoritarianism. Some organizations even “requested the IOC to take Istanbul off of the list of cities for the 2020 Olympics in order to reclaim the honour of Olympic ideals.” Even commentators who had supported Istanbul 2020 worried about the impact of the Games on Istanbul. When the results were announced during the ceremony in Buenos Aires, the Turkish delegation remained seated, utterly dejected. Then, Erdoğan stood up, hugged his Japanese counterpart warmly and said, “We shall win [next time], God willing.” However, later, he told the Turkish media that “it hasn’t been fair: In a way, they are cutting ties with the 1.5 billion people of the Muslim world” (Today’s Zaman September 10, 2013). Erdoğan’s statement conveys the feeling of Turkey’s isolation and its paradoxical dilemma: Not European enough to be accepted into Europe, and not enough powerful to be persuasive. He also vehemently criticized the Turkish media and social networks, accusing them of ensuring Istanbul lost its bid to host the 2020 Olympics.

Unlike bilateral sports diplomacy, the impact of major sporting events are more diffuse and uncertain. If the application process highlights the number of symbolic values a
country is expected to embody, then its real impact is difficult to measure. In addition, being awarded a sports mega-event like the Olympic Games implicitly means that the country already has the strength and means of persuasion beyond traditional spheres of influence. The first Olympic bids submitted by the TNOC were initiated by elites wholly committed to the achievement of EU member status to consolidate Turkey’s European identity, an ideal to which the Kemalist elites were so attached. Istanbul’s 2020 bid can be considered to have occurred in a very different context. Turkey’s externally projected image changed as the result of intersecting non-hierarchical factors: Firstly, greater economic prosperity provided the means for the development of a new foreign policy that has sought to establish Turkey’s regional influence, including the former territories of the Ottoman Empire and the Muslim world; and secondly, the difficult progress of EU accession negotiations was exacerbated by the opposition of some European member states and Turkey’s slow pace of reforms towards the fulfilment of membership criteria. The Olympic Games in Istanbul could have been a way of symbolically demonstrating to Europe Turkey’s continued movement towards its destiny, regardless of the lack of progress in the EU negotiation process.

Conclusion

Over the last twenty years, the political use of sport in Turkey has been integrated into an influence-building diplomacy to foster a positive image abroad. From 2000, sports diplomacy, alongside other diplomatic instruments, have participated in a new AKP-driven foreign policy, such as the international cooperation policy (instituted through TİKA, the Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency), and an external cultural policy (implemented through the opening of Yunus Emre cultural centres in 28 countries). At home this policy has sought to disseminate an image of the nation in multiple ways: As a benevolent country and regional power served by an ambitious foreign policy, as a country with a dynamic economy and a strong stable government, and as a modern state sustained by its commitment to conservative values. In the aftermath of the Arab revolts in the early 2010s, Turkey paraded itself, and was correspondingly vaunted abroad, as a political model of the ideal modern state, which had succeeded in successfully combining democracy with Islamic values. Particularly in the period after 2013, faced with a series of domestic and international setbacks the country’s weaknesses were revealed through political developments that somewhat served to tarnish its image.

This is probably the point at which the limits of public diplomacy and sports diplomacy are reached. It is absolutely clear that states try to use sport for political purposes. Major sporting events, particularly those that can be considered truly mega-events by virtue of their exceptional scale and global impact, namely the Olympics and FIFA World Cup, receive absolute government backing. Nevertheless, it remains difficult to measure the actual effects of sports diplomacy beyond the declarations made by political authorities through communication policies and media coverage.
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NOTES


2. The reasons behind the decision to compete to host sport mega-events, such as the anticipated positive impacts on the local community and regional economy, or in terms of urban planning and regeneration, remain of course, fiercely debated (see Horne and Manzenreiter 2006; Murray and Pigman 2014) and will not be addressed in this paper.
3. For Manzenreiter although the “Beijing Games offered an excellent opportunity to promote China to the world, there was less consent with regard to the way this could have been achieved. Instead the vast majority of attention and effort [of the Chinese authorities] focused on the domestic audience” (Manzenreiter 2010: 33). The sans faute of the Sotchi OG did not prevent Putin’s use of hard power when Russia annexed Crimea four months later.

4. For Hall “In fact to criticize the hosting of mega-events as an economic and social development mechanism is to be doubly damned. For one contends not only with the neoliberal discourse of competition and the relentless pursuit of regeneration but also with the mythologies of the social benefits of sport. Sport is extremely hard to argue against” (Hall 2006: 67).

5. At the end of May 2013, a wave of demonstrations contesting the urban development plan for Istanbul’s Taksim Gezi Park sparked widespread protests in Istanbul and across Turkey. The Police suppressed the protests with tear gas and water cannons; eleven people were killed and more than a thousand were injured. The excessive use of force by the police alongside the overall absence of government dialogue with the protesters was criticized by some foreign countries and international organisations.

6. Syria was a strictly controlled country under Assad with tight security control over its social and political groups and public space. It was therefore apparent that supporters had been invited to celebrate the match at the behest of the leadership.


9. Thirty-six out of the thirty-eight gold medals won by Turkish sportsmen at the OG were in these sports (twenty-eight just for wrestling).


14. Between 1957 and 1967, Sinan Erdem served as the secretary general of the Turkish Volleyball Federation. In 1966, he became member of the International Volleyball Federation (FIVB) and served as the head of the organization committee of FIVB between 1972 and 1984. He was the deputy secretary general of the Turkish National Olympic Committee (TMOK) from 1975, before serving as the secretary general from 1982 to 1989. In 1989, Sinan Erdem was appointed chairman of the TMOK.


18. Ibid.


22. The choice of Qatar to host the FIFA World Cup in 2022 has been the subject of much controversy, including amongst others, corruption charges and the bad working conditions of workers who build the stadiums. The debate that has surrounded the decision is demonstrative of the considerable damage that can be done to the image of a country awarded the responsibility for organizing a sports mega-events, that is to say, selection does not systematically produce positive effects.

23. URL: http://www.gamesbids.com/eng/.

24. The allocation of the 2012 Olympic Games to London over Paris would have been won at the hotel and before the vote, thanks to the leading role played by then British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, who put his political weight behind the campaign in the final straights.
25. Beyond making numerous trips abroad, Erdoğan flew from Ankara to Istanbul to host an IOC delegation dinner at the historic Esma Sultan Mansion next to the Bosphorus in Ortaköy in an effort to show his support for Istanbul’s bid and land the 2020 Olympic Games (Hürriyet Daily News March 27, 2013).

26. Former UN Special Reporter on the Right to Adequate Housing, Miloon Kothari, visiting Istanbul in March 2013, invited by the Istanbul Chamber of architects [TMMOB Mimarlar Odası], stated that the “Olympics would be a disaster for Istanbul” (Ince April 1, 2013).

27. The Urban Movements Istanbul, Habitat International Network, and the Istanbul People’s Houses wrote a letter addressed to IOC members denouncing the repression of the Gezi protests and the Urban projects initiated in the name of the Olympic Games, see URL: http://www.sendika9.org/2013/06/this-is-an-urgent-call-to-the-international-olympic-committee-ioc-from-istanbul/.

28. Thus, the secularist newspaper Cumhuriyet ran an article titled “Yes to the Olympics, no to looting” [Olypiyata evet, yağmaya hayır], Cumhuriyet, August 9, 2013, p. 9.

29. See pro-government newspapers such as Star, Yeni Şafak, Akşam, Haber Türk in their editions of September 9, 2013.

ABSTRACTS

For the first time in its fifteen years of brilliant yet unsuccessful candidacies to host the Olympic Games (OG) and the Football European Championships (Euro), Turkey was admitted into the elite group of countries capable of staging sports mega-events. Although it failed in the last round for the 2020 OG (beaten by Tokyo in 2013), and for the Euro 2016 (beaten by France in 2010), it has since been tipped as the strong favourite to host Euro 2024. International matches have been simultaneously utilized by the Turkish government as an opportunity to publicly demonstrate its willingness to resolve historically problematic issues with other countries. In this paper, it will be argued that Turkey’s ambitions to host sports mega-events and its politicization of specific matches can be interpreted as a strategy of the state to diffuse a positive image at home and abroad, and consolidate its role in the region. A distinction will be made between the use of sport, more accurately football matches, as a tool of diplomacy (in which the state remains the main actor of the process in the context of bilateral relationships) and the use of sports events, which includes also the involvement of sports actors for more diffuse ends. Rather than referring to the concept of soft power, the notion of sport diplomacy will be utilised to analyse Turkey’s influence through the strategic use of sport. Specifically, through the comparative analysis of successive bid proposals to host the Istanbul Games, the AKP’s strategy to promote Turkey’s new power will be critically appraised.

INDEX

Keywords: Sports diplomacy, sports mega-events, Olympic Games, Turkey, soft power
The Soft Power of Framing: Constructing Istanbul as a Regional Art Centre

Jérémie Molho

I would like to thank Anlam Arslanoğlu for our discussions that laid the basis for this article. Then I would like to thank the EJTS editorial board as well as the two anonymous referees for their comments and criticisms that enabled me to restructure and improve this article. Finally, I would like to thank Kerrie Bramhall for her very thorough editing of the final version.

Introduction

1 In 2014, to mark its tenth anniversary year, Istanbul Modern, Istanbul’s first modern and contemporary art museum, opened an exhibition titled, Neighbours – Contemporary Narratives from Turkey and Beyond. The event showcased artists from neighbouring geographies considered to have historical, political and cultural ties with Turkey, including the Balkans, Caucasus, and Middle East.¹ The event reflects the growing interest in creating ties with art scenes in the region, particularly the Balkans and Middle East. Turkish curators have been increasingly involved in external cultural projects and Turkish artists have been featured in galleries and at art fairs in Dubai and Budapest. Correspondingly, Istanbul fairs have welcomed galleries from around the region. Explanations for these increasing interactions argue that they are the result of “Turkish soft power”. Both academics and policymakers have referred to Nye’s soft power theory to account for the development of links between Turkey and its surrounding region (Altunışık 2008; Çandar 2009). Within this perspective, the diffusion of culture through cultural centres and technological media, such as television soap operas, are considered to form a strategic component of the promotion of Turkey’s international influence.

2 Focusing on the specific case study of the contemporary visual arts world in Istanbul, the aim of this paper is to open the black box on this so-called Turkish soft power. To
this end, the art world will be regarded as a relatively autonomous system with its own organisational logics (Becker 1982; Bourdieu 1983). The contemporary arts sector has been analysed as a complex system of actors participating in the construction of a hierarchy of reputation (Moulin 2000; Thornton 2012; Heinich 2014). However, the process of construction has not been geographically neutral in its effects, resulting in the unequal distribution of symbolic power (Quemin 2006). It will be argued that within this context, actors in the art world construct cognitive frames in order to put new territories on the map. Therefore, increasing links between Istanbul and its surrounding region can be analysed as the outcome of the framing of the Middle East as an emerging region, and Istanbul as a rising regional centre.

The study is based on field research conducted in Istanbul between 2012 and 2014. Seventy-one semi-structured interviews were carried out with a variety of local art actors, including gallery owners, auction houses managers, foundation directors, collectors, curators, artists, and art fair managers. By focusing on the international networks and the interests and motivations of these actors, the methodology aims to demonstrate the positionality of actors in relation to the power dynamics of the art world and explore the strategies and discourses that are asserted for building external relations. I argue that the development of regional ties does not result from a top-down strategy, but from the construction of cognitive frames describing the rise of a regional art market or an alternative scene; and Istanbul as a rising regional art hub.

This paper will critically examine an understanding of regional interactions as a consequence of Turkish soft power and elaborate on the construction of spatialised cognitive frames within the art world. By asking how the Middle East has been framed as an emerging art market region, the study will discuss the ways in which Istanbul art galleries have seized this opportunity and subsequently altered their discursive position toward the relationship between Istanbul and the Middle East. Finally, I analyse the discourse of Istanbul institutional actors to illustrate how Istanbul is framed as an emerging regional art centre.

I. Beyond soft power theory: Framing and the social construction of art centres

Soft power theory can be understood as a concept that was developed to reduce the complexity of transnational cultural interactions for state strategy and corporate interests. Nye (1990) coined the term “soft power” to analyse the reconfiguration of American presence in the world following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the bipolar order, which had been at the forefront of US military strategy for the past four decades. Rather than resulting in the predicted decline of power, Nye argued that a variety of tools were available to the US to maintain their influence. Nye’s theory marked an effort to expand the notion of power by differentiating between its various processes (coercion, inducement, agenda-setting, and attraction), and defining the role of “soft” tools such as television, cinema, political discourse and cultural centres. While Nye’s approach has been widely applied to the analysis of Turkey’s new geopolitical context, two limitations can be perceived. Firstly, Nye overemphasised the role of state actors. In charge of defending national interests, they are encouraged to mobilise different sets of tools to develop or retain their country’s influence. Although the role of civil society was stressed in Nye’s subsequent works (Nye 2004), it remains treated as
a secondary factor. Such an approach tends to disregard the potential role of powerful private actors with major economic stakes invested in the promotion of a country's influence. Secondly, Nye's theory supposes that promoters of a state's influence have the capacity to mobilise cultural organisations to further their goals. This may be true in the case of cultural centres with organic links to the state, for example, the Yunus Emre cultural centres. However, relatively autonomous organisations like the social media and art world cannot function as instruments of influence (Zaharna 2007).

6 Throughout the course of the twentieth century, while the visual arts enjoyed the benefits of state support granted through acquisitions and the institution of the Academy of Fine Arts, the country lacked an art market infrastructure (Pelvanoğlu 2014). Consequently, the emergence of Turkey's art market has been a comparatively recent development: Fifty years ago, it was virtually non-existent with only a few short-lived art galleries referenced before the 1970s. The sale of late-Ottoman and early-Republican paintings by pioneer art dealers, such as Yahşi Baraz (1975) and Aydın Cumali (1973), thereafter, started to promote a taste for collecting. In the 1980s, many new galleries were established and auction houses, such as Portakal Kültür ve Sanat Evi and Antik Aş, assumed a central role in the art market. As Yahşi Baraz explained, economic liberalisation measures taken after the 1980 military coup gave rise to the emergence of an art market in Istanbul: “The first collectors started after 1984. It was the first time that art really got bought and sold” ( Küçükylıdurm Jan. 26, 2012). However, growth was largely localised and the Turkish art market remained relatively marginalised in the international market with few external promoters. After 2000, events began to change with the proliferation of institutions and the market price boom (Molho 2014). Recent developments within the Istanbul art scene have been less a consequence of public strategy than the venture initiatives and patronage of important industrial families investing in cultural infrastructure (şeni 2010). The Eczacıbaşı family founded the Istanbul Biennial in 1987, which underwent a process of internationalisation and recognition through the progressive invitation of foreign curators and artists and the subsequent attraction of a foreign public. From 2000 investment into Istanbul’s art infrastructure soared (Polo 2013). Private museums and foundations were opened such as the museums of Elgiz, Borusan, Pera, Istanbul Modern, Sakıp Sabancı Museum, ARTER, and SALT. In addition, private universities, such as Bilgi and Sabancı, opened programs in cultural and art management, fuelling the scene with professionalised knowledge.

7 The growth of the contemporary art market during this period is evidenced by auction sales figures, which increased significantly from eleven to fifty million dollars between 2000 and 2009 (Bakbaşa 2010). This evolution was punctuated by a series of highly mediatised market signals: In December 2004, a record 3.5 million dollar sale was recorded for an Osman Hamdi Bey painting, The Turtle’s Trainer; and in November 2009, Burhan Doğançay’s Blue Symphony sold for 1.5 million dollars, constituting the first artwork by a living Turkish artist to exceed the one million dollar mark. Growing international interest in Turkish art has also been evidenced by the organisation of London sales, by Sotheby’s from 2009, and the Saatchi gallery from 2011. Favourable market indicators have also resulted in the establishment of dozens of new contemporary art galleries, including galleries opened by collectors such as Leyla Tara Suyabatmaz (Rampa), Öktay Duran (Arton) and Mehveş Arıburnu (Mana). In addition, Turkish galleries are increasingly featured at major world art fairs, including Art Basel
in Basel, Hong Kong and Miami Beach, the Frieze London art fair, and The Armory Show. Internationally renowned galleries such as Marlborough and Yvon Lambert have attended Istanbul art fairs, while foreign galleries like Krampf, New York and Riff, Paris have been opened in Istanbul. The fees for Contemporary Istanbul has increased fivefold within the six-year period following its foundation in 2006, reflecting the rise of its local and international reputation.

Thus, the growth of the number of collectors and the patronage of institutions is demonstrative of the pivotal role played by the private sector in facilitating the rise of Istanbul’s art sector. State actors, however, have not been absent from this process. The presence of political figures, for example, on the boards of art institutions and at museum inauguration ceremonies, demonstrates the beneficial return of prestige from granting support. Nevertheless, their relatively secondary role in shaping the direction of the arts sector contradicts the assertion that its rise is related to the strategic enhancement of Turkey’s soft power. Attention to the strategies of economic elites profiting from international expansion, however, may help to elucidate the nature of the development of relations in the region. Family holdings, which support the majority of major art institutions in Istanbul, have a vested economic interest in relations with neighbouring countries. The total volume of exports from Turkey to the Middle East increased from six to sixteen percent between 2002 and 2010, while tourist figures increased from 975,000 to 3.6 million in the same period (Habibi and Walker 2011). The trend suggests that economic ties are strengthened correlative to artistic ties. A primary example may be offered by the case of the Sabancı group, who are the majority shareholders of Akbank and significant benefactors of the Istanbul arts sector through Akbank Sanat, the Sakıp Sabancı museum and the sponsorship of events such as Contemporary Istanbul. In 2009, Akbank opened a branch in Dubai. During the inauguration event, the Chairperson of Akbank, Suzan Dinçer Sabancı, met with the head of the Dubai Culture Authority and the owner of Cuadro, a Dubai gallery that represents two Turkish artists, Devrim Erbil and Ali Taptık [Figure 1]. In 2013, Akbank supported a partnership between Contemporary Istanbul and Art Dubai, an occasion that was positioned towards the development of a new art consumer market. Therefore, events are organised as an opportunity to promote Sabancı’s involvement in the art market: “We constantly share information about art markets and new art tendencies with our clients; and we aim to satisfy their varied demands... We – Akbank Private Banking – have been supporting Contemporary Art for eleven years.” Thus, for Akbank, art is regarded as an instrument for the development of a niche clientele base in Dubai.
An additional example illustrating the complex entwining of economic and creative interests may be offered by the case of architect Murat Tabanlıoğlu, owner of Istanbul's pioneer gallery, Galerist, and an important figure in the Istanbul art world having designed Istanbul Modern and represented Turkey at the Venice Architecture Biennale, 2014. Tabanlıoğlu involvement in the art scene of the Gulf region has been negotiated through his architectural company: In 2007, his was the first Turkish gallery to attend the launch of Art Dubai; and in 2008, he received two prizes at the Cityscape architectural competition in Dubai.

Such examples suggest that private actors support the art world for the promotion of their economic interests. However, suggesting that this represents a form of “private soft power” remains an insufficient explanatory basis for analysing the complex regional dynamics that constitute Istanbul’s art world. Although the convergence of actors from different spheres of interest would seem to lend credence to the argument that the art world functions as an instrument of corporate interests (Artun 2011), critical analysis stresses the relative autonomy of the art field (Heinich 2004). As Velthuis states, the art market is “based on the production of belief” (Velthuis 2011: 37). Until the nineteenth century, it may be argued that academic norms prevailed in the establishment of values of artworks. However, the art world has progressively evolved into a complex intersubjective system (Beckert and Rössel 2013). Initially, the economics of the art world seems to be regulated through the strict distribution of functions: Theoretically, artists focus on conceiving and producing artworks while galleries assume responsibility for their reputation. In practice, however, artists undertake an active role in self-marketing. Furthermore, in principle the commercial and institutional spheres remain separate: Commercial actors, such as dealers and auction houses, act as intermediaries between artists and collectors and construct economic values; Art institutions, museums, and biennials make art accessible to the general public and determine the qualification of artistic innovation through the
construction of aesthetic values. Yet boundaries between functions are often blurry: Artists organise sales, gallery owners curate non-profit exhibitions, collectors fund art galleries, and museums play a central role in market value.

Sociologists of contemporary art have argued that a hierarchy of reputation is responsible for regulating the system. Thornton’s *Seven Days in the Art World* (2012) describes the contribution of rituals to the formation of a social hierarchy of status: Artists competing for the prestigious Turner prize; galleries fighting over the best spot at the Art Basel fair. This hierarchy of status extends to collectors and curators. Collectors not only compete for the ownership of artworks produced by prestigious artists, but they also try to hold strategic positions within influential art institutions. The role of a curator extends beyond the organisation of exhibitions to encompass an expectation of affirmed authorship and the demonstration of originality (Heinich 2014). Moreover, the hierarchy of status and reputation is institutionalised through prestigious events (e.g. the Venice Biennial and the Art Basel fair) and mediated through rankings in listings. For example, Art Review’s Power 100 rates people’s comparative influence on the global art market, and the Kunstkompass listing ranks artists based on their presence in important museums. Despite various biases, these rankings are both influential and performative (Quemin 2015): The hierarchy of prestige generates a self-perpetuating logic.

The hierarchy of prestige is also highly influential in terms of the spatialisation of the global art market. Studies have suggested a centre-periphery logic to the spatial organisation of networks of relations in the art world (see Quemin 2006; Plattner 1998). However, this raises the question of how a given territory, either a city or a wider region, can assume a central position in the art field. Drawing on an understanding of the art world as a complex intersubjective system, one can infer that the formation of an art centre results not only from hard factors, but is dependent on the production of cognitive frames. Based on a study of art centres at the time of the Renaissance, Castelnuovo & Ginzburg (1981) identified the main characteristics shared by major art centres, including: a large number of artists; capital accumulation fuelled investment; institutions; and a varied public. The role of major art theorists, such as Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574), in the creation of the symbolic centrality of certain cities was also stressed. Vasari, considered to be the pioneer of art history after the publication of his book *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* in 1550, neglected the emergence of artistic innovations from other Renaissance centres, such as Venice, through his overemphasis on the role of Florentine painters. Thus, conferral of art centre status relies on the construction of cognitive frames produced by actors. I argue that through the process of framing, actors try to affect the perceptions on the relative importance of place to the art world in order to justify their strategic aims and to enhance their own reputations.

The concept of frames enables an understanding of the way in which the construction of ideas can shape social experience. Initially introduced by Erving Goffman (1974), the concept gave rise to a cognitive approach towards analysing the role of discourse in organising social experience and giving meaning to events (Surel 2000). As Entman (1993: 53) argues, “To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text”. Through the analysis of speeches or news reports the method identifies which information a communicator is trying to make more salient, that is “more noticeable, meaningful and memorable to audiences”
Critical attention to the analysis of rhetorical techniques focuses particularly on the way in which specific audiences are targeted through the use of culturally familiar symbols. Although the spatial dimension was not the primary concern of these initial contributions, subsequent works have focused on the framing of space and place. Firstly, through the analysis of the “social construction of scales” geographers have not only applied the concept of framing to spatial issues, but have discussed the centrality of space to understanding the cognitive constructions of a social problem. According to Moore, “Framing the spatial and temporal context is central to the ultimate success of any political project” (Moore 2008: 218). Secondly, a geographic perspective on framing responds to the way in which the circulation of images and discourses may affect our perceptions of space. This is exemplified in Debarbieux et al’s study of the circulation of nineteenth century traveller images and the rise of the frame of exoticism: “Exoticism is characterised on the one hand by the association of geographical distance and the existence of a symbolical gap, on the other hand by the enhanced value of otherness, seen as charming and attractive” (Debarbieux et al 2012: 88). Framing, therefore, deals with the perception of a territory: It involves the selection of a territory and the process of making salient certain aspects of it, for example, its physical characteristics, history, or the social activities that are taking place. Martin (2003) coined the term “place-framing”, to emphasise the performative effect of framing on community mobilisation:

As discourses that reveal ideologies about activism and place, frames have material consequences both in shaping people’s ideas about places and in fostering social action. While some collective-action frames are aimed primarily at motivating activism among members, frames affect external perspectives of a community as well (Martin 2003: 733).

In the case of Istanbul, the place-framing process shares two comparable aims: The mobilisation of a diverse range of actors (institutions, galleries, artists, collectors) at local and international levels; and altering the perception of the art world as one orientated around Western centres by framing other emerging regions and art centres.

The regional dynamics of Istanbul’s art world cannot be restricted to an analysis of underlying national or corporate interests alone. Neither state actors nor patrons are able to fully control the transnational interactions occurring within the Istanbul art scene. The construction of cognitive frames within the art world plays a key role in shaping collective actions and perceptions. As the purveyors of funds, patrons and states may be influential in the development of international links, but they do so in negotiation with a range of other actors, including museums, galleries, auction houses, and art fair organisations. What I define as the “soft power of framing” refers to the capacity of these players to construct a discourse for the mobilisation of other actors at various levels and challenge the perception of the geographical distribution of symbolic power. The remainder of the paper explores how the combination of frames constructed by different actors has contributed to a view of Istanbul as a regional art centre.
II. Framing emerging regions in a globalising art market

In the last fifteen years, the globalisation of the art market has created a radical geographic shift (Velthuis and Curioni 2015). In emerging countries auction prices have skyrocketed, dozens of art fairs have been created globally, and cities, formerly viewed as peripheral areas, have built major art institutions and hosted numerous art gallery events. International auction houses and art fair organisations have been at the centre of this shift. They have been responsible for shaping the perceptions and experiences of space within the art world, contributing both to a regionalised and polarised understanding of the international art market.

The globalisation of the art market has also been responsible for the development of auction houses and art fairs as major art market platforms. Between 1986 and 2011, the growth revenue of the two main auction houses, Christie’s and Sotheby’s, increased from 403 million to 3.6 billion Pounds Sterling; and from 898 million to 4.9 billion US Dollars respectively (McAndrew 2012). Previously confined to the secondary market, they have progressively become more consequential, undertaking a broader remit in the market as retail providers by developing aggressive marketing strategies towards collectors and through the establishment of branches in emerging markets. In addition, the number of art fairs gathering multiple art galleries for a shorter period of time has developed significantly, accounting for more than half of art gallery revenues (McAndrew 2012). These fairs have constituted a platform for extending into emerging art market areas. The company that owns the most prestigious art fair, Art Basel, for example, opened branches in Miami, 2001, focusing on Latin American art; and in Hong Kong, 2011, targeting the Asian market. The space-framing approaches promoted by auction houses and art fair organisations in Istanbul and its surrounding region will be critically examined in the following section. On the one hand, global auction houses frame the Middle East as an emerging regional art market, grouping together a wide variety of nationally segmented markets for sales. On the other hand, art fair organisations have tapped into this rising regional frame to legitimate their position as a central hub between these segmented markets.

International auction houses and the regional segmentation of the international art market

Professional art market literature, which largely publishes information on auction sales data (e.g. Artprice), now widely diffuses a vision of the art world as the juxtaposition of regional art markets. As a contributor to the emerging region of the Middle East, this new geographic framing has led to the inclusion of Turkey. Gulf countries have played an increasingly expansive role in the production of interest in “Middle Eastern art”. While Dubai remains the Gulf’s affirmed art market centre, other Gulf countries, including Bahrain, Qatar, as well as Sharjah and Abu Dhabi of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), have been steadily investing in art institutions, therefore, becoming strong market buyers. In Abu Dhabi the Saadiyat Cultural District project announced in 2006, designated a land area of 2,800,000 square meters to house a series of widely mediatised museum projects designed by international star architects, including: the Louvre Abu Dhabi by Pritzker Prize winning architect, Jean Nouvel; the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi by...
Frank Gehry; the Zayed National Museum by Pritzker Prize winning architect, Lord Norman Foster; and the Performing Arts Center by Zaha Hadid. In addition to buying Cézanne’s Card Players for an excess of 250 million dollars in 2011, Qatar has also attracted a lot of attention by appointing Edward Dolman, Christie’s CEO, as executive director of the Qatar Museums (formerly the Qatar Museums Authority). In 2013, Art Review rated its chairperson, Sheikha Al Mayassa as the most powerful figure in the international art market. Such initiatives can be analysed within the regional geopolitical context (Kazerouni 2014), and have laid the foundations for framing the Middle East as a rising art market region.

Since the establishment of Christie’s in 2005 and Bonham’s two years later, Dubai has been positioned as the art market hub of the region. Following its institution, Christie’s sales have generated local interest, encouraging businessmen to turn towards the art market and driving up market prices (Moghadam 2012). In the dissemination of the discourse of the rise of the “Middle Eastern art scene”, Christie’s has actively mobilised the press. The rapid development of the art market sector in Dubai was quoted by the director of Christie’s in Gulf News, a Dubai based newspaper, to be an indicator of the dynamism of the region: “In Dubai, where there were only five art galleries a decade ago, we now have eighty-five. New museums and galleries are being built in the region. There are art fairs in Beirut, Morocco, Dubai and Abu Dhabi. People of this region are investing in art.” Three years later, Gulf News ran an article headlined, “Dubai vital selling centre to world art market says Christie’s.” Citing Michael Jeha, the managing director for the Middle East, the article referenced Christie’s generation of 250 million dollars of sales and the statement that Dubai “attracts buyers from more than thirty countries underlining the popularity of Middle Eastern Art globally” (Jaspal April 24, 2015). Dubai has played a major role in spreading the idea of a Middle Eastern art scene. They have responded to the comparatively small amount of local artistic production by situating it as a hub for Arab, Iranian, and Turkish art. The presence of Dubai galleries at the Art Basel fair was commented upon by the co-director of Art Basel, Marc Spiegler, to be an indicator of the development of the arts sector of the region: “The fact that you have two galleries from the UAE points to the growth of the region in terms of its artists, galleries, institutions, and private collectors” (Esposito June 12, 2012).

The proactive role of Christie’s in disseminating the frame of the Middle Eastern art originates from its corporate strategy. A comparison of the regional strategies of the world’s leading auction houses, Christie’s and Sotheby’s, reveals the contingent nature of regional framing. Christie’s opened a branch in Dubai, 2005; and Sotheby’s opened branches in Doha, 2008, and Istanbul, 2009, although neither company organises contemporary art sales in Istanbul. Christie’s Dubai sales have included Turkish, Iranian, and Arab artists, while Sotheby’s sales in Doha comprise mainly Arab and Western artists. Although Sotheby’s organised London sales exclusively dedicated to Turkish art between 2009 and 2011, the decision to include Turkey alongside other countries, including Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, marked a change in strategy. These broader country groupings are directed towards tapping into a wider market potential. The map of the regional groupings of Christie’s and Sotheby’s art sales highlights the fact that Istanbul is not considered to be a regional sales hub [Figure 2]. Location choices are dependent on the capacity of cities to provide competitive advantages in terms of its taxation and
customs regulations and art trade infrastructure. Lower trade barriers and a more efficient customs systems mark Dubai and London as the more attractive prospect.

Figure 2

The inclusion of Turkish contemporary art in auction sales in Dubai and London
Jeremie Molho, 2015

In order to justify the geographic segmentation of the international art market, auction houses produce what has been defined above as space frames: A discourse that renders certain elements geographical realities more salient than others. In a Sotheby’s press release for its selling exhibition of contemporary art, At the Crossroads 2, promoters emphasised the common cultural backgrounds and historical trajectories shared by the countries included in their sales:

At The Crossroads 2 will explore the relationship between this diverse group of contemporary artists and examine how their shared political and cultural past has influenced the art being produced in the region today. While the turbulent socio-political changes of the twentieth century and the disintegration of the USSR has dramatically influenced artistic production, the contemporary identity of the region also stems from a rich history of artistic practices dating back to antiquity - from the production of delicate Persian miniatures and Azerbaijani carpets to Ottoman architecture, ancient Georgian frescoes, and Central Asian jewellery and crafts.10

Despite the commerciality of an auction sale, it was necessary for Sotheby’s to legitimise their choices through discursively constructed references to shared political, historical, and cultural traditions that framed the countries as a coherent regional whole. Sotheby’s space-framing makes actual cultural interactions more salient. Similarly, Christie’s Istanbul representative underlines the similarities between historical periods of Arab and Turkish art:

From a cultural point of view, these are two cultures that can communicate. Turkish art and Egyptian art have lived through very similar times, their opening to
the West. A Turkish sales catalogue looks more like a Dubai catalogue than a London Catalogue, especially for modern art... We have a 600-year-old past of the Ottoman Empire. For centuries we have been under the same umbrella. From a cultural point of view it’s not the same thing because the Ottoman Empire did not have a very directive cultural policy, but they have been influenced by the same culture. Iran, Mesopotamia have their own cultures, but there were relationships.  

The argument is derived from a conception of the development of modern painting as a consequence of the process of westernisation beginning in the nineteenth century that has been systematically emphasised in the historiography of Turkish arts. While agents of this “modernisation” movement are typically remembered as facilitating a break with Middle Eastern culture, Christie’s representative argues that Arab societies experienced an analogous process of westernisation. My aim is not to discuss these particular perspectives of history, but rather uncover the discursive mechanisms that are being employed by their use.

The understanding diffused by auction houses of a global art market geographically segmented into regions is grounded in contingent cognitive constructions. These space-frames are the product of the commercial strategies of auction house companies. Their primary objective is to access the newly created wealth of the region through the provision of specifically targeted goods. Analysis of the way in which Sotheby's and Christie’s rationalise the organisation of their regional sales indicates their capacity to elaborate appropriate discourses for their intended audiences.

**Art fairs and the framing of Istanbul as a regional hub**

Although the upward trend in art auction sales has been largely concentrated in the Gulf and Turkey, Istanbul's surrounding region has largely been a dynamic area of development. With the exception of Art Athina founded in 1993, the majority of galleries and art fairs were established in the last decade [Figure 3]. Comparably, Istanbul also developed many new art fairs, the most important of which are considered to be Contemporary Istanbul and Artinternational in terms of their international network. These new art fairs have constituted platforms of exchange, enabling the promotion and movement of artists between Istanbul and the broader region. Indeed, many events have been organised with this particular focus in mind.
International art fairs participate in the framing of regional art markets. Artinternational, established in Istanbul, 2013, was explicitly positioned as a regional platform. Despite the pre-existence of a competing international contemporary art fair, Istanbul was the selected location. While the dynamism of the city was stated as a motivating factor, the potential of the region was considered critical:

The geographic potential, the possibility of reaching Europe, the Middle East and also Eastern Europe, the ex-Soviet Republics, Central Asia, Russia... There is the cliché that [Istanbul] is the meeting point between East and West, but in more concrete terms, it’s a four-hour flight to about fifty countries. So it can grow into a space where diverse types of regions come together.

Not only was the centrality of the location considered an advantage, but a strategy was put in place to ensure that the fair was established as a regional networking event. The selection of the committee was integral to its strategic implementation: Eleven of the twenty-three members were related to the Middle Eastern art scene, as opposed to eight with affiliations to Turkey and four to other countries; and members names were intended to act as a draw to collectors from the region. In addition, they worked alongside VIP representatives in order to utilise their contacts with Middle Eastern collectors to encourage attendance.

If you wanted to join the fair you saw that there was somebody like Dyala who is involved with the Middle East, there are VIP relations with the Middle East, there is Leila Heller on the selection committee. So I’m sure that there were some people like this gallery in San Francisco who looked at it and said, ok, we’re gonna bring our artists from that part of the world or who deal with Islamic themes. Both of its galleries were approached because they would fit the theme and also because they proposed something that they thought could work in the region. The Middle Eastern aspect of the fair was kind of in the way that it was presented and marketed, so the galleries picked up on that when they decided if they were going to attend and once they had been accepted, which artists they should bring.
Through the production of several signals, the fair constituted itself as an attractive meeting point for actors specialised in the Middle Eastern art scene, thereby performatively contributing to the legitimation of its existence. Reference to the Middle East as a “theme” in the above-cited excerpt, demonstrates the equation of the region with specific subjects. To be selected and achieve commercial success at the fair, applicant galleries were encouraged to participate in the framing of the Middle Eastern art scene. Paula Al Askari, an Abu Dhabi collector and selection committee member, argues that the fair constituted a juncture for the Turkish and UAE art scenes: “It does seem like the entire art community of the UAE is going to Istanbul... Art fairs are playing a really strong role in developing the sense of a Middle Eastern art scene, which has expanded to include non-Arab countries in recent years” (East Sept. 14, 2013).

Competitor art fair, Contemporary Istanbul, also adopted a similar position towards the region, underlining their intent to combine internationality with locality:

We believe the assets of the local culture should not to be effaced by the uniform, homogenous global culture. Aligning ourselves to the values in the last eight years, we gathered not only galleries from across the world but also hosted countries like Gulf Countries, Eastern European Countries and this year Russia. Thus highlighting the unique glocal idiosyncrasy (the character) of Contemporary Istanbul as not only an art fair, but a cultural platform.

Art fairs are anxious not to present themselves as solely commercial events. Beyond acting as a platform for the sale and acquisition of artworks, art fairs represent themselves as forums of dialogue and exchange, for example, through the organisation of talks and non-profit sections. Discourse opposing the homogenisation of global culture, however, can be regarded as somewhat paradoxical having originated from a symbolic representative of the globalisation of arts. In fact, Contemporary Istanbul’s strategic emphasis on its regional embeddedness serves as a means of differentiating Istanbul as an art centre in the global market. The strategic focus on regional art scene, therefore, operates as a marketing tool.

In opposition to national segmentation, both international auction houses and art fairs contribute to advancing the vision of a regionalised art market in order to expand their potential customer pool. This observable marketing strategy accompanies a discourse that aims to change the perception of other art market actors. Firstly, international auction houses have been at the forefront of regional segmentation – and particularly the construction of the Middle East as an art market area – through the mobilisation of accessible historical references for local and international audiences. Secondly, international art fairs have reacted by situating themselves as a cultural bridge. By adopting the idea of separation between the Western and Middle Eastern art markets, they have legitimated their market position while simultaneously granting a performative existence to the frame of a regionalised art market.

III. Constructing Istanbul as a regional art centre

After emphasising the promotion of regional framing by agents of globalisation in the art market, the way in which this frame is adopted and performed within the Istanbul art world will be considered. Art galleries and institutions demonstrate the will to combine local support with their extension of external relations. As discussed above, place-framing not only attends to changing perceptions, but also the mobilisation of
local actors around a common vision. I argue that the development of a regional frame gathering the commercial and institutional spheres of the Istanbul art world is demonstrative of the mutual intent behind the construction of Istanbul as an international art centre. To achieve this objective, support given to a regional understanding of the art market has appeared to constitute the formative step.

Adoption of this position firstly serves to oppose the processes of peripheralisation resulting from an asymmetrical power relationship with the Western art world. Albeit, there remains a risk that local and external collectors have more faith in Western produced art, as may be inferred from the comments of a collector actively involved in supporting the Istanbul art scene: “Our objective is still this: To have our artists recognised in Europe, to have them invited to Documenta, to have them bought by MoMA, by Tate. Nobody says ‘Wow! He was bought in Dubai!’”. Secondly, regionalisation implies a rise in transnational interactions and contributes to the internationalisation of the Istanbul art scene. In the absence of regional frames local audiences may remain nationally focused, and pursue a patriotic approach to collection, as the owner of Galeri Zilberman in Istanbul explains:

Iranians, Emiratis, Iraqis support a lot of their artists... I can see it clearly. In New York or in London, when an artist from the Eastern part of the world opens an exhibition, the diaspora of China, India or wherever they come from are there, and they buy, they support... Each person supports the artists from their own countries. That’s how the market is working.

Obstacles to the trade of contemporary artworks arise less from customs restrictions than from the lack of an arts based discourse. Galleries and institutions are required to mediate interactions by framing the regional art scene and legitimating it from a creative standpoint. This process represents the preliminary route through which the trust of collectors is secured. Such considerations have led galleries and institutions to produce a discourse of cultural proximity between the art scenes of Istanbul and the Middle East alongside a discourse of emancipation from Western cultural hegemony.

**Art Galleries: The construction of cultural proximity**

The vast majority of art galleries in Istanbul are primarily dedicated to supporting local Turkish artists and targeting local collectors. Concomitantly, the latters have been increasingly regarding the development of internationally focused activities as an asset. Although often reluctant to work alongside local auction houses, some Istanbul galleries consider proposing artworks in international auctions as a more beneficial means of broadening their collector base. According to Christie’s representative in Istanbul, eighty-five to ninety-five percent of Turkish artworks sent to Dubai are sold to non-Turkish buyers. The director of CAM gallery, Istanbul, explained that being listed in a Christie’s catalogue enabled her to gain visibility and develop relations with collectors from the Gulf: “Christie’s has made a sale in Dubai under the label ‘Middle East’ with Iran and Turkey. It’s there that they see our artists; it’s there that their attention is attracted. Then they come to the fairs or they come by themselves.” Thus, the creation of a broad regional label for the transfer of artworks for external sale in Dubai facilitates an opportunity for Istanbul galleries to gain access to a foreign collector base. Moreover, it offers a viable alternative to participating in the more costly art fairs abroad.
The majority of Istanbul’s leading art galleries have utilised multiple routes for the
development of links with the Middle East, including participation in art fairs,
partnering with galleries, and representing artists from across the region.24 The artistic
director of Galerist describes Dubai as evocative of a niche for Turkish galleries due to
its cultural proximity. In contrast to the Art Hong Kong fair, a prestigious but highly
competitive event, Art Dubai is regarded to provide a more opportune occasion for
participants:

Dubai is great, it provides a great space for networking. It’s a small fair, but it has a
good collector base and a lot of institutions come, probably because they want to
see something different from what they see in Europe, and because even European
galleries bring different art to Dubai... It’s easier to be seen. We used to go to Art
Hong Kong. There are 250 galleries. Most of them are huge galleries. You get a lot of
Asian collectors, but it’s very hard to establish any kind of communication with
them and it’s very hard to be seen among so many galleries.25

Positioning themselves as part of a Middle Eastern art scene is, therefore, a means of
differentiation, enabling them to more easily reach international institutions intent on
investing in “Middle Eastern art” because of a perceived need to diversify their
collections. In the terms of Galerist’s art director, being featured in Dubai facilitates the
conditions for targeting wealthy regional collectors. The popularity of Turkey in the
Middle East, a benefit of so-called Turkish soft power, is argued to offer a competitive
advantage:

In the last five years, Turkey has become this regional power. It’s not just
politically, but also culturally. For example, when we go to Dubai, we get a lot of
interest, people say: “Oh! You’re from Turkey!” They know all of our TV series, all
the singers. Turkey has become culturally influential in the area.26

As part of an expression of interest in an art gallery, this “influence” may be regarded
as a means of more readily instilling buyer confidence, an essential component of
purchasing decisions. The owner of Galeri Zilberman represents the development of
links with the Middle East as the strategic derivative of cultural proximity.27 However,
while Galerist’s director refers to the commercial advantages of cultural proximity,
Zilberman stakes his interest as a collector of art:

It is a strategy because I believe that we have a strong cultural, geographic, and
historic relationship. We are very comfortable when we go there, for fairs or for
anything else, and I find that we are very close to them... In the art of the Middle
East, what interests me the most is political art, and especially photograph and
videos by artists doing political art... I think that in photography and video the best
artists in the world are from the Middle East, because they have the social resources
and impressions, which is not the case anymore in the West. I feel closer to the
subjects that are being treated.28

Given the emotive nature of art commerce, a personal connection to the issues being
addressed can be a potent incentive for buying. Although galleries generally assert the
universality of an artist’s work, they can also draw on the associations of proximity to
establish an emotional connectivity with potential buyers.

Middle Eastern gallery owners have argued that the Istanbul art market more readily
accommodates alternative visual media compared to other areas in the region. The
exhibition of a one video installation by a Palestinian artist was reasoned by the owner
of the Green Art Gallery, Syria, to have constituted a risky move in the context of an
unready Middle Eastern market, despite its showing at the Venice Biennale. He feels
more confident with the Turkish market: “Istanbul has a lot of private collections that
go for such conceptual and video work” (Lord Nov. 24, 2011). The director of The Empty Quarter gallery, Dubai, specialising in fine art photography, similarly explained that “The Turkish collector base for photography is much wider than the Gulf” (Ibid.). The openness of local collectors to artworks that do not appear to be immediately commercial, suggests the comparative maturity of the Turkish art market and its institutions. This leads Dirimart’s director to state that the development of links between Istanbul and the Middle East are part of the broader process of internationalisation and the resulting expansion of Istanbul’s art scene, rather than being a regionally directed strategy towards certain growth areas. Accordingly, a direct correlation is perceived between participation and partnerships with foreign galleries and fairs, and the successful receipt of Turkish art in Gulf countries. At the same time, the view of Istanbul as an emerging centre also offers a competitive market advantage. The director of CAM gallery, Istanbul, argues that interest in Turkish art by Middle Eastern collectors is invested because of an anticipated rise in value:

They see Istanbul as a fresh market, they come and say “can I have a piece of this cake?”… When I look at their sales catalogues, I see that what we exhibit is good if you compare it. Our prices are low compared to theirs. I have seen things there worth 300 or 500 thousand dollars that I would never exhibit in my life… So it is possible that they think in a speculative way. Now our prices are good. In the future, it will grow. And they buy.”

40 The way in which art galleries frame increasing ties between Istanbul and the Middle East relies on mutual interest and the argument of cultural proximity. The perception of proximity extends beyond a similarity in tastes to encompass similarities between the experiences of collectors. Proximity is advanced as an argument of trust, a necessary component of art investment. But beyond proximity, the ability of galleries and their artists to gain the international recognition of prestigious art institutions continues to provide an important market signal. Framing Istanbul as part of an emerging market region constitutes an opening step towards the affirmation of Istanbul as an art centre. This framing has developed through the endeavours of actors trying to broaden their market base. In the process of penetrating new markets several emerging countries have been grouped together based on considerations of geographic and cultural proximity; and selected specific cities to act as springboards for reaching potential new collector communities. Art galleries have been active in the regionalisation of the Istanbul art scene. Initially developed for commercial reasons, exchanges with the surrounding region have been framed as the result of cultural proximity.

**Art Institutions: Istanbul as an alternative voice in the international art world**

41 Art institutions play an essential role in the consecration of an artist’s reputation and in the construction of artistic values. The location of norm-setting institutions is critical to understanding the hierarchy of art centres. Despite the recognition of the importance of emerging regions on the international art market, many analysts contend that the historical dominance of Western institutions remains unaltered (Quemin 2006; Choron-Baix and Mermier 2012). A small number of Western art institutions, such as MoMa in New York, the Tate Modern in London, and the Centre Pompidou in Paris, continue to retain their authority for recognising and bestowing the
standard of artistic merit. Therefore, challenging the cultural hegemony of these institutions through alternative vocabularies has constituted a core issue in affirming new art centre status. The globalisation of the art world occurred in conjunction with the proliferation of new city biennials. There are currently 161 biennials listed on the International Biennial Association map: Thirty-nine in the Asia Pacific region, eighteen in Africa and the Middle East, and sixteen in Latin America. Countries falling outside the remit of so-called artistic centres have been at the forefront of this "biennalisiation" movement. Nevertheless, the authority of the Venice Biennale or Documenta in Kassel, Germany, for example, remains intact due to the continued draw of their worldwide visibility and capacity to establish norms. Thus, the issue of "decentring" the art world is not dependent on increasing trade or establishing new institutions. Rather, it is tethered to the ability of actors to create new frames that challenge the authority of the "centre" by offering new alternative centres that are positioned to express artistic forms and ideas that find little space elsewhere. These issues have been engaged with as part of the Havana, Gwangju, and Johannesburg biennials. Havana was the first to definitively promote non-Western artists (Rojas-Sotelo 2011). These "Biennials of resistance" aimed to provide a platform for questioning the authority of Western art centres. To do so, they asserted the affirmation of new areas by claiming their autonomy and cultural specificity:

A network of sites of cultural production sharing common questions, themes, and, indeed, a common precariousness ... these platforms take their stand on the ground of newly evolving regionalities – whether mobilised under the sign of Latin American and Caribbean solidarity, of Afro-Asian unity, of a post-Cold War position of Asia-Pacific solidarity (Hoskote 2010: 312).

42 Thus, the lack of representation in the international art world and the issue of recognition provided the powerful impetus for areas to participate in the framing of the emergence of new regions.

43 The occasion of the Istanbul Biennial generated considerable debate concerning relations with the West and the legacy of cultural hegemony. From the beginning, the East-West and Local-International dialectic was stressed. The biennial was presented and marketed as a bridge between East and West, using the symbolic charge of Istanbul. It gathered Turkish and international artists and curators. But this positioning triggered discussions. Tomur Atagök and Susan Platt (2001) have questioned the way in which artists from the Middle East like Shirin Neshat and Kutluğ Ataman were shown at the Biennial. They argued that the Biennial served to perpetuate the logic of cultural hegemony by presenting artworks that could be easily understood, hampering the expression of the complexity of local issues for the production of a "digestible other". They used the Biennial as an opening to challenge the influence of cultural hegemony: "An ongoing and unresolved heritage of 'Orientalism' in which Turkey is still defined in terms of the erotic, the alien and the dangerous 'other' that is threatening to Europe, at the same time that it holds valuable resources that Europe is eager to exploit" (Atagök and Platt 2001: 103). Criticism of the Istanbul Biennial, develops a Gramscian approach towards the denunciation of cultural hegemony. In the nineteenth century, hegemony denoted the influence of the European colonial powers in terms of their coercive control and cultural authority. In the twentieth century, Gramsci’s cultural hegemony concept transcended the notion of the cultural domination of one state over another to denounce the transnational cultural influence of the ruling class in the legitimisation and maintenance of its material domination. As a critical mirror to Nye’s soft power,
the concept of cultural hegemony has been used to question the legacy of Western influence in Turkey. Edward Said drew on a Gramscian approach to describe the construction of the East-West dichotomy in Western hegemonic discourse on the “Oriental”. Established during the period of colonial expansion, its legacy is argued to have persisted beyond World War 2 through formal and informal cultural institutions (Said 1993). Gramscian theory, following Marxism carries an emancipatory goal for the mobilisation of people against the authority of Western cultural institutions. The Istanbul Biennial, while perpetrating the East-West dichotomy, provided a platform for its discussion and identification as an observable frame in local and international discourse. Yet, the Istanbul Biennial also afforded an opportunity for the Istanbul art world to represent itself as a viable alternative. Beral Madra, director of the first two Biennials in 1987 and 1989, gave a speech in 2011, asserting its innovative status in developing biennial practice:

They successfully opposed the idea of a national pavilion, which was the prevalent form of biennial organisation at the time. Istanbul was pioneering as a regional biennial. It was not until the 1990s that a similar approach would be implemented at the Venice Biennale. Thus, the Istanbul Biennial, founded ninety years after the Venice Biennale, placed not only Turkey, but also the post-Soviet region and the Middle East on the seemingly inaccessible great map and changed their fate of remaining on the “periphery.” (Madra 2011: 32)

Discourse on the historical influence of the Istanbul Biennial contributes towards the framing of Istanbul as a regional art centre by explicitly denouncing cultural hegemony and countering the view of the region as a peripheral geography.

Furthermore, the adoption of a Gramscian critique of the international art world has also encouraged institutional actors in Istanbul to question the construction of the history of Turkish art. Birkan (2011) argues that the history of the arts in Turkey has emphasised the influence of the West. The period between the late-nineteenth mid-twentieth century is presented as a series of importations of techniques and styles ranging from Orientalism, to Cubism and Impressionism. The orientation of cultural policies towards the West in the Republican era is remembered as resulting in a correlative process of disassociation from Middle Eastern culture, disregarded by Atatürk as ”a composition of legends, which is an inheritance of a lost empire” (Quoted in Korad Bırkiye 2009: 262). Thus, the creation of ties with other contemporary arts scenes from around the region can be interpreted as part of the endeavour to challenge the dominance of this frame.

In Istanbul the main figurehead of this changing perspective is Vasif Kortun, the curator of two Biennials in Istanbul and the current director of the Garanti Bank foundation, SALT, which has developed projects with Township art galleries in Cairo and Ashkal Alwan, Beirut. Kortun’s decision to work with actors from the Balkans and Middle East has contributed to the construction of a cognitive frame that aims to facilitate a rupture with the Western aesthetic. Such discourse relies on a critique of the ideology of Turkey’s modernisation. Vasif Kortun asserts that “Twentieth Century Istanbul was a mistake.” The manager of the non-profit organisation Collector Space, who worked with Kortun in the 2000s before becoming involved with several organisations in the Middle East adopts a similar stance:

The modernisation process or period starting from the mid-nineteenth century, kept referring back to Germany and France in the literary circles, in the visual arts circles... a collective amnesia has happened. The ties either towards Eastern Europe
or the Arab states, all these ties of close proximity were lost in the twentieth
century. While Western cultural hegemony is blamed for having weakened Istanbul’s
relationship to the region, specific reference to “amnesia” is used to signify the parallel
processes of modernisation and negation of collective memory. Kortun explains that
his actions at SALT were directed against the vertical representation of the art world
into centres and peripheries:

Originally, our goal was to have a horizontal, lateral relationship with neighbours.
Before the 1990s, artistic discourse was ordered vertically. Before the 1950s there
was Paris, then there was New York. That’s where you looked. You would never
look at Amman. Even Sophia was a billion miles away. People who thought they
were on the periphery had much more to share together than with a supposed
centre.

However, Kortun criticises the current hierarchy while simultaneously maintaining a
polarised conception of the art world. Rather than rejecting any form of hierarchy, a
hierarchy of prestige is combined with a hierarchy of geographic distancing. Regional
links are viewed as a way of affirming Istanbul as a potentially alternative new pole.
Kortun proceeds by way of referencing Istanbul’s imperial legacy as the former
Ottoman capital:

Istanbul is becoming a new type of city. It’s the hub, it has regained its historical
place, which is a capital city, which is an empire city ... There is a general feeling
about that. It’s been one of the most important cities in the world, it’s been the
centre of the Middle East and the Black sea region. It’s becoming big again in
tourism. It’s on the migratory patterns of people. It has come back to its powerful
historical position. It’s obvious that it has been at the centre of empires for 2000
years. That’s what Istanbul is, that’s what Istanbul will be.

While an appeal appears to be initially made for the criticism of a hierarchical
approach to the art world, a call for the reconfiguration of the hierarchical order is
actually being asserted. The framing of Istanbul as a regional art centre is ambivalent:
On the one hand, it mobilises a Gramscian critique of Western cultural hegemony to
criticise imperial legacies; On the other hand, the vocabulary used to promote the rise
of Istanbul explicitly reiterates the city’s imperial legacy. The installation of SALT in
the Ottoman bank building in Karaköy, 2011, lends a performative dimension to this
discourse. The building carries with it the heritage of its former function of funding the
infrastructural development of the Middle East. The logical consequence of this
discourse of rebirth is the recovery of relations between the former Ottoman provinces.
As Kortun elucidates: “I’m in Istanbul so I’m part of the Middle East, I can’t close myself
to the region. I cannot close myself to Cairo, Amman, Lebanon. It’s a priority, because
of historical allegiances, relationships, common memories.” Kortun’s vocabulary is
reminiscent of the discourse of Turkish soft power. Analogous to Ahmet Davutoğlu’s
Strategic Depth doctrine, the creation of an opening with the surrounding region is
justified through historical and geopolitical commonalities. As previously illustrated,
the art world’s strategy is not defined by government imperative. Yet, the “soft power
of framing” may be usefully employed as a term to refer to its capacity to mobilise
actors from different spheres around a common vision.
Conclusion

Rather than interpreting the establishment of regional links as the result of a strategy of soft power suggested by Nye, this paper has focused on the organisational and discursive logic of the art world. While acknowledging the crucial roles played by states and patrons, I argue that the art world’s complex organisational structure makes it difficult to control as an instrument for the promotion of international influence. Yet, within the art world the desire of various actors, to gain prestige creates a hierarchy of status. On a global scale, this leads to a hierarchised geography dominated by a small number of art centres responsible for initiating movements and establishing norms. Although this hierarchy is subjectively constructed, it has a tangible impact on the mobility of professionals and the flow of the art market. Therefore, the way in which actors frame this hierarchy is a reflection of the relative rise or decline of a city as an art centre, and concomitantly, this framing plays a performative role in this construction.

In response to the growth of art markets in countries such as Brazil, China, and the UAE, agents of globalisation, notably the international auction houses, have elaborated new spatial frames emphasising the emergence of new art regions like Latin America, Asia and the Middle East. This has presented an opportunity for cities to be framed as the hubs of these new artistic regions. Dubai and Istanbul, for example, are cities that have both been framed as the most favourable potential entry points for the Middle Eastern art market. Dubai is presented as the more competitive of the two from the perspective of trade largely due to its lower taxation rates, better custom systems, and ties to the Arab emirates. In order to position itself within this market context, art galleries argue that some forms of regional cultural proximity exist. While the adoption of a regional frame is primarily an easy way to internationalise, art galleries have subsequently become key actors in framing the Middle East as an emerging regional art market. At the same time, Istanbul utilises its comparatively older institutional framework to its advantage, including the Istanbul Biennial, which has continued to capably build a worldwide reputation since its creation.

Framing of Istanbul as an art centre relies on the ability of actors to challenge the hegemony of main centres such as New York and London. Gramsci’s cultural hegemony theory appears as a mirror to Nye’s soft power theory. Like Nye, Gramsci argued that cultural institutions could be used as an instrument to support a country’s influence. However, while the discourse of soft power may be utilised by state actors to frame the actions of the media or art world, as a consequence of their actions actors are conversely able to appropriate the discourse of hegemony in an emancipatory way. Nevertheless, the framing of Istanbul as a regional art center is paradoxical: It relies simultaneously on the mobilisation of an anti-imperialist discourse and on a hierarchical view of the international art world.
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NOTES


3. The board of Istanbul Modern, for example, comprises local and national political figures such as Istanbul Mayor, Kadir Topbaş, and AKP Deputy and former Minister of European Affairs, Egemen Bağış.

4. Furthermore, Suzan Sabancı was also later appointed to the board of Dubai-based magazine, Canvas, a bi-monthly publication promoting Middle Eastern arts and culture alongside the billionaire Rahmi Koç’s former wife, Çiğdem Simavi, also a significant figure in the Istanbul art world.


6. Quemin (2006) analysed the origins of artists and other actors listed in rankings. Quemin concluded that the concentration of actors legitimised through the listings in Western Europe and North America revealed a centre-periphery logic. Similarly, Plattner’s (1998) analysis of the Saint-Louis art world suggests a comparable centre-periphery logic to the dominance of the New York art world over local artists and curators.

7. Isabelle de la Bruyère director of Christie’s Middle East, quoted in Chaudary (April 13, 2012).

8. The creation of Canvas magazine in 2004, offers an example of the transnational promotion of art produced across the region.

9. Based on information collected from Sotheby’s and Christie’s websites in 2014.


11. Interview held in Turkish in Istanbul, April 2014.


13. Although not all remain in existence, examples include: ARTIST, art Beat, Art Bosphorus, Contemporary Istanbul and Artinternational.


15. Based on data collected from art fair websites in 2014.

16. The company behind Artinternational is based in London and has been responsible for organising many art fairs globally including, for example, Art Hong Kong, now owned by Art Basel, and the India Art fair, New Delhi. The management team comprises individuals drawn from the UK, Greece, France, and Dubai.

17. Interview held in English in Istanbul, December 4, 2013.

18. Leila Heller is a New York based gallery specialising in the art of the Middle East.


21. Interview held in Turkish in Istanbul, April 2014.

22. Interview held in English in Istanbul, December 2013.

23. Interview held in Turkish in Istanbul, December 12, 2013.

24. For example, Dirimart represents Ghada Amer from Egypt and Shirin Neshat from Iran; Art Sümer represents Basim Magdy from Egypt; Galerist represents Yousef Nabil from Egypt; and Galeri Zilberman represents Walid Siti from Iraq.


27. The owner of Galeri Zilberman has established links with the Middle East, for example, by participating in Art Beirut, in Abu Dhabi Art, and by exhibiting artists from the region. The profiles of his artists also mention being featured at multiple exhibitions in the Middle East as well as their presence in Middle Eastern collections.


29. Interview held in Turkish in Istanbul, 12 December 2013.

30. Following historical biennials, such as the Venice Biennial initiated in 1895 and the Sao Paolo Biennial created in 1951, many cities started to develop their own biennial from the 1980s, like Havana in 1984, Dakar in 1992, and Shanghai, in 1996.

31. Kortun enjoys worldwide recognition. He is the only Turkish figure listed in Art Review as one of the 100 most influential people in the international art world. He was appointed curator of the 3rd Istanbul Biennial in 1993. He directed the project founding a private museum by Elgiz in Istanbul and curated the UAE pavilion at the Venice Biennial in 2011.

32. Interview held in English in Istanbul, December 14, 2012.

33. Interview held in English in Istanbul, December 14, 2012.

34. Interview held in English in Istanbul, April 14, 2012.

35. Ibid.

36. Ibid.

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ABSTRACTS

In the last ten years, ties between the art worlds of Istanbul and its surrounding region have been increased. These developments would initially appear to be a component of so-called “Turkish soft power”, indicating the rise of Turkey’s regional influence. Through the analysis of organisational dynamics in the case study of Istanbul, this paper critically questions the representation of the arts sector as an instrument of state or corporate interests. Rather than being dependent on hard factors alone, the geography of the global art market results from the social construction of space. This paper analyses discourses on the Middle East as an emerging art market and on the rise of new cities as regional art centres as the production of cognitive frames. Local art actors have emphasised the cultural proximity of Turkey to the region and the mutually shared interest of challenging Western hegemony in the international art world. Thereby, they have framed Istanbul as an emerging regional art centre.

INDEX

Keywords: Istanbul, Art Market, Art centre, Place-Framing, Middle Eastern art scene

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An illusionary power of seduction?
An assessment of Turkey’s cultural power in the Arab world in light of its
audio-visual presence in the region

Jana Jabbour

Introduction

1 “My country is your faithful ally and friend” (Erdoğan Mar. 30, 2003). This statement
made by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and addressed to Arab people in March
2003 marks a turning point in the history of Turkish-Arab relations. In fact, since the
establishment of the Turkish Republic by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in October 1923,
Turkey’s foreign policy and strategic thinking were best illustrated by the motto “The
Turk has no friend but the Turk.” Ankara saw the Middle East region, in particular,
more as a sphere of risk than a sphere of opportunity. The Turks’ wariness and mistrust
of the Arabs, who were seen as the “enemies of the interior”¹ and were accused of
accelerating the fall of the Ottoman Empire, coupled with the multiplication of
territorial disputes with Arab states², provoked a detachment and a separation of
Turkey from the Middle East. In this sense, the securitization of the Middle East region
for much of the 20th century meant that the interaction between Turkey and the Arabs
was either non-existent or, when existent, entirely based on hard power or the threat
of the use of military force³. The conflicting character of the relations between Arab
countries and Turkey was reinforced, in the beginning of the 20th century, by the rise of
Arab nationalism, which conceived the Ottoman Empire as an oppressive entity, and its
heir – the Turkish republic – as alienated from the West⁴.

2 However, since the arrival of the Justice and Development Party [Adalet ve Kalkınma
Partisi, AKP] to power in 2002, Turkey’s foreign policy and strategic thinking have
undergone a major paradigm shift (Sözen 2010). Given its Islamist roots, the AKP was
able to bring Turkey closer to its Muslim identity and Ottoman past and to restore and
re-establish links with the Arab and Muslim neighbourhood. Therefore, as of 2002, and
until the outbreak of the Arab revolutions, Turkey’s public discourse and conduct of
foreign policy have reflected a de-securitization of the Middle East/Arab region and a
push away from hard power. In fact, in the 2000s, and for the first time since the
The establishment of the Turkish Republic, Turkey has had a strong presence in the Middle East, not through its hard power and military capabilities, nor through its confrontational attitude and coercive capacity, but rather through its cultural exports to the region. Certainly, the Syrian crisis and the recent renewal of armed conflict between the PKK and the Turkish army have marked a reversal of this trend and a return to the use of hard power. Nevertheless, this evolution does not invalidate the cultural offensive of Turkey in the Arab world.

Based on Turkey’s newly acquired cultural attractiveness in the Middle East, several scholars and journalists published works discussing the so-called “soft power” in Turkish foreign policy vis-à-vis the Arab world. Titles such as Soft Power in Turkish Foreign Policy: New Instruments and Challenges (Öner 2013), Soft Power and Public Diplomacy in Turkey (Kalm 2011), Challenges to Turkey’s Soft Power in the Middle East (Altunışık 2011), or Turkey’s soft power on the rise despite challenges (Akarçeşme Apr. 2, 2013) have proliferated. However, these works have all taken the concept of “soft power” for granted and have failed to question its relevance. In fact, the concept of “soft power,” as defined by Joseph Nye, is very broad and can cover various realities and distinct phenomena. If “soft power” is the “ability to get what you want through attraction rather than through coercion or payments” (Nye, 2005: 5), its mechanisms and vectors remain unclear and ill-defined. In particular, Joseph Nye does not properly address the following questions: Who produces “soft power”? For which purpose? Through which particular instruments and strategies? Is “soft power” effective everywhere and anytime or does its efficiency depend on the local context in which it is projected?

In this article, I will not disqualify the concept of soft power, but I will rather attempt to determine and identify its “origins” and vectors through the particular case study of Turkey’s “soft power” in the Middle East region. I consider “soft power” to be the ability of an actor to seduce and attract others and thereby “win hearts and minds”. I argue that Turkey’s “soft power” in the Arab world lies mainly in Turkey’s media and audio-visual presence in the Middle East. Such “soft power” is projected by two different types of actors: the Turkish government on the one hand, and non-governmental actors on the other hand – namely media production companies acting as private “cultural entrepreneurs”. The article is based on more than 50 interviews conducted with state and non-state actors (businessmen, civil society, production companies) in Turkey and the Middle East (Egypt, Kurdistan Regional Government, Lebanon, Qatar, and UAE) between 2011 and 2014.

In the first part of our analysis, I examine the conceptual framework and theoretical foundations of Turkey’s paradigm shift with regard to the Middle East. In particular, I explore the so-called “Davutoğlu doctrine” of “strategic depth” [stratjik derinlik] and its impact in terms of paving the way for Turkey’s re-engagement with its Arab neighbours.

In the second part, I discuss the vectors of Turkish “soft power” in the Middle East and the actors involved in the projection of such power. I examine the export, by Turkish media producers, of soap operas [diziler] to the region; by analysing their content and representations, we attempt to interpret the message that these popular culture products convey to the Arab public. I then turn to the projection of “soft power” by the Turkish government and focus on the launching of the Arabic-language TV channel – TRT Al Arabiya. I also analyse the connections and interaction between the Turkish government and private actors in terms of projecting “cultural power” in the region.
In the third part, I assess the impact of Turkey’s “soft power” in the Middle East. I discuss the limitations of Turkey’s cultural power both in terms of theoretical and analytical relevance and practical and contextual efficacy. I argue that while the cultural actions of the Turkish government and private entrepreneurs might have rendered Turkey “popular” for the Arab masses, they have nevertheless produced limited outcomes in terms of increasing Turkey’s general power capacity in the region. Moreover, I examine the impact of the so-called “Arab Spring” on Turkey’s use of soft power in the region: I show that with the outbreak of the Arab uprisings, and particularly with the beginning of the Syrian revolution, Turkey has been compelled to move away from soft power and to embrace hard power in the conduct of its foreign policy vis-à-vis the Middle East.

I. “Strategic Depth” and the “Davutoğlu Doctrine”: a reengagement with the Arab world

Turkey’s rapprochement with the Middle East must mainly be understood in light of the so-called “Davutoğlu Doctrine” (Grigoriadis 2010). Currently serving as Prime Minister (2014–), and formerly nominated Erdoğan’s foreign affairs advisor (2003–2009) and later Turkey’s minister of foreign affairs (2009–2014), Ahmet Davutoğlu has had an important influence on the design of Turkey’s foreign policy, as confirmed by several Turkish policymakers whom I interviewed in Ankara. When the AKP seized power in November 2002, it was a newly-born party (created in 2001) with little or no experience in terms of foreign affairs. The party therefore looked for experts of international relations to help design the country’s foreign policy. Given that Ahmet Davutoğlu was known to be an intellectual with a conservative background whose affinities coincide with those of the AKP, he was nominated Prime Minister Erdoğan’s advisor and was invited to put into practice a vision that he had formulated in 2001.

In 2001, Ahmet Davutoğlu, who was at that time professor of International Relations at Boğaziçi University, published a book titled Strategik Derinlik: Türkiye’nin Uluslararası Konumu (Strategic Depth: Turkey’s International Position), in which he articulated a new strategic vision for Turkey (Davutoğlu 2001). In this seminal work, Davutoğlu assesses the strengths and weaknesses of Turkey in the 21st century and suggests ways by which Turkey could become a global power.

Davutoğlu’s main argument is straightforward: In the post-Cold war order, a country’s significance and power on the world stage lies on its “strategic depth” (Jabbour 2011). For a country to be a “central state” [merkez ilke] and a leading actor in international relations, it must possess “geographical depth” – meaning an exceptional geopolitical location – and “historical depth”, meaning a rich cultural and historical background (Davutoğlu 2001: 87). Considering the Turkish case, Davutoğlu asserts that his country is uniquely endowed to be a central state. In fact, with regard to geographical depth, Turkey is strategically positioned at the confluence of East and West, at the intersection of the Middle East, the Balkans, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Europe. Its exceptional location on the Rimland belt grants it the natural ability to influence the regional and international geopolitical balances. With regard to historical depth, Turkey has a rich historical and cultural legacy as heir to the Ottoman Empire. Therefore, based on the cultural and historical ties it has with the former Ottoman territories, Turkey must be
able to increase its influence and power in neighbouring regions. In the words of Davutoğlu:

Turkey enjoys multiple regional identities and thus has the capability as well as the responsibility to follow an integrated and multidimensional foreign policy. The unique combination of our history and geography brings with it a sense of responsibility. To contribute actively towards conflict resolution and international peace and security in all these areas is a call of duty arising from the depths of a multidimensional history of Turkey (ibid.: 142).

Yet, while all neighbouring regions are seen as important, Davutoğlu considers the Middle East to be of utmost significance and value for Turkey. Reviving the geopolitical theories developed by Halford Mackinder and Nicholas Spykman, Davutoğlu asserts that the Middle East region is located in the heart of Eurasia, and is therefore “key to strategic balances” (ibid.: 357). Whoever is able to control this area will be able to greatly influence regional and international power configurations (ibid.: 146). Therefore, according to the professor-turned-politician, Turkey should increase its influence in the Middle East so as to create a regional “hinterland,” necessary for Ankara’s rise in the international arena (ibid.: 155).

After stating the importance of the Middle East, Davutoğlu suggests means to increase Turkey’s power in this region. The author insists that Turks must first “overcome psychological barriers” and reconcile with their Muslim identity and their Ottoman past, so that they can genuinely use Turkey’s historical and identity ties with the Arabs in order to facilitate interaction with the Middle East and therefore increase Ankara’s regional leverage. While the language he uses is pragmatic and not ideological, his book nevertheless includes a “neo-Ottoman” tone: Neo-Ottomanism is not understood here in its “hard version” – as a willingness to restore the Ottoman Empire in its geographical and territorial extension (which would mean eliminating borders) – but is rather understood in its “soft version,” as an inclination to restore the cultural influence and prestige of Turkey in the territories that were once part of the Ottoman Empire (Taspinar 2008). In fact, in order to help Turkey rise to the status of regional power, Davutoğlu emphasizes the necessity of making his country culturally attractive and of developing horizontal relations between the Turkish society and Arab societies (Davutoğlu 2001: 615). Hence, the idea of “soft power” – as conceptualized by Joseph Nye – is clearly incorporated in Davutoğlu’s thinking. However, the term “soft power” is not used by Davutoğlu, nor does he specify what instruments and tools should be used to make Turkey culturally attractive in the region. His thought therefore remains theoretical and does not provide a concrete blueprint for action.

When Ahmet Davutoğlu was appointed advisor to Prime Minister Erdoğan in 2003, he became one of the few intellectuals – after Zbigniew Brzezinski, Henry Kissinger and Alvaro García Linera – to be nominated to a state position and to be offered the opportunity to put his theory into practice. Hence, since 2003 the conceptual framework he developed has structured and guided Turkey’s diplomatic action in the regional and international arenas. In particular, a new policy of rapprochement with the Middle East has been set in motion, with a constant use of “soft power” instruments.

In fact, throughout the 2000s, Turkey has been culturally present in the Middle East, particularly through popular culture and audio-visual products. It is to the examination of these instruments that we now turn.
II. A complex and multidimensional “seduction enterprise”: the projection of Turkey’s cultural power in the region by the AKP government and private actors

Turkey’s cultural influence in the Arab world is a direct consequence of the actions and initiatives of two types of actors: on the one hand, the export by private Turkish companies of TV series (soap operas) to the Middle East, and on the other hand, the launching by the Turkish government of a TV channel dedicated to the Arab audience: TRT Al Arabiya.

Popular culture and soap operas as means to win the hearts and minds of the Arab masses: the projection of cultural power by private Turkish entrepreneurs.

Turkey’s “soft power” in the region is mostly based on popular culture and mass entertainment. Indeed, Turkey’s cultural prestige and attractiveness in the Middle East are closely associated with the export of soap operas that have swept the region and turned into a social phenomenon worthy of academic and scholarly attention.

While soap operas are popular in every part of the world, they are particularly significant in the context of the Arab world, where they constitute an inherent and essential part of social life (Gonzales-Quijano 2011: 116). In fact, soap operas, or musalsalat in Arabic, are widely consumed in the Middle East: They are watched collectively with family and friends or individually; they are broadcasted on a “small screen” in private houses or on a big screen in public spaces like coffee shops; and they are seen during daytime or night-time, and even after iftar (the meal that breaks the fast) in the holy month of Ramadan. Traditionally, as of the 1960s, the Arab drama scene has been dominated by Egyptian musalsalat, generally displaying love-and-hate stories and socially-inspired comedies (with the famous Egyptian actor Adel Imam for example) or offering a biographical account of historical figures (for instance the life of President Gamal Abdelnasser, of King Faruk, and of the artists Asmahan and Oum Kalthoum). These soap operas, which were all in Egyptian dialect, gained wide popularity across the Middle East and contributed to Egypt’s regional hegemony. In the 1990s, however, Syria developed its own capacity to produce soap operas and succeeded in competing with, and even dethroning, Egyptian musalsalat. Here also, Syrian soap operas – exported to the Arab world in Syrian dialect – have allowed the country to gain visibility in the Middle East, and to increase its regional clout and prestige. Hence, given the pervasiveness of TV series in the Arab world and the potential that they offer in terms of “soft power,” whoever is able to dominate the soap opera industry and to export its own musalsalat to the region can, at least to a certain extent, spread its worldview, values, and ideas to Arab populations, and build cultural prestige in the region.

In the 2000s Turkey followed the trend set by Egypt and Syria and started to export soap operas to the Middle East. From the outset, it is important to state two facts. First, there was a demand in the Arab world for new media products and for musalsalat different from those produced by Egypt and Syria. Therefore, Turkish soap operas were welcomed. Second, the production and export of the Turkish series to the region is the
work of private companies that are not linked to official circles in Ankara. These actors, whom we can call “cultural entrepreneurs,” produced the TV series essentially for a local Turkish public with the sole objective of doing business and making profit; however, as the first series were exported to the Arab world and became popular in this region, they have contributed to Turkey’s “soft power,” something that the cultural entrepreneurs were neither planning nor expecting. And while the Turkish government did not provide any public support for these cultural entrepreneurs, it nevertheless capitalized on the success of these series to increase Ankara’s prestige in the Arab street.

Fig. 1

Promotional material showing protagonists Mehmet/Muhannad and Gümüş/Nour from Gümüş soap opera

Three different categories of Turkish soap operas are exported to the Middle East (Gonzales Quijano 2011): romances, historical dramas, and political thrillers. Each of these categories promote a certain image or “brand” of Turkey. The first “conquest” of the Middle East by Turkish soap operas started in 2008 with the export of the romantic soap opera Gümüş (Silver) which, with its 85 million Arab viewers, represented a genuine success story in the Middle East (Fig. 1). While the series was also popular in other regions such as the Balkans and Central Europe, it recorded its biggest audience ratings in the Arab world (Rotivel 2011). Gümüş follows the story of the wealthy, handsome gentleman Mehmet (played by Kıvanç Tatlıtuğ) who is forced by his grandfather to marry his cousin Gümüş (played by Songül Öden), a young lady with a conservative background born and raised in a traditional village of Anatolia. Beyond the love story that eventually unfolds between Gümüş and Mehmet, mesmerizing the Arab public, the series became attractive in the region as it portrayed Turkey as a country where people have a modern yet Muslim-compatible lifestyle: The protagonists drink alcohol, dance in nightclubs, and kiss in public, yet they often pray, and they respect the patriarchal model of their family by listening to the elders’ and living with their parents. Moreover, throughout the series, the viewers witness the emancipation of the female character Gümüş. With the strong support of her husband Mehmet, Gümüş becomes a successful businesswoman and a renowned fashion designer; she therefore personifies the ideal of a Muslim lady who perfectly succeeds in both business duties and household responsibilities.
In Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Morocco, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, the series created a phenomenon of Gümüş-mania (Figs. 2, 4). Ladies rushed to buy T-shirts and posters with the photo of their favourite character; newborn babies were named after the protagonists; some divorces were recorded due to the fact that Arab wives were no longer content with their husbands and demanded that the latters be as romantic as “Mehmet” (Buccianti 2010). While the series was first aired on the Saudi satellite channel MBC in the daytime slot (2 pm), its high audience ratings pushed the managers of MBC to broadcast it in evening prime time (9.30 pm) (Buccianti 2010).

Being a success story in the Arab world, the series Gümüş paved the way for the export of other popular Turkish romantic soap operas like Aşk ve Ceza (Love and Punishment), Öyle Bir Geçer Zaman Ki (Time goes by), Aşk-ı Memnu (Forbidden Love), Asi, and Fatmagül’in Suçu Ne? (What is Fatmagül’s fault?), all of which have reached high audience ratings in the region. Our interviews in Turkey show that Turkish producers originally created their series exclusively for a local Turkish audience. However, the popularity that Gümüş acquired in the Arab world made them realize the potential and opportunities offered by the Middle East market. Motivated by economic and financial gains, they have, since then, attempted to export their series to the Arab world.

The plots of the romantic soap operas exported to the Arab market are often identical: Almost all the stories revolve around a conservative family who moves from Anatolia to engage in business in Istanbul, and who succeeds in business without compromising religious values and Muslim traditions. The importance and significance of these soap operas in terms of cultural power and social attractiveness lies in the fact that they promote an image of Turkey as an ideal society where Islam coexists with modernity, where men and women are equal, and where capitalism and consumerism do not erode social and religious values. This is precisely the ideal-type of society that Muslims and
Arabs are longing for, but which they cannot find in their own countries. In this sense, Turkish romantic soap operas act as means to escape their grim reality; they offer them the possibility to imagine themselves living in a better world. In other words, Turkish diziler act like a mirror that reflects what a majority of Arab viewers dreams of: embracing modernity without compromising their religious values and social traditions. Therefore, by conveying images and representations that appeal to the Arab public, Turkish romantic soaps have contributed to “winning hearts and minds” and making Turkey attractive in the imaginary of Arab viewers.

Fig. 3

Promotional material for Muhteşem Yüzyıl presenting the main cast of the series

The second category of Turkish soap operas are the historical series, mostly exemplified by Muhteşem Yüzyıl (Magnificent Century), a hit series in the Middle East (Fig. 3). Produced by the company Tims Production, the series is based on the life of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent, the longest reigning Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, and his wife Hürrem. The soap opera glorifies the Ottoman past and revives Turkish history in the minds of Turks and Arabs. What is of major importance in our analysis is the political message indirectly conveyed to the Arab and Muslim audience through this soap opera: An in-depth analysis of the script shows that Muhteşem Yüzyıl portrays the Ottoman Empire – and by inference Turkey – as a legitimate power and a perfect representative of Arabs and Muslims worldwide. Throughout the series, we note a recurrence of the terms “Islam,” “Muslim,” and “Jihad” hundreds of times, and a repetition of several statements that convey the message that the past rulers of this country (the Sultan-Caliphs) ruled “with the Koran and the Sharia” and “protected Islam and Muslims against infidels and heretics”\textsuperscript{11}. For instance, we note statements like: “I want to combat for the cause of Allah, for it is a sacred duty”; “Our mission is to spread the light of Islam; May Allah be with us”\textsuperscript{12}. Furthermore, the series implicitly reminds the Middle Eastern populations of their historical ties with Turkey. For instance, we find significant statements by Suleiman the Magnificent like: “I am the Sultan of Anatolia, Diyarbakır, Kurdistan, Azerbaijan, Damascus, Aleppo, Egypt, Mecca, Jerusalem, and Yemen. I am the Sultan of Arab territories which my ancestors had
conquered”; “I rule over the Safavids, the Mameluks of Egypt, the Abbasids, Syria, Palestine, Hijaz, and the Silk Road”

Hence, by emphasizing the historical ties between Turks and Arabs under the Ottoman Empire, and by portraying Turkey as heir to the Caliphate, an institution that defended Muslims and spread the word of Islam, Muhteşem Yüzyıl attempts to appeal to Muslims in the Arab world, who have long suffered from a lack of credible leadership. As to Arab Christian viewers who follow this series, our interviews and research show that Muhteşem Yüzyıl attracts them for a variety of reasons: While some of the Christian viewers watch the series because they are curious about history – especially the “Golden era” of Sultan Süleyman – the majority of them follows the musalsal because they are attracted by the action and the plot in the series (the love intrigues in the Harem), the costumes and accessories that the characters wear, the theme songs, as well as the beauty of the actors and actresses, in particular Meryem Uzerli playing the role of Hürrem (Fig. 5). Therefore, everybody seems to like the series, albeit for different reasons. What’s more, the series appealed not only to the Arab populations, but also to the Kurds of Syria and Iraq. In fact, during our visit to Erbil, we noticed a real interest for Muhteşem Yüzyıl (and all the Turkish soap operas in general): In the streets of Erbil, several advertisements were promoting the next episode of the series, shops were selling accessories like the ones used by the characters, and taxi drivers often spoke with enthusiasm about the beauty of “Sultana Hürrem”.
Here again, it is interesting to note that the production of historical series was not politically motivated, but only based on economic and financial incentives. In an interview we made with Timur Savcı, producer of Muhteşem Yüzyıl, he asserted that his “main objective when producing this series was to sell a story and a product which everybody, in Turkey and in the neighbouring regions, would relate to.”

According to Savcı, creating a series based on the life of Suleiman the Magnificent and the history of the Ottoman Empire was a rational choice: Turks would be attracted by the rediscovery of their past; Muslim and Turkmen populations in the Arab world, Central Asia, and the Balkans would identify with the story as they share the same identity, history, and values of Turkey, while other people would at least be attracted by the setting, the sound and light effects, and the expensive costumes and accessories (a budget of 70 million dollars).
Finally, the third category of soap operas exported to the Middle East are the political thriller series exemplified by *Kurtlar Vadisi* (Valley of the Wolves). Produced by the company PanaFilm, aired in Turkey in 2007 and exported to the Arab world in 2008, this series promotes an image of Turkey as a powerful country able to confront the West. The series revolves around the Turkish intelligence agent Polat Alemdar (played by Necati Şaşmaz) whose mission is to defend Iraqis against American occupation (Fig. 6). The series is built around a Manichean vision of the world in which Americans are portrayed as evil, “the bad guys”, “the barbarians”, while the Turkish characters are presented as “the good guys,” the “benevolent forces”, and the big brothers and godfathers of an oppressed Arab and Muslim population. One statement in the script is particularly emblematic: In a scene where Polat Alemdar meets an Israeli agent and an American soldier, he says: “All those who had ruled this region in the past oppressed local populations, except our ancestors. Our ancestors taught us to fight against injustice, colonization, and imperialism”\(^{16}\). The message conveyed, whether intentionally or unintentionally, is the following: Turkey is a nation who has the political courage to challenge Western domination and to stand up for moral values.

Because of the success of this series in the Arab world, the company PanaFilm produced a movie titled *Kurtlar Vadisi Filistin* (Valley of the Wolves, Palestine). The story is inspired by the Mavi Marmara Flotilla episode.\(^{17}\) It revolves around a group of Turks who send a humanitarian convoy to Gaza and attempt to provide assistance for the Palestinian population. The language used in the movie is telling: For example, in one scene, when an Israeli soldier asks the Turkish character why he came to Israel, the latter answers: “I did not come to Israel, I came to Palestine” (Fig. 7). In another scene, an Israeli agent tells the Turkish character: “You know you won’t make it out from our Promised Land”, to which the latter answers “I don’t know what part of this land has been promised to you, but I promise you six feet under” (Figs. 8, 9). The date of the series’ release is not trivial: Coming out in 2010, the movie resonated with Ankara’s fiery rhetoric against Israel at that time and the degradation of its relations with Tel
Aviv. It provided support for Erdoğan’s denunciation of Israeli killings during the Davos meetings of March 2009, and to Turkey’s harsh stance regarding the Israeli assault on the Mavi Marmara ship. By portraying Turkey as the champion of the Palestinian cause, the movie seduced the Arab audience and pushed it to perceive Turkey as a good leader at the regional and international level, and as a legitimate and credible representative of the Arab world.

Fig. 7

![Scene from Kurtlar vadisi where a Turkish intelligence agent is talking with an Israeli soldier](image)

Scene from Kurtlar vadisi where a Turkish intelligence agent is talking with an Israeli soldier

Fig. 8

![Screen capture showing the main character Polat Alemdar adopting a defiant language when addressing to an Israeli protagonist](image)

SCREEN CAPTURE SHOWING THE MAIN CHARACTER POLAT ALEMDAR ADOPTING A DEFIANT LANGUAGE WHEN ADDRESSING TO AN ISRAELI PROTAGONIST
Beyond the representations and the images that Turkish soap operas convey and that appeal to Arab populations, the success of the diziler is due to other factors, in particular their quality of production on the one hand and the structure and nature of the Arab export market on the other hand. In terms of production, the Turkish soap opera industry is highly developed compared to its Arab counterpart. Benefitting from a good economic situation in their country, production companies are dedicating huge budgets to create high-standard series that can compete with international and American hit series. The quality of the image and sound, the professional performance and the charisma of the actors, the realistic scenarios, the attractiveness of the music and theme song, and the beauty of the picturesque shots (at the Bosphorus, in luxurious villas), have all contributed to the popular appeal of these series. Moreover, the format used made the series competitive: The majority of the diziler are made up of two to four seasons, each composed of thirty 90-minute episodes. This makes them price-competitive, as broadcasters and TV channels buy long episodes that can fill up lengthy airing time. Hence, the success of Turkish soap operas lies in part in their production strategies.

Additionally, it is the export strategies that account for their popularity in the Arab world. In fact, Turkish diziler are dubbed not in classical Arabic but in colloquial Arabic, the language that people use in their daily life. Through the use of dialects with which people can connect, these series easily penetrate the minds of the Arab public and allow the viewers to identify with the characters and accept the message that is indirectly conveyed in the scenario. The dialect, in this sense, creates a sense of proximity between the Arab viewer and the soap opera on the one hand, and between Turkish and Arab societies on the other hand. Dubbing was made in Syrian dialect rather than Egyptian dialect. In our opinion, this choice might have been driven by two factors. The first relates to market economics: Given that in the 2000s Syrian musalsat dethroned their Egyptian counterparts and became more popular, it was logical and rational that the Turkish series be dubbed in this dialect to ensure their success. The second reason may be political: When the first Turkish soap opera, Gümüş, was aired on
Arab TV channels in 2008, Syria and Turkey enjoyed excellent diplomatic, economic and social relations. Erdoğan and Bashar al-Assad were close friends; Ankara and Damascus signed a free trade agreement and were considering the lift of visas; and diplomatic visits were very frequent between the two countries. The soap opera industry has therefore benefitted from the Turkish-Syrian honeymoon. It is indeed highly probable that the dubbing in Syrian dialect was made possible by the political rapprochement between Damascus and Ankara. Our research shows, in fact, that all Turkish diziler were translated into Arabic in Damascus by three Syrian production companies – Sama Art Production, Firdaws Art Production, and ABC Damascus – and were dubbed by Syrian actors. Since the beginning of the Syrian uprising and the ensuing degradation of relations between Bashar al-Assad and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Syria has suspended its dubbing work of Turkish soap operas and has stopped airing them, thus proving that there is a political dimension to the dubbing. These series are now being dubbed in Dubai by Emirati companies.

Fig. 10

A Lebanese magazine article talking about a night organized in Beirut on the theme of Muhteşem Yüzyıl

In addition to dubbing, we also note that the names of the characters and the title of the soap operas have been adapted to the Arab context. In Gümüş, for example, the name of the main character “Mehmet” becomes “Muhanad” in the Arabic-dubbed version of the series; similarly, “Gümüş” becomes “Nour”, a common female Arabic name. Very amusingly, the title of the series Muhteşem Yüzyıl, which literally means “Magnificent Century,” was translated in Arabic into a very different name: “Harim el-Sultan,” which means “The Sultan’s Harem” (Fig. 10). In fact, the expression “Sultan’s Harem” speaks to the imaginary of Arab viewers for whom the harem is a subject of phantasms and a symbol of an exotic world in which all desires are fulfilled. Therefore, the title in itself made the series very appealing for the Arab public.

The success of Turkish soap operas in the Middle East is not only based on their dubbing language and their adaptation to the Arab context, but also on the nature and structure of the Arab drama industry. While Arab soap operas display love stories but avoid touching upon “sensitive” topics such as premarital sex, abortion, and women emancipation, Turkish soap operas deal with these “real” issues that are seen by the Arab public as relevant, attractive, and linked to reality. In terms of format, Arab soap operas are usually produced with very low budgets, which impacts negatively on their quality (image and sound, actors’ performance, marketing strategies, etc.). These shortcomings of the Arab media have therefore left a room for the Turkish diziler to take hold in Middle East societies.
Our analysis has thus far shown that the projection of “soft power” through Turkish soap operas is the result of non-governmental actors. It is important here to consider the interaction between these actors and the Turkish government, and to study the role, if any, played by the latter. Our field research and interviews with Turkish producers show clearly that production companies did not receive any kind of material or moral support from political actors and governmental circles. The producer of Muhteşem Yüzyıl, Timur Savcı, even told us that when his production team asked for authorization to shoot in Topkapı palace, the government only granted them permission for a few days, and the team later had to create its own palace-like setting.

However, we notice that while the government did not contribute to the production of Turkish soap operas, it nevertheless attempted to “surf” on their popularity and success in order to increase Ankara’s influence and prestige in the region and to build a regional power. Two anecdotes provide concrete illustrations. In an interview with a diplomat in Ankara we were told that during a visit to the United Arab Emirates in 2010, President Abdullah Gül, in order to “break the ice” with the Gulf rulers, started his official meeting by talking about the latest episode of the series Fatmagül’in Suçu Ne (“Fatma” in the Arabic-dubbed version), which was very popular in the Gulf and was watched even by the royal family! Another anecdote relates to the series Muhteşem Yüzyıl: In late 2012, Erdoğan called for prosecutors to ban this soap opera, accusing it of distorting historical facts. In particular, the Prime minister claimed that the series misrepresented Suleiman the Magnificent by portraying him as an emotional man who spent more time in the harem than in conquests. The series was in fact taken off TV channels and from Turkish airlines flights for over a week. During that time, we had the chance to meet with the consul of Turkey in Dubai Elif Çomoğlu Ülgen, who told us that

it is highly doubtful that this ban will continue, as Prime minister Erdoğan knows that the series is very popular all over the Arab world; therefore, he will soon put it back on the screens, as it serves our soft power in the region.

Indeed, all claims against Muhteşem Yüzyıl were quickly dismissed, and the series was broadcasted again. This clearly shows that even when the Turkish government has negative views of the soap operas, it has nevertheless capitalized on them to increase Ankara’s attractiveness in the Middle East, and has instrumentalised their popularity to consolidate its power in the region.

**TRT Al Arabiya: the Turkish government’s attempt to build a regional power through television.**

While the export of Turkish soap operas is the initiative of private cultural entrepreneurs, other media instruments have been designed by the government in order to better reach out to the Middle East. In particular, the launching by the Turkish government of an Arabic-language TV channel – TRT Al Arabiya – and the establishment of an Arabic branch of Anadolu Agency shows Ankara’s willingness to use the media as a means of cultural influence.

In April 2010, at a time in which soap operas were conquering “hearts and minds” in the Arab world, Prime Minister Erdoğan inaugurated TRT Al Arabiya in Istanbul. In his opening speech, Erdoğan stated:
TRT will be our common channel, the channel of all Turks and Arabs. It will bind us to each other. It will unite our hearts. It will serve to deepen our relationships, strengthen our brotherhood, and consolidate our union (TRT Al Arabiyya 2010).

He added:

Although we are talking different languages in this vast geography, we should not forget that we have one history, one culture and similar values. We have given a shape to history together. Be sure that we will give a shape to the future altogether. We are the members of a civilization that places high importance on neighborliness.

Hence, TRT in Arabic is clearly designed as an instrument of “soft power”. As is reflected in the Prime Minister’s speech, this channel is part of the AKP strategy to “win the hearts and minds” of the Arab public, therefore contributing to Turkey’s regional power. In fact, on its website, the channel indicates that its mission and goal is to create an “interaction between Turks and Arabs,” to “raise awareness about the values they have in common”, to “create a mutual understanding”, thus “strengthening cultural and historical links between these peoples”.

It is obvious that this channel is being used to promote a certain official discourse about Turkey. In fact, the news bulletins and the various talk shows and programs broadcasted on TRT Al Arabiyya adopt the governmental point of view and attempt to explain, justify, and legitimize Ankara’s political positions. For example, when corruption allegations against the government broke out and a political dispute erupted with the Cemaat of Fethullah Gülen, the news bulletin of TRT Al Arabiyya attempted to defend Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his government by portraying the Hizmet movement as a “secret and opaque organization”, by designating Gülen as “a manipulator,” and by offering the Arab public a simplistic narrative in which the AKP is depicted as victim and Gülen as the “bad guy”. Similarly, following the overthrowing of Mohammad Morsi in Egypt, TRT Al Arabiyya aired a talk show in which it clearly sided with the Muslim Brothers, denouncing a “coup,” praising the Turkish government for its courageous stance, and implicitly encouraging Turks and Arabs to embrace the Rabi’a Movement. Therefore, this channel serves Ankara’s public diplomacy: It attempts to communicate, spread, and justify Turkey’s political choices to an Arabic-speaking public.

However, one must note that no matter how novel and smart TRT Al Arabiyya might be as an instrument of “soft power”, its effects are limited. With limited experience and resources compared to other leading channels in the region such as Al Jazeera, Al Arabiyya, Al Hurra, or France 24 in Arabic, TRT struggles to win a share of the Arab media market and to compete with well-established channels. Moreover, our field research shows that TRT is not appealing to Arab viewers. In fact, for those in the Arab world who are “tuned” to news channels – that is to say the Arab elite and intellectuals – TRT is unappealing precisely because it is perceived as a state-owned channel that is unable to dissociate from the AKP and to adopt a more independent and neutral editorial line. In other words, for critical Arab viewers, TRT is perceived as the “spokesman of Ankara” and an instrument of the Turkish government, which undermines its credibility and limits its attractiveness. Thus, given these observations, it is difficult to say that TRT Al Arabiyya is a successful soft power tool.

In addition to TRT Al Arabiyya, the AKP government opened bureaus in Beirut and Cairo for the Turkish press agency Anadolu. These bureaus are in charge of conducting public diplomacy: They produce information in Arabic whose main purpose is to
promote a positive image of Turkey and legitimize the AKP government’s policy choices. During our interview with Hamze Tekin, the vice-president of the Anadolu Agency in Beirut, the latter stated the following:

Our role is to tell a grand narrative about Turkey. We need the Arab world to better understand Turkey and what our great government is doing. We also serve the other way round: We collect information about the Arab world for our government so that they can make informed decisions and policy choices. This instrument seems to be very efficient today. The majority of Arab news channels quote Anadolu as their source when mentioning news related to Turkey; they therefore unknowingly reproduce and spread the official discourse of Turkey. The reason why these channels use Anadolu is simply because it is a “shortcut” and the easiest way to obtain information about Turkey.

Having examined the various instruments of projection of Turkish soft power in the region, we now turn to a detailed and in-depth assessment of their efficiency.

III. An assessment of Turkey’s soft power in the Middle East: an illusionary power of seduction?

The difficulty and limitations of measuring the impact of soft power, especially in the Middle East region

When assessing Turkey’s “soft power” capacity, it is necessary to state one fact from the outset: “Soft power” is not an operational, easy-to-use concept. First, it is theoretically and practically difficult – not to say impossible – to measure the concrete impact of a soft power initiative. The political science community lacks quantitative instruments to gauge and determine the real consequences of soft power.

Second, soft power does not always translate into political capacity. A country’s culture and values might appeal to other nations without them accepting the political leadership of this country and or aligning with its political and diplomatic positions. In the case of the Middle East, we do not find examples and cases in which Turkey’s “soft power” has led Arab individuals to change their policy preferences because they are culturally attracted to Turkey. In other words, we do not find instances in which “soft power” has pushed an actor to do what he would otherwise not do, as in Robert Dahl’s definition of power. For instance, during the Arab revolutions, people in the Middle East did not align their political positions with the views of Ankara, even though they watched Turkish soap operas. In our interviews in Lebanon in particular, we noticed that addicts of Turkish diziler criticized Ankara’s policy vis-à-vis Syria, Lebanon’s neighbouring country. People affiliated to the “March 8 Coalition” – a political coalition known for its favourable views of Syria and its support for Bashar al-Assad – continued watching their favourite soap operas while at the same time siding with Bashar and denouncing the role of Ankara in the Syrian crisis. Hence, watching a soap opera did not lead viewers to change their political opinions or to defend Turkey’s interests.

In more general terms, it is possible to appreciate the soap operas and popular culture of a country while at the same time being politically opposed to this country. The best illustration of this is the fact that the Middle East region is amongst the biggest
consumers of American films and at the same time shows high levels of anti-Americanism.

Having discussed these analytical difficulties and theoretical limitations for assessing Turkey’s “soft power” in the region, we now turn to the examination of the practical consequences of Turkey’s “soft power” in the Middle East in the past decade.

Achievements and shortcomings of Turkey’s “soft power” in the region

The impact of Turkey’s “soft power” in the Middle East is subject to controversy. While some writers and observers consider that Turkey has won the hearts and minds of Arabs and Muslims through its “soft power” (Kalin 2011), others argue that Turkey’s “soft power” has produced limited positive effects (Altunışık 2011). We support the view that Turkey’s “soft power” has produced highly limited effects, and that its shortcomings outweigh its achievements.

On the positive side, field research and interviews we conducted in the region show clearly that “soft power” actions are self-reinforcing and create a “virtuous circle”: The more one watches a soap opera or TRT talk shows, the more one is willing to visit Turkey for tourism, enrol in a Yunus Emre Cultural Center to learn the Turkish language, or apply for scholarship to study in Istanbul. Therefore, it is clear that Turkey’s cultural presence in the Middle East has increased its “attractiveness” and has made Arab populations curious to discover or re-discover this country.

On the negative side, while Turkey’s strong cultural presence may have appealed to some Arab populations, it has also created negative reactions and feelings in certain segments of Arab societies. Consider the example of soap operas: Our interviews in Cairo, Beirut, Doha, and Erbil show that while soap operas are popular among the “masses” and the general public, they are nevertheless negatively perceived by the intelligentsia and the elite, who perceive them as a “cultural invasion” or as “cultural imperialism”. What is more, given the religious and cultural diversity of the Middle East populations, soap operas have failed to please everybody and to create a positive perception of Turkey in the minds of all Arab people. Muhteşem Yüzyıl, for instance, was subject to much criticism from certain conservative segments of the Sunni Arab community. In fact, some Sunnis whom we interviewed were shocked by the series and considered it a “scandal” to show Sultan Suleiman making love and supposedly drinking alcohol. As for the soap opera Gümüş, it drew much criticism from religious circles for whom Gümüş exhibited a liberal lifestyle that might “corrupt the Muslim conservative values of Arab youth”. A Saudi sheikh went as far as to offer a pilgrimage to the hajj for all those who boycott Turkish soap operas, and a Syrian sheikh ruled that carrying the picture of the Turkish character Mehmet on one’s T-shirt invalidates one’s prayers (Buccianti 2010).

In addition, it seems that the Arab revolutions have negatively affected Turkey’s “soft power” in the Middle East. First, the Arab Spring has dealt a blow to Turkey’s prestige in the region, pushing some segments of the Arab populations to have negative perceptions of Turkey. As a consequence, they have naturally shown a certain indifference to Turkish products in general and to Turkish soap operas in particular, and have even called for a boycott of these products as a means of protest against Turkey’s interventions in the internal affairs of the Arab world. For example, a number
of Egyptian artists and filmmakers have initiated a boycott of Turkish soap operas to protest “Turkish intervention in Egyptian affairs and the position of the Turkish government towards Egypt’s 30th of June Revolution” 30. Second, Erdoğan’s harsh rhetoric and tough stances against Bashar al-Assad in Syria and Abdel fattah al-Sissi in Egypt have had disastrous effects on Turkey’s “soft power,” by causing Arab governments to take official actions against Turkish cultural products: in fact, in Egypt, President al-Sissi imposed a ban on the broadcast of Turkish soap operas (Mc Arthur Aug. 22, 2013); in Syria, as stated above, the government not only stopped broadcasting Turkish series, but also demanded that Syrian companies suspend their dubbing work of Turkish soaps. Consequently, Arab viewers across the Middle East were not able to follow season 4 of Muhteşem Yüzyıl because the episodes were only dubbed until season 3. Third, as Syria has turned into a real quagmire and a political problem for the AKP government, there has been a shift in Turkey away from “soft power” into an open embrace of “hard power”, as exemplified by Turkey’s military intervention in Syria to evacuate the tomb of Suleiman Shah, its participation in the international coalition against Daesh, and its call for a NATO military operation in Syria. Hence, after wandering in the avenues of “soft power” in the 2000s, Turkey is now moving back to the traditional “hard power” approach.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the actors and instruments involved in Turkey’s projection of “soft power” in the Arab world and analysed the efficiency of “soft power” actions in the region. It has demonstrated that Turkish soap operas and TV channel TRT Al Arabiyya have had limited effects in terms of increasing Turkey’s general power capacity in the Middle East.

While Turkey’s “soft power” has had a limited political impact, it has nevertheless drawn Arab populations’ attention to this country, thus creating a debate around the Turkish “brand”. Therefore, we suggest that the real impact of soap operas and the TRT is the emergence of a debate in the Middle East around the so-called “Turkish model”. In fact, Turkey’s “soft power,” along with its economic dynamism and proactive diplomacy, have allowed the country to gain regional exposure and to become the subject of a heated debate around the “model” it represents. Here lies the true success of Turkey’s “soft power” projection: the cultural presence of Turkey in the Middle East has drawn the attention of Arab and Muslim populations to this country, and stirred their curiosity to understand the Turkish experience, or the so-called “Turkish model” (Altınışlık 2005: 45-63; Göksel 2012: 99-120). Whether this “model” is admired or criticized, whether it is applicable to the Middle East or not, is not in itself important for assessing the efficiency of Turkey’s “soft power”. Rather, what is important in our eyes is the fact that this “soft power” has succeeded in building a certain “brand” image of Turkey.

Nevertheless, it remains to be seen whether Turkey’s “soft power” and the debate it has generated around the “Turkish model” have allowed the country to acquire a “place in the Sun” in the Middle East or have simply won her “fifteen minutes of fame” (Ülgen 2010).
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NOTES

1. Interview with İlber Ortaylı, April 2014, Istanbul.
2. With Syria over the Hatay province, and with Iraq over Mossul.
3. For example, Turkey and Syria were at the brink of war in 1999 because Syria was hosting the Kurdish PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan.
4. Arab populations resented the policies of “Turkification” led by the Ottoman Empire during its period of decline. As early as 1913, the Arab National Congress held in Paris demanded reforms that would grant Arabs living under the Ottoman Empire more autonomy. The adopted resolutions included making Arabic “an official language in the Arab provinces... the employment of Arab troops in their home provinces except in time of war... stronger locally-controlled provincial government” (Khalidi 1980: 309-310).
5. He was born in the conservative city of Konya and taught International Relations at the University of Malaysia in the 1990s.
6. Alvaro Garcia Linera is the intellectual who conceptualized the politics of the left parties in Bolivia, and served as the theorist of Morales. He became vice-president of Bolivia.
7. Personified here by Mehmet’s mother and grandfather.
8. According to a survey by the Turkish think tank TESEV, 78% of Arabs watch at least one romantic Turkish soap opera. (Akgün, Perçinoloğlu and Senyücel Gündoğar 2010: 16).
10. Interviews with a dozen of young student graduates in Lebanon, Egypt and Iraqi Kurdistan.
11. The author of this article watched all the episodes of the series; the terms “Islam” and “jihad” are mentioned more than 700 times.
12. Season 2, episode 35.
13. Season 1, episode 48.
14. The authoritarian regimes of the Arab world are seen by their citizens as “subservient” to the West.
15. Interview in Istanbul (translated from Turkish by the author), April 2014.
16. Season 1, Episode 10.
17. In May 2010, Turkey took part in a maritime convoy to Gaza, known as the Gaza Freedom Flotilla, which carried humanitarian aid to the Palestinian population and attempted to break the Israeli siege on Gaza. Turkey participated in this Flotilla through the Turkish NGO İnsan Hak ve Hürriyetleri ve İnsan Yardım Vakfı (The Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief), which bought a ship called Mavi Marmara (The Blue Marmara) and used it to carry aid to Gaza. As a result of Israel’s assault on the Flotilla, nine Turkish activists were killed. Turkey reacted harshly and Prime Minister Erdoğan demanded an official apology from the Israeli government, compensation for the victims’ families, and a lift of the Israeli siege on Gaza. This episode made Turkey very popular in the Middle East, since it was seen as the champion of the Palestinian cause.
18. Tourist visas were in fact lifted between the two countries in 2009.
19. The dubbing work is done by Syrian actors residing in the United Arab Emirates or by Emirati people. It is still done in the Syrian dialect in order to ensure continuity with the previous episodes.
20. The name “Muhanad” is a common name in the Arab world; it is not the same as “Muhammad”, the name of the Prophet.
24. The Fethullah Gülen movement (also known in Turkish as “Cemaat” or “Hizmet”) is a transnational religious and social movement whose proclaimed objective is to form a “Golden generation” [yılın nesil] of young Muslims who are well-versed in religion and open to modernity, globalization and sciences. Until 2013, the movement and the AKP were engaged in a “marriage of convenience” against a common enemy represented by the military and the Kemalist establishment. See Yavuz and Esposito (2009).
25. The Rabi’a Movement is a large sit-in in Rabi’a square in Egypt in support of the Muslim Brotherhood and former President Morsi against the coup of President Abdelfattah al-Sissi. The Movement coincided with the outbreak of the Gezi Park revolt in Turkey (June 2013).
27. Interview, Beirut, September 2012.
28. Survey mentioned above.
30. On 30 June 2013, the one-year anniversary of the inauguration of Mohammad Morsi into the presidency, Egyptians took to the streets calling for his ouster. Turkey called this “military coup” against a democratically elected president and sided with Morsi. See Hürriyet Daily News (Aug. 7, 2013).

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ABSTRACTS

This paper questions Turkey’s “soft power” capacity in the Arab world and Middle East region. It attempts to analyse the role of the different actors involved in the projection of Turkey’s “soft power” vis-à-vis the Arab world. The paper distinguishes between public/governmental and private/non-governmental agents producing “soft power” and examines the interaction between them.

The analysis first focuses on the conceptual framework that underlies Turkey’s paradigm shift from hard power to cultural, or “soft,” power in the Middle East. In particular, it examines the key elements of the “strategic depth” theory, or the so-called “Davutoğlu doctrine,” and shows how a new vision for Turkey’s international role and cultural attractiveness has been formulated. The paper then examines the tools and instruments used to project Turkey’s cultural power in the Middle East: in particular, the export of soap operas [diziler] to the Arab world and the launching of an Arabic-language TV channel (TRT Al Arabiya). The author attempts to identify the actors involved in each of these strategies. Finally, the paper offers an assessment of the real impact of Turkish soap operas and TRT channel in the Middle East. It stresses the limits of Turkey’s “soft power” in the region both in terms of conceptual/theoretical relevance and contextual efficacy, and examines the impact of the Arab uprisings on Turkey’s projection of soft power vis-à-vis the region. The author concludes that Turkey’s cultural power has thus far produced limited outcomes and has had few tangible positive effects in increasing Turkey’s general power capacity in the Arab world.

INDEX

**Keywords:** strategic depth, Davutoğlu doctrine, Middle East, regional power, soap operas, TRT

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Recompositions de l’État et coproduction de l’action publique

Les écoles du mouvement Gülen dans la politique étrangère turque au Kurdistan irakien

State reconfiguration and the coproduction of public action
The Gülen movement’s schools involvement in Turkish Foreign Policy towards Iraqi Kurdistan

Yohanan Benhaiim

1 Cette contribution a pour objectif de comprendre comment l’évolution du rapport de force entre civils et militaires au sein des institutions étatiques transforme le rôle joué par un acteur privé dans la politique étrangère d’un État. Depuis l’arrivée au pouvoir de l’AKP en 2002, la remise en question progressive du rôle de l’armée dans la vie politique turque a favorisé l’émergence d’un nouveau paradigme d’action publique faisant évoluer les pratiques de coproduction de la politique étrangère existant entre acteurs étatiques et privés. L’étude de la participation d’acteurs privés à la politique étrangère de la Turquie dans le cadre de ses relations avec la Région autonome kurde d’Irak, loin de mettre en lumière la montée d’un soft power turc, permet d’observer les processus d’adaptation de ces acteurs au changement de paradigme de l’action publique.

2 Le soft power est défini par Nye comme le fait d’« obtenir ce qu’on veut en attirant les autres plutôt qu’en les manipulant par des motivations matérielles. [...] Le soft power repose sur la capacité à modéliser les préférences des autres pour qu’ils veulent ce que vous voulez » (Nye 2008). Le soft power d’un pays peut ainsi prendre deux dimensions. Il peut résider premièrement dans la capacité d’un État à « définir un agenda et à déterminer le cadre du débat » (Nye 2008), ce qui peut se traduire par l’imposition de normes ou d’institutions internationales. Deuxièmement, le soft power désigne la
capacité d'un pays à être attractif aux yeux de la population et des dirigeants des autres pays. Cette deuxième dimension du soft power peut puiser à plusieurs sources telles que les valeurs politiques du pays, sa politique étrangère et sa culture (Nye 2004). Dans ce dernier cas notamment, Nye souligne que le soft power des États-Unis est davantage le produit de l'activité de la « société civile » que des institutions gouvernementales (Nye 2013).

La littérature existante abordant la thématique du soft power pour le cas de la Turquie insiste aussi souvent sur le rôle des acteurs privés dans la politique de la Turquie à l'étranger, que ce soit pour le promouvoir ou dans le cadre d'une réflexion plus critique (Öktem, Kadioğlu, Karlı 2012). Certains travaux s'inscrivent plus largement dans la construction d'une analyse de la politique étrangère turque qui a émergé depuis l'arrivée au pouvoir de l'AKP autour du triptyque « démilitarisation – démocratisation – soft power ». Ce paradigme explicatif, porté à la fois par la littérature académique et certains discours officiels, s'articule en trois idées interdépendantes. L'arrivée au pouvoir de l'AKP aurait conduit à la démilitarisation du système politique, synonyme de démocratisation. Ce processus de démocratisation favorise l'affirmation de la société civile qui prend un rôle de plus en plus important dans la politique étrangère turque (Altuğşık 2008 ; Davutoğlu 2010). Enfin, le développement du rôle des acteurs privés dans la politique étrangère turque est l'un des moteurs du soft power de la Turquie sur la scène internationale (Kalın 2011). Le recours accru au concept de soft power dans la littérature scientifique semble ainsi révélateur de l'influence du discours politique de l'AKP au moment où ce dernier renforce son contrôle sur les structures étatiques à la fin des années 2000. Cette valorisation du concept de soft power se fait en parallèle à la remise en question progressive du pouvoir de l'armée au sein du système politique turc et participe ainsi à délégitimer les instruments militaires de la politique étrangère turque.

Cependant, le concept de soft power ne nous aide pas à comprendre le rôle des acteurs privés dans la politique étrangère de la Turquie et favorise au contraire une certaine confusion conceptuelle. En effet, l'ensemble des dynamiques de coproduction de politiques par des acteurs publics et privés ne peut pas être réduit au concept de soft power. Contrairement à ce que laisse à penser une partie de la littérature sur le sujet, il n'existe ainsi pas de lien de causalité automatique entre le développement des activités du secteur privé à l'étranger et le soft power d'un État. Si les acteurs privés s'inscrivant dans des dynamiques transnationales peuvent en effet avoir des activités complémentaires à celles des institutions étatiques dans leur domaine, quand elles ne pallient pas leur absence, les phénomènes de coproduction de la politique étrangère restent dans la majorité des cas dissociés de l'émergence réelle ou supposée du soft power d'un État. Des acteurs privés peuvent ainsi participer à la définition d'une ligne diplomatique avec les acteurs étatiques sans pour autant être facteur de soft power sur la scène internationale. À l'inverse, des acteurs non étatiques peuvent favoriser la diffusion d'une image positive d'un pays, alors même qu'ils ne sont aucunement associés à la prise de décision en matière de politique étrangère. Le cas des écoles Fezalar liées au mouvement de Fethullah Gülen au Kurdistan d'Irak nous permet de remettre en question les apports heuristiques du concept de soft power. Comme d'autres acteurs privés qui ont participé à la diffusion d'une image positive de la Turquie sous le gouvernement AKP, les écoles Fezalar se sont implantées dans la région avant l'arrivée de celui-ci au pouvoir. Malgré leur présence au Kurdistan d'Irak depuis 1994, les écoles n'ont pas participé à « modeler les préférences » des autorités kurdes irakiennes au
cours de ces années. Cependant, les transformations des rapports de force entre civils et militaires au sommet de l’État turc au cours des années 2000 ont poussé les écoles Fezalar à s’adapter à ce nouveau contexte politique en faisant évoluer leurs activités au Kurdistan irakien. Le mouvement Gülen a profité de ces transformations politiques en Turquie pour modifier son positionnement sur le dossier kurde irakien et ses relations avec la politique étrangère turque.

5 La question n’est donc pas de savoir si les écoles Fezalar participent au soft power de la Turquie. Il faut au contraire s’émanciper de ce concept afin de prendre la distance nécessaire avec certains discours de légitimation politique. Notre questionnément réside davantage dans l’étude de l’évolution des modes de production de l’action publique à la lumière des articulations existant entre les évolutions de la scène politique turque, la fabrique de la politique étrangère et les activités transnationales des acteurs privés. Notre hypothèse principale est que les écoles Fezalar nous offrent la possibilité d’observer les évolutions des modalités de coproduction de la politique étrangère turque dans le cadre d’une perte de pouvoir progressive de l’institution militaire.

6 La remise en question du rôle des militaires dans la vie politique turque avec l’arrivée de l’AKP en 2002, et la fragilisation des fondements cognitifs de la politique étrangère turque au Kurdistan irakien au cours des années 2000 a ouvert la voie à une crise de paradigme telle que l’a défini Peter Hall. L’« accumulation d’anomalies » a en effet favorisé « un déplacement de la configuration de pouvoir de la politique publique et entraînent une concurrence étendue entre les paradigmes rivaux » (Hall 1993). La phase de compétition institutionnelle durant laquelle s’effectue la transition progressive d’un paradigme à un autre ouvre une fenêtre d’opportunité à certains acteurs privés tels que le mouvement de Fethullah Gülen, leur permettant de participer à la production de ce nouveau cadre cognitif au sein d’une « nébuleuse réformatrice » (Topalov 1999). Dans le cas de la politique turque au Kurdistan d’Irak, la remise en question d’un cadrage cognitif sécuritaire lié à la lutte contre le PKK en Turquie s’est ainsi effectué au profit d’un paradigme d’action publique renouvelé privilégiant la valorisation du partage d’une culture, d’une histoire et d’intérêts économiques communs entre la Turquie et les Kurdes d’Irak. Sur le plan institutionnel, ce changement paradigmatique a accompagné la prise de contrôle de ce dossier d’action publique par le gouvernement de l’AKP au détriment des militaires à la fin des années 2000. Ce processus a participé à transformer les activités des institutions Fezalar au Kurdistan irakien au milieu des années 2000, en modifiant certains discours et pratiques de ses membres. Les effets retours de ce changement paradigmatique sur l’acteur privé mettent en valeur le caractère réciproque de cette coproduction, le nouveau paradigme de politique étrangère qu’il a participé à construire le transformant à son tour. Il semble ainsi que la cemaat a été en mesure de coproduire en partie la politique étrangère turque du fait des évolutions de la scène politique en Turquie et non grâce à ses capacités de diffusion d’une image positive du pays dans la région.

7 Les recherches que nous avons menées sur les institutions Fezalar permettent de vérifier ces hypothèses. La littérature existant sur le sujet, souvent produite par des auteurs proches du mouvement, reproduit dans les grandes lignes le discours de la cemaat sur la question (Akyol 2008 ; Kirk 2011), qui valorise les écoles comme lieux d’échanges et de tolérance entre les différentes communautés de la région, en
n’abordant pas ou peu les relations à la politique étrangère turque et à ses évolutions. Deux séjours de recherche au Kurdistan d’Irak ont permis de constituer un corpus d’entretiens afin de compléter l’apport de ces sources écrites. Il a ainsi été possible d’interviewer une dizaine d’ancien(ne)s étudiant(e)s aux âges et aux profils sociologiques diversifiés ayant effectué leur scolarité au cours des années 2000 dans les écoles Fezalar situées dans différentes villes de la région (Erbil, Suleymaniye, Halabja). D’autres entretiens ont été effectués auprès de cadres de la cemaat en Turquie et au Kurdistan irakien (une dizaine), de professeurs et de parents d’élèves. En vue de mieux saisir l’évolution qu’ont connue les écoles depuis les années 1990, des entretiens avec d’anciens professeurs et responsables d’écoles ayant travaillé au sein des écoles au cours des premières années d’installation du mouvement dans la région se sont avérés fort utiles. Des rencontres avec des représentants de partis politiques irakiens, des hauts fonctionnaires du ministère de l’Éducation du GRK en charge des relations avec les institutions privées, et des représentants de la TUSKON en Turquie ayant des activités économiques au Kurdistan d’Irak ont aussi permis de mieux saisir certaines dimensions des relations entre la cemaat et les acteurs politiques et économiques du GRK. Enfin, ces deux séjours de recherche se sont avérés complémentaires car ils ont eu lieu avant et après l’éclatement de la grave crise qui a secoué les relations entre l’AKP et la cemaat à partir de décembre 2013.


I. Les différentes dimensions des établissements Fezalar dans le cadre de la politique ethno-sécuritaire de la Turquie (1994-2005)

Du début des années 1990 jusqu’au milieu des années 2000, la politique étrangère de la Turquie au Kurdistan d’Irak constitue un monopole de l’institution militaire. À cette époque, l’action des écoles Fezalar semble s’inscrire dans le même paradigme ethno-sécuritaire que celui de la politique étrangère turque. Cependant, le succès des écoles et leur capacité à diffuser une image positive de la Turquie est à relativiser.

Régime sécuritaire et politique étrangère turque au Kurdistan irakien

Le coup d’État du 12 septembre 1980 entraîne la mise en place d’un régime sécuritaire en Turquie. Ce régime se caractérise en termes institutionnels par la domination des institutions sécuritaires dans le champ politique, notamment à travers le MGK [Milli
L'idéologie de la sécurité nationale [milli güvenlik] justifie cette subordination des autres institutions par la nécessité de défendre la Turquie contre ses ennemis intérieurs comme extérieurs (Cizre 2003 ; Dorronsoro 2005). En produisant des valeurs et une manière de définir les problèmes qui s’appliquent à l’ensemble des domaines d’intervention étatique, cette idéologie constitue alors le paradigme dominant des politiques publiques en Turquie.

11 En matière de politique étrangère, cette domination des institutions sécuritaires est favorisée par la fragilité qui caractérise les gouvernements de coalition de l’époque. Au cours des années 1990 ce ne sont pas moins de douze ministres des Affaires étrangères qui se sont succédé, et à partir du milieu de la décennie, les nominations de diplomates sont de plus en plus politisées par les différents partis (Robins 2002). Dans ce contexte de fragmentation du jeu politique fragilisant l’efficacité de la diplomatie turque, il a été facile pour l’armée de monopoliser certains dossiers de politique étrangère. Le dossier chypriote ou, depuis la première guerre du Golfe de 1990-1991, le dossier kurde irakien constitueraient ainsi des monopoles de l’institution militaire. La manière dont la Turquie définit ses relations avec les Kurdes d’Irak est étroitement liée à la mainmise de l’armée et des autres institutions de sécurité sur la gestion du dossier kurde sur la scène domestique. La position turque vis-à-vis de la région kurde d’Irak se définit comme une politique de lignes rouges, exacerbée par l’invasion américaine de 2003 qui accentue en Turquie le sentiment d’insécurité. Premièrement, l’État turc exige des Kurdes d’Irak qu’aucun soutien ne soit accordé au PKK contre lequel de nombreuses opérations militaires transfrontalières sont lancées au cours des années 1990 et 2000. Deuxièmement, Ankara craint l’émergence d’un Kurdistan indépendant au Nord de l’Irak qui pourrait inciter sa propre population kurde à faire de même. Enfin, la Turquie ne souhaite pas voir la ville de Kirkouk sous le contrôle des partis politiques kurdes, de peur que les réserves d’hydrocarbures de son sous-sol ne tombent entre leurs mains et en vue de défendre les droits de la minorité turkmène particulièrement présente dans cette ville du nord de l’Irak.

12 Les Turkmènes d’Irak ont ainsi une place particulière dans la politique étrangère turque. La proximité de certains des membres de la diaspora turkmène d’Irak en Turquie avec les institutions sécuritaires explique en partie le fait que leur défense ait été définie comme l’un des objectifs de la politique étrangère turque et qu’ils aient aussi joué le rôle de « sous-traitant » de cette politique sur le terrain, notamment à travers des partis politiques tels que le Front turkmène d’Irak, [Irak Türkmen Cephesi, ITC]. Cette politique de soutien à la minorité turcophone d’Irak peut se lire aussi comme une expression d’un syndrome de Sèvres en partie déterritorialisé. Comme dans le cas de Chypre, la menace pesant sur des minorités turcophones à l’étranger justifie l’intervention de la Turquie en dehors de ses frontières, dans une région qu’elle n’a reconnue comme irakienne qu’en 1926. Sauver ces Turcs de l’extérieur de l’oppression kurde en Irak représente ainsi le combat en miroir de la guerre pour la défense de l’intégrité du territoire national que mène l’armée contre les militants du PKK à l’intérieur des frontières du pays. Obsession territoriale et analyse raciale de l’histoire participent donc à la construction de ce référentiel ethnico-sécuritaire dans lequel s’inscrit la politique étrangère turque au Kurdistan irakien du début des années 1990 au milieu des années 2000.
Une implantation articulée à la politique étrangère turque


14 C’est dans ce cadre que peut se lire l’implantation des institutions Fezalar au Kurdistan irakien via un phénomène de décharge de la politique d’influence culturelle de la Turquie à cet acteur non étatique. Les écoles ont ainsi vraisemblablement été installées dans le but premier d’aider en priorité les Turkmènes d’Irak, de la même manière que les Tatars de Crimée ou les Gagaouzes des Moldavie à la même époque. Fethullah Gülen raconte dans une interview parue en 1996 dans le magazine Aktüel Para sa version de la genèse des écoles :

> Lorsque nous avons ouvert les écoles pour les Turkmènes à Erbil, Talabani dominait avec Barzani (la région, nda). J’ai fait dire à notre cher Président :
>
> « Je vois comme une obligation personnelle que l’État ouvre une école au nord de l’Irak, alors que là-bas les Kurdes affligent les Turkmènes. Si vous ne le faites pas, sachez que nous allons le faire ».

Ils m’ont dit de faire comme on voulait.10

15 Plus qu’un simple accord, il semblerait que les écoles aient bénéficié du soutien de l’État turc dans leur processus d’installation, à une époque où des troupes de l’armée turque étaient stationnées dans le nord de l’Irak dans le cadre de l’opération Provide Comfort11. Un des premiers professeurs à avoir enseigné au Kurdistan d’Irak raconte ainsi son arrivée en Irak. Son récit fait apparaître autant les synergies existantes entre l’armée turque et les groupes présents sur place que l’ingénuité des membres du mouvement envoyés pour enseigner dans les écoles :

> Un militaire que nous connaissions nous a mis dans un camion avec les militaires de l’ONU et nous a fait passer la frontière. [...] Nous sommes passés par la route des montagnes qui était contrôlée par les militaires parce que les grands axes étaient tous contrôlés par les Kurdes. [...] puis nous sommes allés au bureau du Front turkmène (ITC, ndlr) accompagnés par deux voitures remplies d’une dizaine de
miliciens turkmènes armés quand on est arrivés à notre hôtel. Nous avions très peur...\textsuperscript{12}

16 De la même manière, malgré la volonté actuelle des membres du mouvement de minimiser la place du « facteur turkmène » dans leur installation et en particulier les contacts antérieurs avec le Front turkmène d'Irak, ce parti a vraisemblablement aidé le mouvement dans les tout premiers moments de son installation sur place, avant que ce dernier ne s'en éloigne rapidement. Un autre professeur raconte ainsi :

En décembre 1994, à un moment où il y avait beaucoup de combat entre le PDK (Parti démocratique du Kurdistan, ndlr) et l'UPK (l'Union patriotique du Kurdistan, ndlr) nous avons ouvert la première école. Mais ce n'était pas notre école. Elle a été ouverte avec l'aide de l'ITC qui nous a donné deux salles dans une école qu'ils géraient. C'est après qu'on a eu notre propre école.\textsuperscript{13}

17 Au-delà de quelques rares points de convergence idéologique, la coopération entre les différents acteurs de la politique étrangère turque et la cemaat s'explique par plusieurs raisons. Le pragmatisme des fidèles de Fethullah Gülen les a poussés à rechercher l'appui de l'État turc, et plus particulièrement des institutions sécuritaires, qui étaient alors des acteurs incontournables dans la région kurde irakienne. Du fait de l'instabilité de la situation sécuritaire notamment liée à la guerre civile qui éclata en 1994 entre le PDK de Massoud Barzani et l'UPK de Jalal Talabani, cette proximité permettait aussi aux institutions Fezalar de sécuriser un minimum leur personnel et de se développer dans la région. Un professeur affirme ainsi :

L'armée nous a beaucoup aidée ! Même si ils devaient nous haïr par certains côtés, ils ont vu que nous aidions la politique étrangère turque... Pour ouvrir notre école à Souleymaniye nous avions deux lettres de soutien : une du vali d'Erbil, et une de leur part.\textsuperscript{14}

18 Dans l'entretien cité plus haut avec Gülçin Tahirolü en 1996, Fethullah Gülen explique aussi : « [...] le MIT comme les institutions de renseignement qui étaient là-bas ont toujours été associés à ce travail. Et même lorsqu'Erbil a été bombardé, ils n'ont rien fait à notre école. Ni l'Irak, ni Barzani ». Enfin, il semblerait qu'un des objectifs de ces écoles soit aussi directement lié à la volonté d'améliorer l'image de la Turquie au-delà de la population turkmène d'Irak. Au cours du même entretien, Fethullah Gülen souligne que « s'ils (les Kurdes, nda) construisent quelque chose dans notre environnement, s'il y a un jour un État autonome, je crois à l'utilité (de ces écoles, nda) pour apaiser leur violence et leur colère ». Dans les premières années de leur installation, les écoles sont ainsi pensées par la cemaat et avec le soutien de l'État turc, comme un vecteur d'influence dans le cadre d'une politique plus large dont les instruments et les objectifs se définissent comme relevant davantage du hard power. La coexistence de ces différentes dimensions au sein des écoles a pu avoir des effets contre-productifs et semble en partie expliquer les limites de l'attractivité de ces dernières de 1994 au milieu des années 2000.

**Le développement limité des écoles**

19 Le premier public visé par les écoles semble ainsi avoir été les élèves de la minorité turkmène d'Irak, bien que très vite, des élèves kurdes les aient intégrées. Cet objectif initial explique en partie l'aide qu’ont reçue les premiers enseignants de la part de l'ITC et de Turkmènes ayant des postes de direction au sein du ministère de l'Éducation. Les étudiants turkmènes dans les écoles semblent y être surreprésentés au cours des
années 1990. Le prestige des écoles poussait ainsi certains hauts responsables politiques turkmènes à y inscrire leurs enfants. Cependant, bien qu’à l’époque la demande de la population turkmène soit forte, ses besoins dans le domaine éducatif étaient déjà pris en charge par d’autres institutions. Les écoles turkmènes avaient été fermées en Irak en 1974, quelques années à peine après avoir été autorisées, le régime baathiste prétex tant l’intervention turque à Chypre pour accentuer sa répression sur la population turkmène du pays (Bayraktar 2008). Depuis le début des années 1990 cependant, le Croissant Rouge turc distribuait de l’aide humanitaire aux populations turkmènes et aidait l’ITC à développer des activités éducatives dans la région. Fort du soutien financier de l’État turc, l’ITC gérait ainsi de nombreuses écoles communautaires à destination de la minorité turkmène\(^{15}\). Par ailleurs, les relations entre les Turkmènes d’Irak et ceux de Turquie favorisèrent le financement de ces institutions éducatives par des mécènes issus de la diaspora turkmène. La présence de cette diaspora chez le voisin turc permet aussi aux étudiants turkmènes détenteurs d’un certain capital économique et social de partir en Turquie pour poursuivre leur scolarité, alors que d’autres bénéficiaient de bourses d’études de l’État turc. Par conséquent, l’existence de ces différentes opportunités pour la population turkmène fait que les écoles Fezalar ne furent ni le seul, ni le plus important vecteur d’influence de la Turquie auprès des populations turkmènes durant ces années.

Les relations du mouvement avec les partis politiques turkmènes aux premiers moments de son installation dans la région ainsi que le caractère ethnoï-co-sécuritaire de la politique étrangère turque à l’époque ont aussi pu pénaliser ses activités pendant un temps. Il faut en effet plusieurs mois pour que l’UPK, au pouvoir à Erbil jusqu’à la prise de la ville par le PDK en 1996, dépasse sa méfiance initiale vis à vis du mouvement et accepte l’ouverture officielle d’une école dans la ville\(^ {16}\). De la même manière, les institutions Fezalar peinent à attirer des élèves kurdes en leur sein du fait de cette même méfiance concernant les objectifs. Un professeur turc enseignant durant les premières années d’installation au Kurdistan irakien témoigne ainsi :

> Oui on nous regardait comme des agents tout simplement parce que les seuls Turcs qu’il y avait à l’époque c’était les agents ! [...] Les Kurdes avaient peur de nous, ils nous évitaient, on disait que nos écoles étaient les écoles du MIT, et cela a duré des années.\(^ {17}\)

Cette situation perdure jusqu’au cours des années 2000 et n’est pas sans conséquences sur la capacité des écoles, souvent désignées comme étant « pour les amis des Turcs »\(^ {18}\), à attirer des élèves kurdes. Cependant, le prestige lié à la qualité de l’éducation dispensée dans les lycées Fezalar, associé à la réputation de grande moralité du personnel enseignant, parvient malgré tout à attirer des élèves issus de l’élite kurde. La gratuité de l’enseignement et les bonnes relations entre Ankara et le PDK qui est au pouvoir à Erbil avec la fin de la guerre civile favorisent aussi l’intégration de ces élèves kurdes à partir de 1996.

Les moyens limités du mouvement à cette période expliquent aussi son succès mitigé. Les écoles, alors gratuites pour les étudiants, sont financées par les dons des hommes d’affaires. Il semblerait que les dons des entrepreneurs turcs originaires de Gaziantep aient été la principale source de financement des écoles au cours des années 1990, du fait des liens importants unissant ces hommes d’affaires à ceux du Kurdistan irakien, et notamment à la région de Zakho\(^ {19}\). Cependant, ce mode de financement n’a pas toujours pu répondre aux besoins des écoles et des professeurs. L’énormité des conditions matérielles difficiles qu’a connues le mouvement durant ces années est aujourd’hui
valorisée dans le discours des cadres afin de souligner le caractère désintéressé des écoles, et de se distancier des professeurs turcs bien mieux payés enseignant à l’époque dans les écoles de l’ITC. Ce manque d’autonomie vis-à-vis du mécénat des entrepreneurs turcs a ainsi visiblement rendu les écoles Fezalar dépendantes de l’évolution de la situation économique en Turquie.

Figure 1. Les écoles Fezalar : nombre d’établissements ouvert par an en Irak et lieu d’implantation (1994-2012)


Il est ainsi possible d’observer le développement important des activités de l’entreprise Fezalar après 2005 et notamment après 2009 (fig. 1). Or ces années correspondent à la réorientation progressive de la politique étrangère turque vis-à-vis de la Région autonome kurde d’Irak. Le constat de l’évolution parallèle de la politique étrangère turque et de l’implantation des écoles de la cemaat dans la région nous invite à poser la question du rôle de cet acteur dans le changement de politique et des conséquences de ce changement sur ses propres activités.

II. Les transformations sur la scène domestique en Turquie et la reconfiguration des modalités de coproduction de la politique étrangère (2005-2012)

À partir du milieu des années 2000, le produit de plusieurs dynamiques internes au champ politique turc va conduire au changement de paradigme de la politique étrangère d’Ankara au Kurdistan irakien. La cemaat va elle-même participer à la définition d’un nouveau paradigme d’action publique, au sein d’une « nébuleuse
réformatrice » favorable à une autre politique turque dans la région. En parallèle le mode de fonctionnement des écoles Fezalar évolue et les relations transfrontalières entre la Turquie et l'Irak s’intensifient, notamment entre les espaces kurdes des deux voisins, ce qui a un impact sur le mouvement même. L’évolution de la politique de la Turquie et de celle du mouvement au Kurdistan irakien permet aux écoles de développer leur attractivité, tout en produisant des effets retours inattendus.

Les limites du paradigme sécuritaire

La remise en question progressive du régime sécuritaire par l’AKP, associée à l’accumulation d’échecs d’Ankara sur le dossier kurde irakien, conduit à un changement de paradigme de la politique étrangère turque se traduisant par une attitude plus conciliante vis-à-vis d’Erbil à la fin des années 2000. Après l’arrivée au gouvernement de l’AKP en 2002, et surtout à partir de son second mandat en 2007, un bras de fer s’engage pour la définition du régime politique dans le pays entre le parti de Recep Tayyip Erdogan et l’armée turque. Sur le terrain judiciaire, le procès Ergenekon contre les membres d’un groupe nationaliste soupçonné de chercher à renverser le gouvernement s’ouvre en 2007 et l’AKP est menacé de fermeture l’année suivante. La politique étrangère turque connaît en parallèle certaines évolutions, notamment du fait de la valorisation de la thèse d’Ahmet Davutoğlu sur la profondeur stratégique, qui milite pour une stratégie du « zéro problème avec les voisins » 

Dans ce contexte de tensions politiques, l’une des expressions de cette opposition va être la politisation de certains dossiers d’action publique. La politique turque au Kurdistan irakien va ainsi devenir l’un de ces dossiers, au fur et à mesure que la politique conduite par les militaires turcs va révéler ses lacunes.

Dès les années 2000, le paradigme sécuritaire avait en effet montré ses limites sur le dossier kurde irakien. La présence des forces américaines depuis l’invasion de l’Irak en 2003 avait commencé à remettre en question la toute-puissance des forces armées turques dans le nord du pays. L’incident de Suleymaniye du 4 juillet 2003 durant lequel des membres des forces spéciales furent arrêtées par l’armée américaine a ainsi représenté un message clair adressé par les États-Unis aux autorités militaires turques. Par ces détentions, Washington a clairement montré que la région kurde d’Irak n’était plus le pré carré de l’armée turque qu’elle avait pu constituer durant les années 1990. Quelques années plus tard, c’est la stratégie politique des autorités militaires et de leurs alliés locaux qui fut remise en cause. Ankara comme la diaspora turkmène en Turquie tendaient ainsi à surévaluer la présence turkmène en Irak autant que la popularité des partis politiques turkmènes soutenus par l’État turc (Quesnay 2011). Cependant les faibles résultats de l’ITC aux premières élections de l’Irak post-Saddam Hussein de 2005 remirent en question cette perception. Ce parti politique aidé par Ankara n’obtint en effet que 0,7 % des voix à l’échelle nationale et 10,9 % des voix dans le gouvernorat de Kirkouk, alors même que ce gouvernorat était censé regrouper le plus grand nombre de Turkmènes. Enfin, la campagne militaire transfrontalière Güneş Operasyonu (Opération Soleil) de février 2008 contre les militants du PKK en Irak, se solda par de faibles résultats et de fortes tensions avec Washington. Cette opération semble ainsi représenter une sorte de baroud d’honneur des tenants du paradigme sécuritaire à l’heure où ce dernier était de plus en plus remis en question par les partisans d’une autre politique.
En effet, alors qu’auparavant il était difficile de voir une réelle différence entre les politiques défendues par l’armée et le gouvernement sur ce dossier, la question de la reconnaissance officielle du GRK comme interlocuteur devint un point clivant à partir de 2007. La conséquence directe de cette compétition à l’intérieur du champ étatique est le caractère multivocal alors pris par la politique étrangère turque. À l’image de la politique étrangère d’États fédérés ou de régions donnant plusieurs voix à un État sur un dossier (Duchacek, Latouche, Stevenson 1988), différents acteurs aux positions divergentes au sein d’un même État peuvent provoquer le même phénomène. Les vifs échanges qui eurent lieu par médias interposés à ce sujet entre Erdoğan et Yaşar Büyükanıt, le chef d’état-major de l’époque, illustrent ainsi cette multivocalité de la politique étrangère où l’enjeu est bien de savoir quel acteur est légitime pour déterminer si oui ou non les représentants kurdes irakiens sont des interlocuteurs crédibles pour Ankara (Özcan 2010 ; Benhaim 2014). Le transfert progressif du dossier kurde irakien des mains des militaires à celles du ministère des Affaires étrangères au cours des années 2007-2008 marqua la fin de cette compétition. Ce passage ouvrit la voie à une nouvelle politique turque vis-à-vis du KRG, marquée par le développement des flux commerciaux et l’amélioration des relations diplomatiques facilitée par l’ouverture d’un consulat à Erbil en 2010.

**L’émergence d’une nébuleuse réformatrice**

Comme le souligne Peter Hall, le passage d’un paradigme d’action publique à un autre, enclenché par la crise du premier paradigme, ouvre la voie à une compétition entre paradigmes qui « peut déborder les limites de l’État et concerner l’ensemble de l’arène politique » (Hall 1993). Il semble que ce soit le cas en Turquie à la fin des années 2000, où le caractère multivocal de la politique étrangère turque, lié au contexte de fortes tensions interinstitutionnelles, a participé à étendre ce débat au-delà des cercles étatiques. Cette nouvelle configuration a favorisé l’évolution du rôle des acteurs privés dans la production de la politique étrangère, en leur offrant une fenêtre d’opportunité pour faire remonter certaines de leurs revendications. Dans ce contexte, la cemaat et d’autres acteurs en profitent pour participer à la production d’un nouveau paradigme. Les années 2000 voient ainsi des acteurs favorables à une autre politique se mobiliser au sein de ce qui peut être décrit comme une « nébuleuse réformatrice » (Topalov 1999) qui participa à l’émergence d’un nouveau cadre cognitif et accompagna le changement de politique étrangère.

Ce nouveau « sens commun » sur le dossier kurde irakien se caractérise par la volonté de dissocier la lutte contre le PKK des relations avec les partis politiques kurdes irakiens afin de développer les échanges transfrontaliers entre la Turquie et la partie kurde d’Irak. Cette nouvelle orientation est vue comme susceptible de faire évoluer à la fois la question kurde en Turquie et la politique étrangère turque dans la région. De bonnes relations avec Erbil ouvriraient la voie à l’essor d’activités économiques potentiellement bénéfiques pour le développement du Sud-Est turc et contribueraient par la même occasion à ancrer la Turquie dans son environnement régional en lui faisant jouer un rôle plus important. La nébuleuse portant ce nouveau paradigme d’action publique était composée d’acteurs privés et étatiques. Au sein de l’État turc, les partisans d’Ahmet Davutoğlu vouyaient dans cette nouvelle politique une application de la doctrine de « zéro problème avec les voisins ». Les nostalgiques des années Özal, quant à eux, pouvaient y voir un écho à ce qui avait été amorcé au début des années...
Parmi les acteurs non étatiques, les revendications des hommes d'affaires soucieux de développer leurs activités avec une région en pleine reconstruction participèrent aussi à la formulation de cette nouvelle vision (Özdemirkiran 2013). Enfin, la cemaat joua aussi un rôle dans la construction de cet argumentaire réformateur, notamment à travers l’organisation de forums portant sur la question kurde.


L’organisation d’une telle conférence souligne donc l’importance des relations d’interdépendance entre acteurs étatiques et privés durant les phases de transition. Cette période de démilitarisation a ainsi offert une large marge de manœuvre à la plateforme Abant tout en permettant au gouvernement d’y puiser un argumentaire pour sa politique étrangère et d’éviter l’éventuel coût politique qu’aurait représenté à cette époque un contact direct avec le GRK. Cette participation de la cemaat à la production d’un nouveau paradigme traduit aussi une dynamique antérieure de transformation du mouvement. Depuis le milieu des années 2000, les établissements Fezalar au Kurdistan d’Irak avaient en effet connu de profondes mutations illustrant cette volonté du centre de modifier le mode de fonctionnement des établissements dans la région.
La restructuration des écoles Fezalar et l’intensification des liens transnationaux

À partir de 2005, la nouvelle équipe en place à la tête de l’entreprise Fezalar fait évoluer le mode d’implantation des écoles, le recrutement du personnel enseignant et le financement de l’institution. Comme le montre le graphique exposé fig. 1, non seulement les ouvertures d’écoles reprennent à partir de 2005, mais le nombre d’ouvertures par année augmente fortement à partir de 2009. Il semblerait ainsi que le changement de la politique étrangère turque ait bénéficié à l’entreprise Fezalar qui en a profité pour aussi s’implanter hors de la région kurde d’Irak. Il est à noter que ce développement des écoles dans le reste de l’Irak se fait la même année que l’accession d’Ahmet Davutoğlu au poste de ministre des Affaires étrangères, et dont la politique de « zéro problème avec les voisins » se développe au cours de ces années. Cette recrudescence dans le nombre d’ouvertures d’écoles peut également s’expliquer par l’amélioration des conditions sécuritaires et économiques en Irak, et notamment dans la région kurde du pays. Elle trouve aussi sa place dans une stratégie de reprise en main des écoles par le centre du mouvement à partir de 2005. Le nouveau directeur des écoles Fezalar venu cette année-là d’Istanbul, où il dirigeait les prestigieux établissements éducatifs Fatih, entreprend alors une restructuration du personnel enseignant. Si le critère de compétence est mis en avant par la direction, il semblerait que le critère idéologique ait joué aussi un rôle. On observe en effet une homogénéisation du personnel enseignant, les professeurs étant presque exclusivement recrutés au sein du mouvement à partir de cette date. Par ailleurs, le mode de financement des écoles évolue au même moment. L’amélioration des conditions économiques dans la région kurde et, surtout, le retour des Kurdes irakiens immigrés d’Europe ont profondément transformé la structure de la demande. Les exigences des familles augmentèrent en parallèle avec leur pouvoir d’achat, ce qui permit à la nouvelle direction d’augmenter sensiblement le prix des inscriptions des écoles qui avaient cessé d’être gratuites en 2003. Cette transformation du modèle économique de l’entreprise Fezalar eut pour effet de développer et de diversifier les ressources du mouvement en Irak. Cela permit aussi à l’entreprise Fezalar de s’autonomiser vis-à-vis des financements des hommes d’affaires turcs, bien qu’elle continuât de jouer le rôle d’intermédiaire entre ces derniers et d’éventuels partenaires kurdes irakiens.

frontière. L’ignorance, la pauvreté et la division sont désignées comme autant de maux qui doivent être combattus par le développement de l’éducation via les écoles et le renforcement des liens entre Kurdes et Turcs par la religion. Professeurs et cadres des écoles mettent aussi l’accent sur une sensibilité partagée entre Turcs et Kurdes, un cadre cognitif et émotionnel commun, preuve de la bonne entente naturelle entre les deux peuples. L’héritage commun de Saïd Nursi, penseur kurde de Bitlis dont se revendique Fethullah Gülen, est aussi valorisé par les membres turcs comme kurdes du mouvement en Irak. Dans le cadre de ce discours, le PKK est parfois comparé à « l’Ergenekon des Kurdes »

Dans le contexte de ce discours, le PKK est parfois comparé à « l’Ergenekon des Kurdes », nationaliste, militariste, laïque, et souhaitant construire des frontières entre les peuples. À cette circulation du discours répond aussi une circulation des membres du mouvement au sein des réseaux de la cemaat présents dans les espaces kurdes d’Irak et de Turquie. La présence d’établissements liés au mouvement des deux côtés de la frontière offre des opportunités aux élèves comme aux professeurs d’inscrire leur trajectoire personnelle et professionnelle dans ce qui semble se dessiner comme un sous-espace d’action transnational kurde au sein de la cemaat.

Ainsi, un grand nombre de professeurs et de surveillants (agabey et abla) venant de Turquie dans les institutions Fezalar sont issues de familles kurdes ou originaires de l’est du pays, ce qui est vraisemblablement le produit d’une politique centralisée du mouvement pour accroître son attractivité au sein des populations kurdes irakiennes.

Dans le cas des mobilités de l’Irak vers la Turquie, les professeurs conseillent souvent aux étudiants de poursuivre leurs études au sein des universités liées au mouvement dans Turquie, en les orientant notamment vers l’université Zirve de Gaziantep, ville dont sont originaire de nombreux hommes d’affaires investissant dans la région kurde d’Irak. L’ouverture de l’université Salaheddine Eyyubi à Diyarbakır, elle aussi liée à la cemaat, s’accompagne d’un nouvel effort promotionnel au sein des écoles qui favorisent ainsi la circulation transnationale des étudiants et contribuent à la promotion d’une image positive de la Turquie ainsi montrée comme porteuse d’une identité kurde et musulmane.

Depuis 2013, le festival des Cultures sœurs d’Anatolie et de Mésopotamie fait venir des étudiants des écoles Fezalar dans certaines villes kurdes de Turquie pour valoriser la culture et la musique de la région. Ce festival connaît un certain succès et bénéficie du soutien des associations d’enseignants locaux liées à la cemaat, mais aussi d’hommes d’affaires liés à la TUSKON pour ses tournées dans les villes telles que Bismil, Ergani, Bitlis, Silvan, ou encore Cizre.

La cemaat face à la question nationale dans les écoles et parmi ses membres

Le caractère kurde de la région où se sont implantées les institutions Fezalar est à l’origine de défis spécifiques qui se posent à la cemaat au Kurdistan d’Irak, malgré des ressemblances évidentes avec les autres écoles du mouvement ailleurs dans le monde. Comme dans d’autres écoles liées au mouvement de Fethullah Gülen (Balci 2003 ; Angey-Sentuc 2015), les établissements Fezalar séduisent par la qualité de l’éducation qui y est prodigué, l’apprentissage de l’anglais et l’ouverture sur l’international qu’ils proposent à une époque où les relations économiques avec la Turquie connaissent un impressionnant développement. L’attention portée par le personnel des écoles Fezalar à garder un contact régulier avec les familles des élèves et leur capacité à tisser des liens étroits avec ces derniers, et ce même après la fin de leur scolarité, leur permet de remettre en question les préjugés existant dans certaines familles d’étudiants à
l’encontre des Turcs ou de la Turquie. Le fait que les professeurs soient restés en 2003 alors que des rumeurs circulaient au sein de la population civile au sujet d’une possible attaque de l’armée irakienne contre Erbil a aussi augmenté le prestige des écoles. De plus, l’évolution des écoles et l’articulation croissante de leurs activités aux dynamiques transnationales existant entre la Turquie et l’Irak, et plus particulièrement entre les zones kurdes de ces deux pays, est l’un des facteurs qui participe à augmenter leur attractivité auprès du public kurde irakien selon certains étudiants.

Cependant, dans un contexte local marqué par un fort sentiment national, et face à la sensibilité de certains élèves vis-à-vis des revendications du mouvement kurde de Turquie, le corps enseignant des établissements Fezalar doit parfois faire face à des tensions, ponctuelles et localisées, liées notamment à l’évolution de la situation de l’autre côté de la frontière. Afin de les prévenir, il est interdit de discuter de politique au sein des établissements. Les rares cas de questionnements plus ou moins provocateurs de la part d’étudiants parfois évoqués par les anciens élèves peuvent aussi être des occasions saisies par le corps professoral pour se distancier par rapport à la politique conduite par l’État turc. Les professeurs soulignent alors qu’ils sont justement là pour participer à améliorer les relations entre les deux peuples. Certains étudiants interrogés font état des dérapages nationalistes de la part de professeurs Turcs ou de promotion explicite du gouvernement AKP par ces derniers ou par les surveillants. Un étudiant raconte ainsi qu’à la fin des années 2000, lorsque les relations entre la cemaat et l’AKP étaient bonnes, lors des discussions du soir : « notre ağabey, nous a d’abord parlé de Saïd Nursi, puis de Fethullah Gülen, et ensuite il nous a expliqué pourquoi Recep Tayyip Erdoğan était bon pour les Kurdes ». Il semblerait cependant que ce cas soit isolé, et que la norme se définisse plutôt par une promotion indirecte de la Turquie. Le mouvement parvient ainsi à renvoyer une image positive du pays et de ses habitants même auprès des élèves ayant grandi dans le cadre de familles très nationalistes. Cette promotion de la Turquie et de valeurs telles que la dévotion envers son pays produit aussi des effets paradoxaux chez certains étudiants. Ainsi une ancienne élève reconnaît que ce sont les valeurs transmises par les professeurs au lycée, notamment l’implication et le devoir vis-à-vis de son pays, qui lui ont permis de développer un sentiment nationaliste qui la rend critique du mouvement aujourd’hui.

Ces paradoxes liés aux circonstances particulières d’implantation des écoles au Kurdistan d’Irak et à leur articulation croissante aux dynamiques transnationales se retrouvent au sein même du mouvement en en faisant apparaître la complexité. Le développement des écoles auprès des populations kurdes irakiennes n’a ainsi pas fait l’unanimité au sein de la cemaat. De la même manière, les membres kurdes irakiens du mouvement travaillant dans les écoles font état de tensions passées avec certains membres venant de Turquie. Au cours d’un entretien, un membre de la cemaat travaillant au sein des institutions Fezalar raconte :

C’est comme partout, il y a de tout, il y a des nationalistes ici aussi... Par exemple, ces personnes ne veulent pas dire Kurdistan, ils ne veulent pas parler de ce genre de choses. […] Mais c’était surtout avant, je n’en vois plus beaucoup aujourd’hui.

La diversité croissante des sensibilités nationalistes au sein du mouvement, indissociable du phénomène d’indigénisation de la cemaat, fait apparaître aussi différentes interprétations du discours officiel. La dénonciation de la division des peuples turc et kurde par le nationalisme et les frontières héritées du traité de Lausanne s’accompagne souvent d’un discours nostalgique de l’ottomanisme par certains membres du mouvement. Ce même discours sur la division et l’importance de
l’héritage ottoman est aussi parfois interprété selon une lecture nationaliste kurde par certains anciens élèves devenus membres du mouvement et professeurs dans les écoles. Ainsi, si l’islam est reconnu comme le ciment unissant Turcs et Kurdes, certains des versets du Coran sont cités pour légitimer la valorisation de l’identité kurde et la division dénoncée avec le plus de vigueur tend à être celle dont souffrent les Kurdes de la région. Cette vision est cependant loin de faire l’unanimité chez les membres kurdes d’Irak dont certains soulignent à l’envie que « le but de la cemaat n’est pas de construire de nouvelles frontières mais de faire disparaître les frontières existantes ». Des divergences similaires entre la réception du discours de la cemaat à son centre en Turquie et à sa périphérie au Kurdistan irakien existent au sujet de la place de Saïd Nursi dans le mouvement. Alors que les représentants du mouvement à Istanbul peuvent sous-estimer le rôle du penseur kurde dans la popularité de la cemaat au Kurdistan d’Irak, les entretiens avec des membres kurdes irakiens laissent apparaître cet héritage de la pensée de Saïd Nursi chez Fethullah Gülen comme l’un des premiers critères expliquant leur adhésion. Il n’est aussi pas rare que le débat sur la manière dont l’auteur des Risale-i Nur doit être appelé provoque de vives discussions parmi les membres kurdes irakiens du mouvement travaillant comme enseignants. Certains membres produisent en effet un débat existant aussi en Turquie (Alakom 1998 ; Çakır 1998) et reprochent ainsi à la dénomination officielle choisie par le mouvement – Saïd Nursi – de gommer volontairement l’identité kurde que lui-même aurait revendiqué selon eux en se souhaitant se faire appeler Molla Said-i Kurdî.

L’importance du contexte kurde peut aussi expliquer pourquoi alors même que le nombre d’écoles au Kurdistan irakien n’a jamais été aussi important, il est en comparaison plus difficile pour les établissements Fezalar de recruter leurs professeurs auprès de leurs anciens élèves. À titre de comparaison, dans un pays tel que l’Azerbaïdjan où les écoles de la cemaat se sont implantées à la même époque, il semblerait que les écoles parviennent à recruter plus de professeurs et à intégrer davantage d’élèves dans le mouvement. Cette difficulté particulière rencontrée au Kurdistan d’Irak est dénoncée par les professeurs comme la conséquence de la faible valorisation du métier d’enseignant dans la région. Cependant, le fait que cette professionnalisation au sein des écoles soit aussi vue comme une turquification de la part de certains étudiants peut aussi jouer un rôle dans cette dynamique.

III. La fin du partenariat entre la cemaat et l’AKP au Kurdistan irakien


La remise en question progressive de la position d’intermédiaire de la cemaat

À partir du milieu des années 2000, la cemaat a tiré profit de ce qu’il est possible de définir comme une rente d’intermédiation. L’intensification des échanges à partir de
ces années rendirent nécessaire l’existence d’intermédiaires entre acteurs politiques et économiques turcs et kurdes irakiens. L’exemple de l’organisation des conférences par la plateforme Abant évoqué précédemment illustre dans quelle mesure la cemaat a bénéficié de cette situation de transition en Turquie pour jouer un rôle d’intermédiaire politique durant ces années. Le directeur des institutions Fezalar décrit ainsi la deuxième partie des années 2000 comme une époque où :

Nous avons commencé à faire plus de réunions, à recevoir plus des gens, nous leur montrions que notre école pouvait être un pont, pouvait favoriser la communication entre la Turquie et les gens ici, [...] il n’y avait pas d’autres endroits où demander des conseils sur la Turquie à l’époque, avant il n’y avait pas de consulat.\footnote{42 C’est justement ce quasi-monopole de l’intermédiation, rendu possible par l’ancienneté de l’installation des institutions Fezalar et par l’habileté de ses dirigeants, qui va être progressivement remis en question à partir du début des années 2010. La cemaat a elle-même participé à l’apparition des conditions favorables à sa propre marginalisation. L’installation d’un consulat turc à Erbil en mars 2010, qui était une mesure soutenue par le mouvement,\footnote{43 Le fait que le PDK de Massoud Barzani puisse lui aussi se passer de la cemaat pour ses relations avec le gouvernement turc fragilise la position des écoles dans la région. À partir de 2009, le ministre de l’enseignement supérieur de l’époque, Dlawer Ala’Aldeen, a fait fermer certains établissements liés au mouvement en prétextant de la mauvaise qualité de l’enseignement. Le recteur de l’université Ishik témoignait ainsi en 2012 que le ministère de l’Éducation leur avait demandé de rendre des bâtiments donnés précédemment par le gouvernement régional.\footnote{44 Cette perte d’influence se traduit aussi sur le terrain économique. À la fin des années 2000, le poids des entreprises liées au mouvement était important. Cependant, au fur et à mesure que le commerce entre les deux voisins s’est développé, le poids relatif de ces dernières a diminué. En parallèle, de moins en moins d’entreprises font appel au mouvement pour jouer le rôle d’intermédiaire afin d’entrer en contact avec les entreprises ou les autorités locales. Cette tendance s’explique par la dégradation des relations avec l’AKP mais aussi par le fait que les entrepreneurs de Turquie}

Le fait que le PDK de Massoud Barzani puisse lui aussi se passer de la cemaat pour ses relations avec le gouvernement turc fragilise la position des écoles dans la région. À partir de 2009, le ministre de l’enseignement supérieur de l’époque, Dlawer Ala’Aldeen, a fait fermer certains établissements liés au mouvement en prétextant de la mauvaise qualité de l’enseignement. Le recteur de l’université Ishik témoignait ainsi en 2012 que le ministère de l’Éducation leur avait demandé de rendre des bâtiments donnés précédemment par le gouvernement régional. Même si la cemaat bénéficie toujours de la tolérance du GRK qui n’a pas pris de mesures majeures contre les écoles, certains membres importants du parti de Massoud Barzani s’avèrent hostiles au mouvement qu’ils soupçonnent notamment de soutenir le parti d’opposition Gorran fondé en 2009. Cette profonde méfiance a été d’autant plus dommageable aux institutions Fezalar que désormais « le PDK n’a plus besoin d’eux (la cemaat ndlr) pour faire le lien avec l’AKP » comme le souligne un proche du parti.\footnote{44 Cette perte d’influence se traduit aussi sur le terrain économique. À la fin des années 2000, le poids des entreprises liées au mouvement était important. Cependant, au fur et à mesure que le commerce entre les deux voisins s’est développé, le poids relatif de ces dernières a diminué. En parallèle, de moins en moins d’entreprises font appel au mouvement pour jouer le rôle d’intermédiaire afin d’entrer en contact avec les entreprises ou les autorités locales. Cette tendance s’explique par la dégradation des relations avec l’AKP mais aussi par le fait que les entrepreneurs de Turquie}
« connaissent maintenant la route » selon une expression utilisée par l’un d’entre eux, et n’ont donc plus le même besoin d’intermédiaire qu’ils pouvaient avoir par le passé. Une partie des entreprises liées à la TUSKON s’est aussi réorientée vers d’autres marchés d’exportation du fait de ces tensions sur la scène nationale ne favorisant pas le développement de leurs activités en Kurdistan d’Irak, mais aussi du fait de l’offre plus importante venue de Turquie. Un représentant de la KASIAD, la branche de la TUSKON à Kiziltepe explique : « avant c’était avantageux de travailler là-bas (au Kurdistan irakien ndlr), mais aujourd’hui tout le monde est installé là-bas, la concurrence est trop forte49 ». En plus des conséquences économiques des tensions politiques, les entreprises liées au mouvement souffriraient ainsi de ce qui pourrait être appelé le « paradoxe du pionnier » : en faisant partie des premières entreprises à s’installer sur place, ces entrepreneurs ont valorisé un marché et ont ainsi dynamisé les investissements d’autres entreprises turques sur ce marché, participant ainsi à l’avènement d’une situation concurrentielle trop importante pour leur maintien dans la région. Enfin, la signature d’un accord entre Ankara et Erbil dans le domaine énergétique fin 2013 renforce la marginalisation des entreprises proches de la cemaat qui ne sont pas intégrées à ces marchés représentant désormais une part importante des échanges entre les deux voisins. Le GRK connaît depuis janvier 2014 une grave crise budgétaire liée au non-versement de la part du budget fédéral qui lui est destiné par les autorités de Bagdad50 et aux dépenses militaires engagées dans la guerre contre l’État islamique depuis la prise de Mossoul au mois de juin de la même année. Dans ces conditions, les revenus du pétrole qui passe à travers le pipeline reliant la région de Kirkouk au port turc de Ceyhan représentent une part importante du budget du GRK, malgré la chute du prix du baril au cours de l’année 2014.

Les conséquences de la crise de décembre 2013 sur les activités du mouvement dans les espaces kurdes d’Irak et de Turquie

45 L’évolution de dynamiques structurelles aux relations entre Ankara et Erbil a commencé à progressivement remettre en question la position d’intermédiaire de la cemaat plusieurs années avant l’éclatement de la crise de décembre 2013. Cependant cette crise qui fonde la rupture d’une ampleur jamais vue auparavant entre l’AKP et le mouvement de Gülen eut des répercussions sur les activités du mouvement dans la région. Si les enregistrements du mois de décembre 2013 concernant des affaires de corruption touchant des membres du gouvernement et des proches de Recep Tayyip Erdoğan ont été les premiers à être diffusés sur internet, ils n’ont pas été les seuls. Quelques semaines plus tard, en février 2014, c’est la conversation téléphonique de deux hommes d’affaires proches de l’AKP, Hayrettin Özaltın et Mehmet Cengiz, qui est diffusée sur Internet. Au cours de cette conversation, ces entrepreneurs qui ont d’importants intérêts financiers au GRK tiennent des propos racistes contre les Kurdes, ce qui ne manqua pas de faire scandale jusqu’à la Grande Assemblée nationale de Turquie51.

46 Cet événement a constitué le début d’une intense guerre médiatique entre la presse pro-gouvernementale et la cemaat au sujet des institutions Fezalar au Kurdistan irakien. La presse pro-gouvernementale commença quelques semaines plus tard une violente campagne de dénigrement à l’encontre de ces institutions. Le journal Yeni şafak a ainsi accusé le mouvement d’être à l’origine de la diffusion des enregistrements d’hommes
d'affaires proches de l'AKP, et d'avoir même formé à cet effet une équipe de spécialistes opérant depuis une station d'enregistrement située dans la ville de Kirkouk. Le quotidien Akşam, repris par Sabah et d'autres journaux, a quant à lui affirmé que les écoles Fezalar faisaient plus de 15 milliards de dollars de bénéfice et que les parents retiraient en masse leurs enfants des écoles suite à la crise de décembre 2013, des informations qui apparaissent très exagérées. Des enregistrements de discussions qui semblent avoir été tenus entre des administrateurs des écoles concernant le prix de certaines fournitures scolaires ont été diffusés sur Internet en vue de ternir l'image des établissements Fezalar au cours des mois qui suivirent. De son côté, la cemaat a organisé elle aussi une campagne de communication afin de répondre à ces accusations. Le quotidien Zaman a donné la parole à Talip Büyük, directeur des écoles Fezalar, qui a vivement contesté ces affirmations. Un livre d'entretiens intitulé Fethullah Gülen et la question kurde [Fethullah Gülên dîd è pirsî kûrd] a été publié dans une maison d'édition proche du mouvement et a été l'un des livres les plus vendus de la Foire internationale du livre d'Erbil qui s'est tenue au début du mois d'avril 2014. Enfin, le mouvement a bénéficié de certains contacts au sein de la chaîne d'information Rudaw TV, la plus importante de la région kurde d'Irak, qui a organisé une interview en décembre 2013 de Mustafa Yeşil, directeur de la Fondation des journalistes et des écrivains et proche de Fethullah Gülen.

47 Au début de l'année 2014, le Premier Ministre Erdoğan demanda au président de la région kurde d'Irak, Massoud Barzani, de fermer les écoles liées au mouvement de Fethullah Gülen. Cette demande ne semble pas avoir été suivie d'effet. Comme tient à le rappeler le directeur des écoles Talip Büyük, l'entreprise Fezalar est une entreprise irakienne enregistrée auprès du ministère de l'Éducation, et il ne serait pas légal de la fermer pour des raisons politiques. De plus, du fait de l'importante crise budgétaire évoquée plus haut, il semble difficile pour le GRK d'être en mesure de remplacer les services proposés par les institutions Fezalar. Cependant, les vives tensions qui régissent ses relations avec l'AKP ne sont pas non plus sans conséquences pour le mouvement sur place. Les terrains et les bâtiments utilisés par les institutions Fezalar ne sont pas la propriété de l'entreprise mais du GRK et peuvent lui être retiré à tout moment, ce qui place l'entreprise dans une situation potentiellement inconfortable si la situation venait à évoluer. Malgré les réfutations des cadres du mouvement au Kurdistan d'Irak, cette crise n'est pas non plus sans conséquence sur l'attractivité des écoles dont le succès était justement fondé sur leur capacité à représenter des voies d'accès vers la Turquie. Un homme d'affaire proche du mouvement témoigne ainsi :

D'habitude à cette période de l'année (mai-juin, ndlr) mon téléphone n'arrête pas de sonner, les gens qui veulent inscrire leurs enfants dans les écoles me demandent si je peux les aider. Cette année, je n'ai reçu aucun appel [...]. Les gens veulent garder leurs distances par rapport à eux (la cemaat, ndlr).

48 La peur d'un stigmate négatif que pourrait représenter le passage dans les universités du mouvement pour une carrière professionnelle en Turquie pourrait être l'une des raisons de cette tendance. De manière similaire, ce contexte n'est pas favorable à une indigénéisation du mouvement au sein duquel le « ticket d'entrée » devient de plus en plus coûteux au fur et à mesure que les relations s'enveniment avec le gouvernement turc.
Conclusion

Malgré la perception qu’ont pu avoir les observateurs de la politique étrangère turque et le discours du personnel venu de Turquie travaillant dans les écoles Fezalar, les activités éducatives de la cemaat ne participent pas à l’émergence d’un soft power tel que défini par Joseph Nye. Elles ne contribuent pas à définir l’agenda ou les formes du débat dans un sens favorable aux intérêts d’Ankara dans le cadre de sa relation avec Erbil. D’autres acteurs privés tels que les compagnies pétrolières jouent davantage ce rôle-là mais des recherches restent à conduire. Par ailleurs, si les écoles Fezalar participent en effet à la promotion d’une image positive de la Turquie, il s’avère difficile de mesurer leur rôle dans l’attractivité du pays auprès des élèves. En effet d’autres facteurs comme la présence d’autres acteurs privés turcs, la situation économique en Turquie, l’amélioration des relations entre Ankara et Erbil, et malgré un certain retard, l’aide apportée par la Turquie au GRK dans la lutte contre l’État islamique, participent aussi, si ce n’est davantage, au développement d’une meilleure image de la Turquie auprès de ces élèves comme d’une grande partie de la population au Kurdistan irakien.

La participation des écoles Fezalar à la production d’une partie de la politique étrangère turque a donc été rendue possible grâce à la transformation du rapport de force entre civils et militaires en Turquie. Cet épisode de coproduction est en effet le produit d’une remise en question du paradigme sécuritaire, du contexte de compétition politique et institutionnelle en Turquie, et de l’émergence d’une « nébuleuse réformatrice » se fondant sur l’activisme de réseaux nationaux et transnationaux. Ce cas d’étude met donc en exergue le fait que les réseaux transnationaux se voient impliqués dans la production de l’action publique à l’étranger selon l’évolution des coalitions mobilisées pour le contrôle du pouvoir sur la scène nationale. Le conflit opposant l’AKP à la cemaat depuis décembre 2013 peut donc être replacé dans la continuité des luttes de pouvoir qui ont ponctué l’histoire des institutions étagées turques au cours des dernières décennies. Cependant, la marginalisation du mouvement de Gülen auquel ce conflit participe au Kurdistan d’Irak dévoile une évolution du système de production de la politique étrangère turque. La remise en question du statut d’intermédiaire de la cemaat et l’importance croissante des relations interpersonnelles entre le président Recep Tayyip Erdoğan et le président de la région Massoud Barzani, est à l’origine d’une dynamique actuelle de concentration du processus de décision alors même que depuis la première guerre du Golfe, la politique étrangère turque au Kurdistan d’Irak s’illustrait par l’importance des pratiques de coproduction présidant à sa formation.

Enfin, il est possible que les conséquences de la crise de décembre 2013 sur le mouvement ne soient pas les mêmes dans les espaces kurdes de Turquie. Comme en témoigne un membre Kurde irakien de la cemaat de retour d’un séjour en Turquie :

Avant, les écoles passaient pour être très proches de l’AKP, mais heureusement le 17 décembre a eu une conséquence positive : ça a changé cette vision-là. Maintenant les gens savent que la cemaat n’est pas liée à un parti, que c’est vraiment neutre, ça nous a fait beaucoup de bien. C’est l’âge d’or de la présence de la cemaat chez les Kurdes de Turquie en ce moment.37

Cependant, il est encore trop tôt pour mesurer l’impact de la rupture avec l’AKP dans les espaces kurdes du pays sur le long terme et les conséquences du retour de la guerre en Turquie à partir de l’été 2015 sur le rôle du mouvement Gülen dans ces régions.
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NOTES

1. Cette complémentarité des activités étatiques et non-étatiques à l’international a été abordée par les travaux portant sur la privatisation de la politique étrangère, terme qui désigne les situations dans lesquelles les acteurs privés produisent leur propre politique étrangère, ou lorsque l’État sous-traite une partie de sa politique étrangère à ces acteurs (Constantin, 1999 ; Gayer, 2006).


3. Le mot cemaat, qui signifie « communauté » en turc, est souvent utilisé pour désigner des communautés religieuses en Turquie, et plus spécifiquement le mouvement de Fethullah Gülen.

4. Elle n’en reste pas moins très intéressante, autant pour les informations qu’il est possible d’y trouver que pour la stratégie d’autopromotion du mouvement qu’elle donne à voir.

5. Gouvernement régional du Kurdistan.

6. Türkiye işadamları ve sanayiciler konfederasyonu, la confédération des hommes d’affaires et des industriels de Turquie, est une association d’hommes d’affaires proche du mouvement Gülen.

7. Ce corpus d’entretien, qui ne prétend pas à l’exhaustivité, présente certaines lacunes. Ainsi, il n’a pas toujours été possible de constituer des panels représentatifs pour les étudiants interrogés. La faible proportion d’étudiants issus de la communauté turkmène parmi les interviewés a cependant été palliée par l’exploitation d’autres entretiens effectués auprès d’anciens professeurs ou de représentants de partis politiques turkmènes en Turquie et au Kurdistan d’Irak. Par ailleurs, des interviews menées en Turquie en 2013 et en 2014 auprès de membres du corps diplomatique turc et d’experts dans le cadre d’un doctorat en cours sur la formation de la politique étrangère turque au Kurdistan d’Irak ont aussi indirectement contribué à cette recherche.

8. Le 17 décembre 2013, une série d’arrestations menées par la police turque a visé des hauts représentants de l’AKP et certains de leurs proches dans le cadre d’enquête sur des faits de corruption. La cemaat de Fethullah Gülen a été accusée par le gouvernement d’avoir orchestré cette vague d’arrestations. En réaction, de nombreux secteurs de la fonction publique ont connu d’importantes purges visant à limiter l’influence réelle ou supposée de la cemaat au sein des institutions étatiques. Le premier séjour de recherche
s'est déroulé en décembre 2011 et janvier 2012 alors que le second au cours du mois de juin 2014.

9. Cette expression désigne un mode de pensée qui doit son nom au traumatisme que constitua le traité de Sèvres d'août 1920. Ce traité vit les puissances victorieuses de la Première Guerre mondiale se partager certaines régions de l'Empire ottoman. Le syndrome de Sèvres désigne ainsi l'obsessive certitude en l'existence de complotis fomentés par les puissances internationales (les États-Unis, la France, la Grande-Bretagne) et leurs alliés à l'intérieur du pays (les minorités ethniques et religieuses) afin de se partager les richesses de la Turquie et profiter du caractère stratégique de sa situation géographique. Cette lecture est d'autant plus forte que l'article 62 du traité de Sèvres mentionnait la création d'un Kurdistan indépendant.


11. L'opération Provide Comfort a débuté en 1991 et fut arrêtée en 1996. Elle a réuni les États-Unis, le Royaume-Uni, la France, l'Australie, les Pays-Bas et la Turquie dans le but de protéger et de venir en aide aux populations kurdes du nord de l'Irak à la suite de la guerre du Golfe. L'instauration d'une zone d'exclusion aérienne au détriment de l'aviation irakienne en vue de prévenir une attaque telle que celle d'Halabja eut pour conséquence la mise en place d'une autonomie de facto de la région kurde vis-à-vis de l'État central irakien.


15. Entretiens avec des représentants de L’ITC et de la Türkmeneli İşbirliği ve Kültür Vakfı (la fondation Türkmeneli pour la coopération et la culture, TIKV), Ankara et Erbil, mars et mai 2013.

16. Les bonnes relations nouées par la suite avec le parti de Jalal Talabani permettront cependant au mouvement d’ouvrir plus tard des établissements à Souleymaniyeh.


24. La plateforme Abant est une institution liée au mouvement de Fethullah Gülen fondée en 1998 qui organise des conférences et des débats sur des questions liées à la démocratisation du système politique turque : droits de l’homme, éducation, droits culturels des minorités kurde et alévie, etc.


31. Le nom choisi pour cette université est ainsi loin d’être neutre. Salaheddine Eyyubi, ou Saladin, est connu pour être le chef militaire musulman qui a repris Jérusalem aux Francs mais aussi pour ses origines kurdes, ce qui le rend porteur d’une double symbolique.


33. Entretien avec un étudiant ayant fait sa scolarité à Erbil, Erbil, décembre 2011.

34. Entretien avec une ancienne élève du mouvement, Erbil, janvier 2012.

35. Lors d’un entretien avec Rusen Çakır lui demandant s’il n’y avait pas de préjugés contre les Kurdes d’Irak chez certains membres de la cemaat, le directeur des écoles Talip Büyük admit que « bien sûr certains ont pu dire “c’est trop de service pour eux” »
avant de souligner que le mouvement ne faisait pas la différence entre les peuples. Ruşen Çakır "Gülen cemaati 19 yıl'dır Irak Kürdistan'ı hizmet götürüyor", Vatan, 21/01/2013.

36. Le verset cité le plus souvent par ces interviewés est le suivant : « Ó Hommes! Nous vous avons créés d'un mâle et d'une femelle, et nous avons fait de vous des nations et des tribus, pour que vous vous entre-connaissiez. Le plus noble d'entre vous, auprès d'Allah, est le plus pieux. Allah est certes omniscient et grand-connaissceur. » (49 ; 13 les appartements).

37. Entretiens réalisés à Erbil, juin 2014.

38. Parmi les groupes se réclamant de l'héritage de Saïd Nursi (mais n'étant pas fethullahçı), celui lié à la maison d'édition Yeni Asya (les yeniasyacular) a publié des traductions en caractère latin des Risale-i Nur où les références à l'identité kurde de Saïd Nursi ont été estompées, voire effacées. À partir de 1993, un autre groupe de nurcus a publié dans la revue Dava (éditions Tenvir) les textes originaux des risale-i nur en les comparant aux traductions des éditions Yeni Asya afin de mettre en valeur les modifications opérées.


40. Selon un cadre kurde irakien du mouvement, entretien à Erbil, juin 2014.


42. Entretien, Erbil, juin 2014.


44. Le fait que certains membres du MIT, dont son directeur Hakan Fidan, proche de Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, aient été inquiétés en février 2012 par le procureur Sadettin Sarıkaya en charge du procès KCK du fait des négociations secrètes qu’ils auraient entreprises avec le PKK dans le cadre du processus d’Oslo serait ainsi lié à une initiative de certains juges proches de la cemaat.


47. Entretien à Erbil, juin 2014.

48. Il est extrêmement difficile d’évaluer la part des entreprises proches du mouvement de Gülen dans le total des échanges commerciaux entre la Turquie et le GRK. Un ancien correspondant d’un journal turc à Erbil évalue cependant à un peu moins de la moitié la part des entreprises proches de la cemaat dans ce commerce à la fin des années 2000.

49. Entretien à Kızıltepe, mars 2014.

50. Le gouvernement fédéral irakien et le GRK ne parviennent pas à s’entendre sur la manière dont doit s’exporter le pétrole exploité dans la région kurde du pays. Alors que l’État irakien souhaite que le pétrole soit vendu via l’entreprise irakienne Somo, la
région kurde vend au contraire directement son pétrole sur les marchés internationaux via le pipeline Kirkouk-Ceyhan. En mesure de rétorsion, le gouvernement Irakien a arrêté de verser à la région sa part du budget national, rendant impossible le versement des salaires des fonctionnaires et participant au déclenchement d’une grave crise économique dans la région kurde irakienne.

51. Le député BDP de Diyarbakır Altan Tan a ainsi pris à parti le président de la région autonome du Kurdistan irakien Massoud Barzani à propos de ces enregistrements lors d’un discours à la Grande Assemblée nationale de Turquie le 14 février 2014.


53. Voir les éditions du 14 mars 2014.


57. Entretien à Dohuk, juin 2014.

### RÉSUMÉS


This article addresses the role of private actors in Turkish foreign policy process, and more specifically the interactions between the Gülen movement and Turkish foreign policy towards Iraqi Kurdistan from 1994 to 2014. This case study brings to light the fact that the role of transnational networks in foreign policy depends on the evolution of power struggle between competing coalitions on the domestic scene. Therefore, the development of the Gülen movement’s activities was partly linked with the army’s foreign policy at the beginning of the 1990’s. It then evolved and participated with a reformer nexus of various actors to the production of a new paradigm on the Kurdish file at the end of the 2000’s. After the file transfer from the army to the MFA and the development of the relations between Ankara and Erbil, the Gülen movement started to be marginalized, and the Turkish state even asked for the closure of the schools after the crisis between the AKP government and the movement in December 2013.
INDEX

**Keywords**: Turkish Foreign Policy, private actors in foreign policy making, desecuritization and demilitarization process, Gülen Movement, Iraqi Kurdistan

**Mots-clés**: politique étrangère turque, coproduction de l’action publique, démilitarisation de la politique étrangère, mouvement Gülen, Kurdistan irakien

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Soft power and the challenges of private actors: Turkey - Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) relations and the rising role of businessmen in Turkish Foreign Policy

Merve Özdemirkiran

Although the formation of a Kurdish state in the Middle East is a political taboo in Turkish foreign policy, Turkey adopted a more pragmatic position when Iraqi Kurds started to build a Kurdish state in 2005, when the new Iraqi constitution was proclaimed. The constitution did not only give the Kurds political autonomy but also economic independence since they control 17% of Iraqi oil resources. Currently, businessmen from Turkey, both Turks and Kurds, are contributing to the construction of this quasi state’s physical infrastructure, while the majority of food and other products are exported from Turkey. Indeed, Iraq quickly became Turkey’s fourth largest economic partner: Turkish-Iraqi trade is worth over $7 billion and, according to the Turkish consulate’s statistics in Erbil, 65% of this is with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) specifically. These businessmen are building bridges, highways, airports, universities in Iraqi Kurdistan, while Turkish is gradually becoming the dominant language of the shop signs and business in general. Through such activities, businessmen from Turkey have established a bridge between Turkey and the KRG, which has generated the conditions for developing bilateral political relations. Considering the violence provoked in the whole region by the Syrian civil war since 2011, Ankara’s relations with its eastern neighbours are dramatically affected. Yet, Erbil is today the only capital with whom Ankara has maintained its good relations and developed alliances in order to cooperate particularly for border security issues in the framework of the fight against ISIS.
The role these businessmen play in Turkey’s involvement in KRG state building illustrates economic interdependence in Turkey’s foreign policy and shows how the state uses economic activity in order to attain its foreign policy objectives. In fact, one of these objectives is to expand Turkish influence by using soft power, which is currently being prioritised in Turkish foreign policy, especially towards the Middle East. Turkish soft power is basically defined by “the values that Turkey represents, by its history, culture, its capacity to mobilise regional dynamics and to create new spheres of influence” (Kalin 2012). Turkey’s economic capacities play a central role in creating these new spheres. Turkey’s business activities in KRG can thus provide reliable empirical data to further analyse Turkey’s regional policy towards its “new” neighbour, with whom security conflicts are not yet resolved. In other words, Turkey’s position towards the Kurdish state building is a relevant case of the use of the soft power as a foreign policy tool.

Soft power (or co-optive power), first defined by J. Nye, is usually considered as a tool controlled by public actors. States usually possess a variety of hard and soft power tools that they can outsource to societal agents (Vuving 2009). In the case of Turkey’s soft power in KRG, however, private actors – businessmen – play the major role. Their activities have prepared the basis for bilateral relations and created a favourable context for Turkey to influence KRG. The Turkish state has taken advantage of these activities in order to achieve its foreign policy goals, including spreading its soft power in the Kurdish region. Thus, the positive situation has been created by private actors, who actually avoid state control because of the effect of Turkey’s Kurdish question, while the benefits are felt by the state.

The consequences of these activities and the relations of these businessmen with the state make the concept of soft power more complex as an analytical tool. These activities do not only influence foreign policy but also affect Turkish domestic politics. Turkey’s Kurds with business activities in KRG are challenging the state in order to enlarge their negotiation space as members of a minority. Thus, Turkey’s minority issue becomes linked to a soft power foreign policy issue. This leads to the question of how much soft power remains an explanatory context when analysing relations between private actors and the state. This phenomenon therefore needs to be explained within the general context of Turkey’s use of soft power in its international relations. This article aims to show, through the case of Turkey’s businessmen in KRG, how the concept of soft power gains a larger definition as a means for private actors. These actors benefit from the state’s desire to expand its soft power, in order to strengthen their influence in domestic politics.

The empirical data for this study comes from 45 semi-structured interviews conducted in Turkey (Istanbul, Ankara, Gaziantep, Diyarbakır) and in Northern Iraq (Erbil) between 2008 and 2011 with businessmen and representatives of business associations and chambers of commerce and industry in these cities. This article focuses on interviews with those businessmen who are also representatives in chambers of commerce and industry bodies. Their position in these organisations provides relevant empirical data to analyse the access of private actors to the political sphere and relations between the state and these businessmen, specifically Kurdish businessmen from southeast Turkey. The interviews show that businessmen from Turkey conducting economic activities in KRG can be divided into two principal groups through their ethnic identity: Turks or Kurds. Their motivations, size of their activities, relations with
state authorities in Turkey and KRG, manner of access to the KRG market depend primarily on this ethnic factor.

When the activities and positions of these business actors are analysed within the framework of Turkish soft power, three main stages can be identified. First, their activities were not officially supported by the Turkish state until the opening of the Turkish consulate in Erbil. That is, from 2005 to 2010, businessmen contributed to Turkey’s soft power in spite of the state. Kurdish businessmen from southeast Turkey have played a key role through their kinship and language skills. Their motivation to contribute the emerging Kurdish quasi state has enabled the development of economic exchange between Turkey and KRG. In contrast, during this period, few Turkish businessmen were committed to these economic relations while they experienced many obstacles, such as long delays at the Turkish Iraqi border. More recently, these business people have been integrated with the Turkish state’s policy of economic integration with Northern Iraq. By opening a consulate in the Iraqi Kurdistan’s capital, Erbil, the Turkish government recognised symbolically the autonomous status of KRG, which made Turkey’s soft power strategies more visible in the region. The third stage relates to the new status that businessmen, especially Kurds from southeast Turkey, gained by being in harmony with the state’s new foreign policy objectives. This agreement has allowed them to participate in foreign policy decision-making processes, where they can negotiate their conditions with the state and ultimately achieve more influence in domestic politics.

In the following sections, these three stages will be analysed within the general framework of relations between the state and businessmen in Turkish foreign policy. The political impact of business activities on soft power will be emphasised to show how non-state actors are using their status in the state’s soft power strategies to strengthen their negotiation capacities with the state.

I. The influence capacities of businessmen regarding Turkish foreign policy

Over the last thirty years, the actions of businessmen have had a considerable impact on decision-making in Turkish foreign policy due to the intensification of economic exchanges on a global scale, the consolidation of financial markets and the development of communicative tools, as a result of economic globalisation. Although the multiplicity of means of action, organisational models and institutional or social structures of the variety of stakeholders that have emerged at the centre of globalisation regularly affect international relations, it is the economy and economic stakeholders that critically determine foreign policies (Carron de la Carrière 2002: 270). That is, economic factors, unlike others, are always present, even omnipresent (Carron de la Carrière 2002: 271).

The omnipresence of the economy also leads actors to avoid armed conflict in order to preserve their economic interests in the international system. States, developed countries in particular, avoid conflicts between themselves and regularly seek means of cooperation to resolve disputes non-militarily, without wasting their large military budgets (Doyle 1997). Thus, the international system, controlled by economic factors, no longer supports direct armed conflict between developed states. By abandoning armed methods and further concentrating on economic factors and means, these states
have created a trading world, albeit one that remains imperfect or even powerless to prevent conflicts at times, and criticised by the originator of the concept, R. Rosecrance.  

In the context of economic globalisation, businessmen and their organisations are considered more and more frequently as central stakeholders in the international system. Furthermore, as the liberal approach to international relations theories states, international economic exchanges that contribute to the growth of the actions of businessmen constitute a solid basis for maintaining international peace, a critical phenomenon that helps states avoid potential conflicts. International economic exchanges, maintained and developed by economic stakeholders, allow states to consolidate reciprocity and interdependence.

Economic stakeholders can also be characterised as transnational actors in their internationally created networks, their organisations at national and international levels, in their capacity to influence international bodies and establish, in certain circumstances, a rival to the state. Their transnational character, which is to say their capacity to act beyond all borders (physical, legal, social, psychological, etc.), permits them to develop a strong capacity to orient or determine state foreign policy strategies while creating a parallel space to international relations, a space dominated by transnational relations (Nye and Keohane 1972). Transnational relations include all relations that, whether by deliberate will or by destination, take place in a global space beyond a state’s national framework which produces itself by at least partially escaping the control or the mediating actions of states (Badie and Smouts 1995: 70).

Among these transnational stakeholders, businessmen and their organisations are characterised by their relatively privileged position and specific relations with states. In the current global economic system, their actions, the results of their activities and, at times, their opposition to state policies affect these policies more directly than other transnational stakeholders. Furthermore, this influence enables them to gain state recognition as “legitimate stakeholders” that can participate in the decision-making process. In this way, they manage to impose themselves more effectively in the political sphere (Winters 1996).

The era of globalisation and, most importantly, the progressive integration of the Turkish economy with international markets following the transformation of Turkey’s national economy to a free market in the 1980s, gave Turkish businessmen a new source of legitimacy. They enlarged their negotiation space with the state which -as many studies on the state/business-world relationships (e.g. A. Buğra 2007; M. Heper 1991) and on the history of the political economy in Turkey, (e.g. Ç. Keyder 1987; K. Boratav 2012) state- controls economic policies, determines the country’s economic objectives, and manifests itself as the principal economic stakeholder and which also therefore defines the scope of entrepreneurs and their interest groups.

Indeed, the Turkish state, at least until the 1990s, imposed control, predominantly in the economic sphere, to limit the emergence of new “fields of power” (champs du pouvoir) that, according to P. Bourdieu, are formed by the holders of other kinds of capital, be it cultural, symbolic or economic. These fields of power construct themselves as a game-space, at the centre of which the holders of different kinds of capital struggle, particularly for power over the state. By exerting power over state capital they gain power over other kinds of capital and their reproduction (Bourdieu 1993: 52). Fearful of all types of rivalry from capital-holders (for example intellectuals,
artists and above all entrepreneurs) who can endanger its monopoly over the control of resources, the Turkish state limited the autonomy and the space of action of (private) holders of economic capital, the businessmen. Therefore, these economic stakeholders held back so the Turkish authorities could not use the economy as an effective foreign policy tool.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, despite previous difficulties, the Turkish economy has developed steadily, with foreign trade occupying a prominent place. It has grown 15 times larger in the last twenty-five years while being profoundly modified, and now constitutes the fulcrum of the Turkish economy. Whereas Turkey used to export agricultural and mining products in the early 1980s (57% of exports came from agricultural products, for example), nowadays 90% of Turkish economic exports come from industrial products (textiles and clothing, intermediary goods, and consumer goods such as cars and household appliances) (Insel 2008: 131). This economic expansion has made foreign trade an increasingly valuable foreign policy tool, while making Turkey a trading state, a state able to use international economic exchange as an integral element for determining its foreign policy (Rosecrance 1986).

Turkey’s foreign policy and Turkey’s integration into the international system, for example its European Union candidacy, have become a new space for Turkish businessmen to influence. Through their economic activities abroad, they have started a new relationship with the state and gained greater “legitimacy” in negotiations with the state while playing an intermediary role between Turkey and foreign countries. According to Buğra, if Turkish entrepreneurial activities fully agree with the state’s self-defined interests and objectives then this compatibility makes the state consider their activities as legitimate (Buğra 2007: 42).

The new critical role of economic stakeholders in the international system with the development of transnational relations supports Turkish businessmen, especially since successive Justice and Development Party [Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi – AKP] governments have set a foreign policy goal of making Turkey a regional power, even a global player, due to its economic growth. The domestic transformation of Turkey’s political economy has brought the political and economic spheres closer together, as M. Kutlay argues: “the restructuring of domestic business actors and the emergence of a new competitive capitalist class underpinned the economic arm of Turkish foreign policy”. Thus, the economy became “the practical hand” of Turkey’s new foreign policy (Kutlay 2011).

Since the beginning of the 1990s, new conditions governing foreign policy have given Turkish businessmen and their associations a unique opportunity to participate more actively in policy-making. Even if their activities correspond to the state’s goals and interests, that is, to those national interests that have been the principal source of legitimacy for entrepreneurs since the Turkish republic was founded, the role of international economic exchanges in Turkey’s relations with foreign countries is giving them for the first time an autonomy that allows them to strengthen their position in domestic affairs. Moreover, as noted by K. Kirişçi, the nature of the trading state requires the involvement of many stakeholders in the formation of foreign policy or diplomatic games. However, the priorities and interests of these stakeholders sometimes differ from those of traditional foreign policy makers in Turkey (Kirişçi 2009).
Through their “legitimacy” and state recognition when their actions coincide with the broad lines of foreign policy, they become stronger stakeholders in domestic policy-making. Thus, foreign policy, which is, with a few exceptions (e.g. Z. Öniş), under-researched in the existing literature on state/businessmen relations in Turkey, becomes a key variable for analysing relations between the Turkish state and businessmen. Turkey’s EU candidacy is a prime example of how businessmen have become influential stakeholders in politics in that the outcome of the Helsinki Summit led the political and economic key players in Turkey to take the initiative in implementing EU-mandated institutional changes (Öniş and Bakır 2005).

During this particular period, and also later, businessmen and business associations were charged with overseeing legislation and implementing reforms demanded for EU integration, thereby acting as central players in Turkish civil society. Furthermore, they intervened in the debate on Turkish democratisation by influencing domestic policy. Indeed, the way Turkish entrepreneurs, large corporations and large groups from Istanbul’s republican bourgeoisie, viewed Turkey’s EU accession efforts is particularly interesting. In one study analysing the attitudes of Turkish citizens regarding the economic, political, and cultural effects of Turkey’s EU candidature, businessmen were notable for their support for Turkey’s EU accession while exerting a certain pressure at a national level to drive the political authorities to pursue reform. Macroeconomic stability, the EU’s development support, foreign direct investments (FDI), expanding the market for Turkish exports through preferential trade agreements with EU member states all motivated businessmen to push Turkey’s political leaders to move forward towards achieving EU membership (Aybar et al. 2007: 337 and 347).

This involvement of businessmen in the European project throughout the 1990s and at the beginning of the 2000s, made this group a key stakeholder in civil society. As an intermediary player between Turkey and foreign states, these businessmen were recognised by the state as an actor in foreign policy. According to Z. Öniş, through their support for Turkey’s candidacy and EU accession, business associations, particularly TÜSİAD [Türkiye Sanayici ve İşadamları Derneği - the Association of Turkish Businessmen and Industrials], remained integral drivers of this project domestically due to their influence on the state and political actors (Öniş 2006: 284-292).

As well as willingly supporting the work of businessmen and associations like TÜSİAD in the European project, particularly between 1999 and 2002, the AKP government also favoured their business activities in targeted regions (the Middle East, Africa, Central Asia) as part of A. Davutoğlu’s foreign policy strategy. AKP has a close relationship with the “pious” business community of Anatolia that has for over ten years constituted the “new bourgeoisie” in Turkey. MÜSİAD,7 which is made up of representatives of this new pious bourgeoisie, has been progressively taking the place of TÜSİAD, which is now considered as representing “Istanbul’s former, secular and Western bourgeois class”.8 This newly emerging bourgeoisie currently accomplishes the tasks assigned to Turkish businessmen within the framework of the diplomatic goals of Turkey’s political leaders: the establishment of an “economic diplomacy”, which has also been applied by other emerging economies, such as China, South Africa, Brazil and India. The goals of economic diplomacy allow businessmen to acquire a unique legitimacy (albeit similar to that of TÜSİAD within the European project) due to the perfect compatibility of their activities with the national interests determined by political leaders.9
Economic diplomacy involves using a country’s tools and capabilities (trade, investment, finance, organisation, development, etc.) to protect its interests in its relations with both neighbouring countries and countries outside its region, and also in decision-making bodies of the international system, while operating from a logic of cooperation without resorting to force or direct coercion. Economic diplomacy requires the state to develop its soft power in foreign relations, which enables it to become a key player in international negotiations.

II. The role of businessmen in Turkey’s relations with the KRG

A policy that implements economic diplomacy considers businessmen as central stakeholders in the process. Businessmen conducting economic activities within the territory of a de facto Kurdish state have thus become the bearers of an economic tool in Turkey’s policy, which has enabled them to acquire a certain level of compatibility with the national interests determined by the government. Consequently, despite predictable conflicts between Turkey and the KRG regarding border security and the presence of PKK militants on Kurdish soil, and despite the opposition of Turkey’s military (at least until 2010), Turkey’s political authorities have not restricted the businessmen’s activities. Furthermore, they have not openly challenged the legitimacy of these activities, which are also essential for any entrepreneurial economic activity in Turkey to survive and succeed (Buğra 2007). In other words, the Turkish businessmen’s activities in the Kurdish region of Iraq have gradually inscribed themselves in Turkey’s foreign policy as a trading state.

Until the opening of the Turkish consulate in Erbil on March 11, 2010, the Turkish state had not established a specific policy regarding this new category of stakeholders who were certainly supporting economic relations with the KRG according to most state leaders. However, their activities were not yet recognised as a key element in political relations as Turkish public opinion was still quite sensitive regarding the Kurdish question and the presence of rear PKK bases on KRG soil. As one entrepreneur, who had experienced business problems due to a lack of Turkish diplomatic representation in KRG, states, “the government was neither a support nor a hindrance” during this period.

Conditions in which entrepreneurs started their business activities

Trade between Turkey and KRG is relatively specific with respect to business conducted by Turkish entrepreneurs in other countries. Border security issues related to the Kurdish conflict and the unsatisfactory development of the Kurdish question in Turkey have both hindered the economic relationship while paradoxically strengthening the role of businessmen.

As mentioned in the introduction, the group of businessmen analysed in this research is not homogenous but forms two groups: owners of big businesses and owners of small and medium size enterprises, considering the type, volume and size of their economic activities. Regarding sociological characteristics, the principal point of division corresponds more or less to an ethnic division between Turks or Kurds.
At the same time, however, there are many intersections between these two main groups. The majority of big business owners are Turks with businesses mainly sited in western Turkey whereas owners of small and medium business are mostly Kurds from southeast Turkey where the Kurdish population is the majority. When these businessmen were asked to explain their initial motivation to conduct business activities in KRG, regardless of business size and location, Kurds replied that ethnic identity was the source. They stated that they started business activities in KRG for “observing the first steps of the first Kurdish state, contributing to the economic development of this quasi state and also developing Turkey’s southeast economic structure.” These motivations are thus not necessarily linked to traditional business interest motivations. Turks’ motivations were significantly different. The most salient was to find new business markets and partners in the Middle East to avoid the negative effects of the 2008 global economic crisis. Some of them also stated that their activities “contribute to Turkey’s regional power capacities in the region and they support a peaceful dialogue between Turkey and Iraqi Kurds” (Özdemirkiran 2013).

The businessmen, both Turks and Kurds, persisted with their activities despite the reluctance of Turkey’s state authorities, a lack of support or state incentive, and restrictions, security threats and tensions between Ankara, Erbil and Baghdad because of PKK bases in Qandil, long queues at the Khabour border gate because of these tensions, and hostile public opinion in Turkey.

One of the most important common problems that affected business conditions was blockages at the Khabour border gate. These long queues had three causes. First, numerous local merchants from the border region are conducting cross-border trade activities in mini-vans (buying cigarettes, tea, rice, etc. from Iraq to sell in Turkey at a higher price). Because their status is not clearly defined, the merchants and their merchandise have to pass regular controls without using commercial procedures reserved for recognised trade activities. This unclear status creates chaos at the border where only 4 or 5 out of 30 counters are usually open. Even though businessmen from southeast Turkey welcome these activities for local economic development, they also demand structural changes at the border and a privileged procedure for crossing the border to bypass the local merchants’ queue, to enter KRG more quickly to sign contracts, contact their partners or develop their business. The second problem is that, until the end of 2010, there was a second checkpoint at Khabour operated by the military, at which Turkish citizens were asked to declare their reason for entering Kurdistan. This caused long waits and sometimes even refusals for businessmen from Turkey. Third, tension between KRG and Turkey rose because of Turkey’s military raids into the Qandil mountains against PKK militants and politicians’ hostile declarations. Nevertheless, businessmen have continued their activities despite these unfavourable conditions. In other words, they have carried out activities that benefit the Turkish state, despite its conscious and unconscious restrictions, by developing economic relations and laying strong foundations for further cooperation between Turkey and KRG.

My field study in Turkey and Northern Iraq on businessmen’s economic activities in the KRG shows that businessmen are indeed at the origin of the improved political relations between Turkey and KRG. While the implementation of a trading state strategy and the willingness of the state to diffuse its soft power economically were certainly central to their business activities, at least up until 2010, it was businessmen
themselves who were the central stakeholders in bilateral relations. In fact, they are the ones who convinced the Turkish state to open a diplomatic representative body in the Kurdish capital, Erbil. The opening of the Turkish Consulate in Erbil is indeed a great success story for Turkish businessmen, which demonstrates their influence over the state.

**Diplomacy follows economy**

Turkish diplomacy has come to Kurdistan through the pressure of businessmen whose demands and organisation have affected the decisions of the Turkish authorities. It should be noted here that opening a diplomatic representation in Erbil amounts to a symbolic recognition of Kurdistan, which was previously taboo in Turkish politics. Although Turkey had recognised KRG’s autonomous status by recognising the Iraqi Constitution of 2005, the implementation of this recognition, and the transition from an informal to formal situation, took time for the Turkish authorities and Turkish public opinion.

The Gaziantep and Diyarbakır Chambers of Commerce mediated between the Turkish state and Turkish businessmen. The economic representatives of the two southeastern Turkish cities that benefit the most from economic exchanges with KRG actively engaged themselves in communicating entrepreneurial requests to the state and expanding trade with Iraq. For example, Mehmet Arslan, former president of Gaziantep Chamber of Commerce, several times invited former secretary of state in foreign trade, Kürşat Tüzmen, to Gaziantep, especially for the exposition *Gateway to Iraq* in order to bring together the minister and businessmen active in Iraq or who were planning activities there. Gaziantep Chamber of Commerce also prepares regular export reports for the Ministry of Economy in which it emphasises the needs and priorities of its members. Personal political relations of the president and other influential members also allows the problems, needs and propositions of local businessmen to be communicated to Ankara. Diyarbakır Chamber of Commerce and Industry is also very much committed to developing relations between state authorities and local business actors. For example, its former president, Mehmet Kaya, organised a meeting in 2008 in Diyarbakır with representatives of Erbil Chamber of Commerce and local political authorities, including the Governor, and Deputy Governors from various parts of southeast Turkey. This meeting, which took place at a very crucial moment when the political tension in the region was high just after PKK attacks on a police station in Aktütün, gave birth to a commercial protocol between Diyarbakır and Erbil Chambers of Commerce. This protocol became a model for other chambers that signed commercial agreements with Erbil Chamber of Commerce.

Galip Ensarioğlu, another former president of Diyarbakır Chamber of Commerce and Industry agreed that “the Chamber was fighting for a consulate in Erbil”, adding that during each meeting with the political authorities in Ankara he stressed the necessity of this consulate to enable the activities of Diyarbakır’s businessmen to continue. He used his personal political relations to express the needs and problems of local entrepreneurs regarding economic activities in KRG.

The establishment of the Association of Turkish-Iraqi Businessmen and Businesswomen [Türk-İrak Ortadoğu İşadamları ve İşadamları Derneği] in 2009 also allowed businessmen to increase their relations with Turkish and Kurdish leaders to negotiate, without
intermediaries, about their specific requests concerning Turkish-Iraqi trade. The president of this organisation, Sıdıka Halıcıoğlu, and her vice-president, Erkut Temiz, conceived what they called “the summit of the Turkish economy”, in which the president of TOBB, Rifat Hisarcıklıoğlu, and Zafer Çağlayan, former Minister of Economy, obtained direct meetings with the aim of explaining the general problems affecting economic activities between Turkey and Iraq and the requests of all businessmen, not only the requests of members of the association.  

With the explicit consent of the Turkish state through the opening of the consulate, business activities multiplied in Kurdistan. As Soran Aziz, vice-president of Erbil’s Chamber of Commerce, put it, “businessmen began to ‘run’ towards Erbil”. The consulate has facilitated business travel from cities in western Turkey to Iraq. Business people from Turkey had previously been reluctant to seize the economic opportunities offered in the Kurdish region of Iraq due to general prejudices in Turkey about “Kurds”. For example, the secretary general of the Chamber of Industry in Istanbul, who was interviewed immediately following a visit to Erbil with a group of members of the chamber, stated that official diplomatic representation in Erbil eased members’ safety concerns and convinced the board of directors of the Chamber of Industry of Turkey’s largest city to organise a discovery trip:

Indeed, after the crisis [of 2008], Iraq was on the agenda as a potential market among the countries of the region, but we didn’t dare to take a step towards Iraq, for security reasons. Now, when our official representatives called upon us for a possible visit while ensuring security conditions, we decided to go and the political decision of the Turkish state to open a consulate reinforced our decision.

As part of the new trading state policy in the region, and particularly concerning KRG, businessmen played a principal role in developing Kurdish-Turkish relations: “They were equally diplomats, intermediaries, and a source of information for the Turkish government.” Their activities created an interdependent relationship between Turkey and KRG while also convincing politicians to abandon the logic of conflict to bring the political language in line with the economic. In this, they took on the role of a diplomat, who, according to R. Aron, “should lead the diplomatic-strategic conduct and speak on behalf of the collective of the state, accompanied by the ‘soldier’ who kills in the name of the aforementioned collective of the state” (Aron, 2008: 17).

These businessmen currently place a distance between the soldier and the diplomat, and accompany and guide them despite their non-state character. The traditional cooperation between the diplomat and the soldier, the two representatives of the state, have transformed themselves to the benefit of the businessman involved in foreign policy. The case of Turkish businessmen economically active in Kurdistan is a clear example to emphasise the change from a policy determined from a perspective of probable conflict to a policy determined by potential cooperation, especially economic, favoured by the new ruling elite in Turkey, whose political rise is closely linked to Turkey’s economic development.

These economic exchanges have facilitated the development of government policies and official links with KRG. The first official high-level visit to KRG was organised with businessmen accompanied by the then Minister of Foreign Affairs, A. Davutoğlu, and the former Minister of the Economy, Zafer Çağlayan (at the time, the Under-Secretary for Foreign Trade22). According to Sıdıka Halıcıoğlu, President of the Association of Turkish-Iraqi Businessmen and Businesswomen, who was among the entrepreneurs that accompanied the two ministers on this visit, the Turkish state called on
businessmen to organise this first official visit. Halıcıoğlu was called by the Minister of the Economy, who wanted to ensure that she participated in the delegation. However, she politely refused to travel with the ministers:

> Since after all the efforts that I had made with Mr. Dara [Dara Ali, the President of the Chamber of Commerce in Erbil, a central figure in relations between Turkey and KRG] for the development of trade, I wanted to host the ministers as a hostess from Erbil to speak with them about this trade.23

The president's position confirms the distance that entrepreneurs want to keep between themselves and the political sphere in order to stand together with their Iraqi counterparts when a visit with state stakeholders takes place. It also reinforces the relative independence that Turkish entrepreneurs are beginning to have in their relations with the Turkish state, demonstrating that they prefer to preserve their non-state character.

During this visit with the businessmen, A. Davutoğlu officially announced Turkey's decision to open a consulate in Erbil, adding that the diplomatic delegation's members were all to feel at home and that the common will would rebuild the Middle East with feelings of closeness. He also focused on the economic development of Erbil: “We can jointly contribute to the development of Erbil. This will be a bridge between Turkey and Iraq. We [Turkey] are the open door between Iraq and the European Union and Erbil is our open door to Basra” (Zaman Oct. 31, 2009). This visit aroused great enthusiasm in KRG, with headlines like “Turkey has recognised Iraqi Kurdistan” and “Let’s all do business in the Middle East!” (Çubukçu Nov. 3, 2009).

Soran Aziz, Vice President of the Erbil Chamber of Commerce, said with joy shortly before Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan's visit to Erbil in March 2011: “the economy that brought the Prime Minister to Erbil”.24 The two main topics of the meeting between Erdoğan and Barzani concerned the economy and security.

### III. Beyond soft power: From state strategy to non-state actors’ benefits

**Turkish soft power consolidated by the economy**

The economic activities discussed here have contributed to Turkey’s soft power. Soft power is the primary tool of a trading state, which, rather than prioritising its military capabilities above all other advantages, imposes its will through economic strength, language or cultural influence.

The economic activities of businessmen from Turkey have led Iraqi Kurds to learn Turkish, for example. Learning Turkish is becoming increasingly lucrative for the Iraqi Kurdish youth, who consider Turkey as their only opening to the West and international markets.25 Accordingly, Kurdish businessmen and shopkeepers in Erbil, Souleimaniya, Dohuk and Zakho increasingly speak Turkish. Similarly, it is not uncommon nowadays to meet a Kurd who speaks Turkish on the city streets, mentioning Turkish film and television stars, or young Turkish-speaking Kurdish businessmen coming to the consulate in Erbil with their Turkish associates to sign contracts or apply for visas to meet other businessmen in Turkey. As the Commercial attaché of the Turkish consulate in Erbil, D. Kutlu mentioned, visa applications have increased at a “dizzying rate”.26
KRG’s economic dependence on Turkey gives rise to a cultural closeness with Turkey, which wishes to influence the region both culturally and politically, using the instruments of soft power. Turkish private schools, known as “Gülen schools”, have been recently added to Turkey’s presence. Economic exchanges prepare the groundwork for such influence, even in a region whose existence and even name, “Kurdistan”, were long considered taboo and previously expressed with contempt by both Turkish leaders and the Turkish public. Turkey now conducts relations with KRG while trying to avoid conflicts due to the Kurdish question in the region by applying the same strategy developed for all dealings with the Middle East, which avoid direct military intervention while focusing on soft power. As claimed by Meliha Benli Altunışık, despite the limitations imposed by the political and economic structure of the region, Turkey has every chance to pursue a policy of soft power in the Middle East since, as compared to its neighbours in the region, it has implemented social, economic and political structural reforms that make it stronger and influential internationally (Altunışık 2005).

Nearly all the businessmen interviewed noted that economic exchanges have led the Iraqi Kurds to deepen their relations with Turkey, buy real estate in major Turkish cities to spend their holidays and, most importantly, send their children to Turkey for higher education. Muhammad, for example, the son of a businessman from Erbil, who studied law at Bilkent University in Ankara, said that going to study in Turkey is as prestigious as going to the United States or Europe:

All my friends and me, we went to the Turkish school, Işık Koleji, it’s one of the best schools here. Now, thanks to my Turkish, I help my father in his businesses with the Turks.  

The case of relations between Turkey and KRG shows how the mobilisation of economic resources can play a central role in solving political problems caused by previous conflicts. Turkey is consolidating its presence in Kurdistan through its products and culture (language, popular culture), using its soft power as the main tool to aid its goal of becoming a regional power. As for KRG, Kurdish leaders seek to develop their relationship with their Western neighbour, a candidate for the European Union, the 17th global economy, a member of NATO and the G20, in short their only neighbour which is integrated with the Western world and that takes part in the international system. Even if the Kurdish government preferred that the Kurdish region remain within the federal system in Iraq, every Iraqi national crisis that creates obstacles to the KRG’s state building process leads the Kurds to make statements suggesting their possible independence. These statements indicate that independence is the ultimate goal of the Iraqi Kurds, although it has been put on hold by KRG leaders during Iraq’s reconstruction process since 2003. Federal problems have led Iraq’s Kurds to develop independent policies, to seek ways to self-manage their economy (especially regarding oil resources), to establish strong ties with foreign countries through the investment opportunities they offer, and to build an independent foreign policy through these economic relationships. For example, in May 2012, KRG announced a proposed pipeline to transport one million barrels of oil per day to Turkey, which the Turkish Minister of Energy welcomed. However, the central government in Baghdad severely criticised this proposal, denouncing the attitude of the KRG, claiming to be the sole legitimate holder of power concerning Iraq’s natural resources (Çandar May 26, 2012).

This announcement was made after KRG Prime Minister Nachirvan Barzani’s visit to Ankara. Since the beginning of 2012, Ankara’s relations with Baghdad have cooled.
Indeed, Turkey, which had been slow to open a consulate in Erbil, is now beginning to take the Kurdish leaders more seriously and privilege its relations with them to ensure their energy needs. Turkey is beginning to consider the KRG as a future independent state rich in natural resources, a neighbour with whom bilateral relations, which can develop on an economic basis, need to be improved. In fact, Turkey’s trading state foreign policy led by Turkish and Kurdish leaders has allowed them to build a political dialogue that has been gradually transformed into bilateral political relations. The Diyarbakır meeting of Masoud Barzani and Tayyip Erdoğan in November 2013 illustrates perfectly this emergence of a political partnership between Turkish and Kurdish governments. Moreover, despite many structural changes in the Middle East caused by the violence around the Syrian civil war, this partnership persists. Ankara and Erbil, both maintained economic and political ties in order to develop an alliance especially in the domains of energy and security. Border security issues linked to the ISIS threats, involvement of both capitals in the fight against ISIS, Turkey’s military commitment in Bashika base in Mosul, challenges and fight against PKK in the South East Turkey after the failure of the peace process for the resolution of Kurdish question since summer 2015, all made this partnership even more crucial for both sides. In an interview where he has called on global leaders to broker a new deal in the Middle East paving the way for a Kurdish state, KRG president M. Barzani declared that Turkey would not oppose KRG’s independence (Chulov Jan. 22, 2016). What makes this declaration more important is that it was pronounced in a very sensitive period where fights between Turkish security forces and PKK militants were intensive in several city centres in the South East Turkey. That shows Ankara-Erbil relations are going beyond Turkey’s Kurdish question.

**Legitimisation of Kurdish entrepreneurs in Turkey**

The Kurdish question is an international and transnational issue with obvious direct consequences for economic activities between Turkey and KRG that are linked to the minority question at the national level in Turkey. The businessmen’s contribution to the economic development of a Kurdish quasi state in the Middle East is a controversial subject in Turkey with public opinion being quite hostile to the formation of a Kurdish state when business activities started in 2005. The case of Turkey’s Kurdish businessmen thus offers an interesting case to explore how a business group from a marginalised ethnic minority can obtain a new status when its activities are compatible with state-defined foreign policy goals, and how the economy, as a tool of soft power, can become a tool for this particular group to express their regional political demands for southeast Turkey.

Economic activities between Turkey and KRG fall within a context where economics and politics are superimposed. Moreover, they include foreign policy and domestic questions, such as the Kurdish minority issue in Turkey. As previously stated, my field work indicated that the main variable for categorising the businessmen interviewed is ethnicity. Their motivations, modes of access, relations with the political sphere, both in Turkey and KRG, their stakes and challenges, problems and support were basically determined by whether they were ethnic Kurds or Turks. In this sense, the economic commitments of a Kurdish businessman have many more political consequences than those of a Turkish businessman. Even if both groups have been criticised by certain state actors (e.g. the military), political parties (Turkish nationalist parties) and public...
opinion, especially up to 2009, for assisting in KRG’s state building process, which was perceived as a threat to Turkey’s security, Kurdish businessmen, especially those based in the southeast are additionally considered as volunteers and main economic supporters of the Kurdish state formation in Iraq. Until 2010, when the army checkpoint at the Khabour border has stopped its control activities, some Kurdish business people suffered economic damage after they were refused access to the border. However, by opening its consulate in Erbil, the Turkish state confirmed its commitment to bilateral relations and economic activities, which at the beginning were not supported domestically, as tools of Ankara’s foreign policy objectives.

Their compatibility with the state’s foreign policy objectives and soft power strategies allowed Turkey’s Kurdish businessmen to build up a new and special relationship with the political sphere. Soft power, which is traditionally defined, designed and controlled by the state, has become, in the case of Kurdish businessmen, an instrument for non-state actors, giving them the opportunity to create a new and specific space at a national level. Thus their contribution, through an ethnic motivation initially, to the state building process of a neighbouring state, has had consequences for Turkey’s domestic minority question while empowering these non-state actors in relation to Turkish state authority.

As the former president of the Diyarbakır Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Mehmet Kaya, noted, “businessmen’s travels to Iraqi Kurdistan abolished taboos, and trade normalised Turkish-Kurdish relations. This normalisation will change public opinion towards Kurds in Turkey; it will be an opportunity to solve the Kurdish question in Turkey”. He also underlined that the principal reason for his commitment was to contribute to the Southeast’s economic development and obtain opportunities for the resolution of Turkey’s Kurdish question. Ferda Cemiloğlu, a committed Kurdish-origin businesswoman in Turkey-KRG economic and political relations, shares the same will. She stated that she is not doing business in KRG out of economic interest, but for the Kurdish nation’s economic development, which has strategic importance for both Iraqi and Turkey’s Kurds.

Ironically, these particular motivations of Kurdish businessmen are no longer perceived as “a threat” by the state because their activities are in perfect compatibility with Turkey’s foreign policy objectives. For the first time, two major preconditions defined by the state in its relations with businessmen, “legitimacy” and “contribution to national interest” have been met by Kurdish businessmen. This new situation has enlarged their sphere of action so that they are more often invited to political meetings regarding the eventual resolution of the Kurdish question. As their activities match the national interest as defined by the state and its soft power strategies, they obtain legitimacy and access to the political sphere. Most Kurdish businessmen economically active in KRG are also members or representatives of business associations, while their activities in KRG reinforce their civil society affiliations and widen their field of action in negotiations with the Turkish state.

This situation of Kurdish businessmen can be compared to that of Turkish Jewish businessmen who enlarged their negotiation capacities with the state as a minority through their service in the state’s foreign policy objectives, especially in the USA. As R. Kastoryano notes, an international political function was attributed to Jewish businessmen because of their involvement in transnational solidarity networks (Kastoryano 1992). Using this particular tool especially at the end of the Cold war, they
created a pressure group supporting Turkish foreign policy strategies. Alongside their informal affiliation to Turkey’s foreign policy objectives, they simultaneously formed a lobby to negotiate over its community interests.

Legitimate action recognised by the state internationally has thus been transformed into a national level benefit for minority members. As many interviewed Kurdish businessmen reported, these economic activities contribute to southeast Turkey’s economic development. They are allowed by the state thanks to their contribution to foreign policy strategies. Thus Kurdish businessmen have a relative opportunity of access to the political sphere. This situation, actually, could provide the foundations for a Kurdish bourgeoisie. Soft power is strengthened by the participation of economic actors in creating the conditions for a non-state actor group’s political participation. Turkey’s economic soft power has had three main consequences for Kurdish businessmen, especially those based in southeast Turkey: first, taboos related to the existence of a Kurdish state have withered away, making the Kurdish question more freely discussed; second, economic integration has formed the basis of Turkey-KRG relations and reinforced as well as legitimised Kurdish businessmen’s status with state authorities; finally, this economic exchange has enriched investors in southeast Turkey, who could constitute a source for the emergence of a Kurdish bourgeoisie.

**Conclusion**

By developing trade worth 11 billion dollars per year between Turkey and Iraq – according to Turkish Ministry of Economy statistics for 2013 – Turkey’s businessmen have contributed to the economic consolidation of Turkish soft power in the Middle East. As a concept related to power in general, soft power has usually been considered within a state-centric approach. However, soft power strategies require action by non-state actors, such as businessmen, civil society organisations, artists or filmmakers, it is thanks to the contribution of non-state actors that soft power circulates.

The case of Turkey-KRG relations confirms this role of non-state actors. Business activities have been the basis of Turkish-Kurdish relations and contributed to the abandonment of several taboos related to the existence of a Kurdish state in the Middle East. As well as contributing to the Turkish state’s soft power strategies in the Middle East, businessmen are also at the origin of a quite new phenomenon. Thanks to the compatibility of their activities with Turkey’s recent foreign policy strategies, Turkey’s Kurdish businessmen have obtained a new status with state actors. Their activities have been “legitimised”, and they are now able to strengthen their negotiation capacities concerning their political and social demands concerning Turkey’s Kurdish question. Thus, a particular group of non-state actors have benefitted from the consequences of the state’s soft power strategies in order to reintroduce the minority question into domestic debate. The state’s soft power strategy has thus become a tool for this particular group in domestic politics.

The economic activities of Turkey’s businessmen in KRG have created a field for implementing Turkish soft power, paradoxically, despite – and sometimes against – the will and control of the state. By using their capacity for transnational action, these activities are challenging the state. This underlines the complex relation between private actors and the state in foreign policy, and weakens soft power as an analytical concept. This concept, which prioritises the intentions and actions of public actors,
underestimates the complexity of relations between public and private actors, especially the transnational capacities and actions of private actors, as well as their ability to challenge the state and to escape from its control – as demonstrated in the particular case examined in this article. A further question appears about behaviours of these private actors towards the state and vice versa when domestic circumstances change dramatically around the Kurdish question in Turkey. A future fieldwork which will be based on interviews with the same businessmen in the South East can allow to compare the evolution of these business actors’ relations with the state during the official peace process (2013-2015) and in the period of armed conflict between Turkish security forces and PKK (since summer 2015) and to bring explanations to the following question: What role can these local business actors play in the post conflict recovery and reconstruction period in the South East Turkey?

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**NOTES**

1. “We the people of Iraq who have just risen from our stumble, and who are looking with confidence to the future through a republican, federal, democratic, pluralistic system, have resolved with the determination of our men, women, the elderly and youth, to respect the rules of law.” The Iraqi state building process was legally started by this political will proclaimed in the preamble of the 2005 Iraqi constitution. The people of Iraq, which include several ethnic and religious groups, agreed on federal principles. This “exogenous state building” process (see Dodge 2006), led essentially by external actors (especially United States), has faced many difficulties from security to unemployment. The failure of the process worsened sectarian tensions between Shias and Sunnis and reinforced civil war conditions. Yet, in Northern Iraq, the Kurdish government, politically isolated from the rest of Iraq since 1991, undertook a relatively successful state building process. Although this can not be considered separately from the central government in Bagdad, the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) is working in many domains as an autonomous political entity that can be called “a quasi state” (see Özdemirkiran, 2013). Dispersed across four countries (Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria), Kurdish people have never had an independent nation state. Thus, the political transformation in Iraq that started after the US intervention in 1991 gave Iraqi Kurds an opportunity to “govern themselves”. However, they experienced a period of internal fighting in which the territory of Kurdistan in Iraq was divided between the two warring sides of KDP and PUK. The isolated status of Northern Iraq also prevented Kurds from building a state as they lived under a double embargo (international sanctions on the Saddam regime through the oil for food program and economic restrictions imposed by Saddam Hussein against the Kurdish region). In 2005, for the first time in their history, Kurdish people gained federal status and control of economic resources when the Iraqi state was restructured with the constitution of 2005. Today, the KRG has a monopoly of violence in Northern Iraq in Weberian terms, has economic independence from Bagdad as it can control 17% of Iraqi oil, has its own police force and army [peshmerga], uses its own flag and collects taxes. Thus, it is effectively operating as a state (see Pierson 1996). KRG is not completely independent in its foreign policy but has a lot more privileges than many other federal states. For example, KRG controls the Turkey-Iraq and Iran-
Iraq borders so foreigners crossing either border receive a KRG stamp on their passports and has to apply for an Iraqi visa to travel on to the rest of Iraq. KRG has also diplomatic representation abroad and conducts negotiations in its foreign relations, for example with Turkey regarding energy and border security, despite the opposition of central government. In short, although KRG is not officially an independent state, it can clearly categorised as a quasi-state.

2. Interview with Deniz Kutlu, Commercial attaché of Turkish consulate in Erbil, Erbil, January 9, 2011.

3. The data was collected for my PhD thesis. (Özdemirkıran 2013).

4. See Richard Rosecrance’s 2010 article in Foreign Affairs, in which he revisits his idea of a “trading world” to criticise these aspects, above all its imperfections and dysfunctional nature, notably regarding “small” trading states in Southeast Asia.

5. Ayşe Buğra concludes that Turkish businessmen do not behave according to the classical rationality of the market economy and feel a lack of confidence regarding the “legitimacy” of their activities, specifically for obtaining purely material benefits. See also Ayşe Buğra (1987).

6. For a detailed analysis of the rise of business association as an actor in Foreign Policy (organisations such as DEIK, TUSKON) see Altay Atlı’s (2011).

7. MÜSİAD is the acronym for Müstakil Sanayiciler ve İşadamları Derneği, founded in 1999. This association is composed of entrepreneurs that define themselves as “pious” and conservative, generally originally from cities in Anatolia. The “MÜ” in MÜSİAD means müstakil (independent), yet lets itself also be known as müslüman (Muslim in Turkish) and refers to this newly emerging class of the bourgeoisie. For a detailed analysis of this association, see Yankaya (2013).

8. For a comparative analysis of the two associations published before the rise to power of the AKP, see Buğra (1998).

9. The Turkish Confederation of Businessmen and Industrialists (TUSKON) also must be cited her as another leading organisation who contributed to state’s FP strategies abroad, especially in Asia and Africa. Blamed by the government for its alleged ties with the Gülen movement (in conflict with the government since 2013 – see other articles on this movement in this special issue), this organisation does not have an active role anymore in Turkey’s economic diplomacy.

10. For example, Prime Minister Erdoğan declared during his visit to Iraq in 2008 that trade capacity between Turkey and Iraq should reach 25 billion dollars. A strategic cooperation agreement was signed during this visit, with both Iraqi and Turkish leaders underlining the importance of KRG’s participation to economic integration between Turkey and Iraq.


12. Only interviews directly linked to the topic of this special issue are mentioned in this article. For detailed information about the sociological characteristics of the businessmen, see Özdemirkıran (2013).

13. This situation of mutual hostility has increased since KRG President Massoud Barzani was welcomed by Prime Minister Erdoğan in 2013 in Diyarbakır, the symbolic capital city for Turkey’s Kurds, and since the “peace process” on Kurdish question started in Turkey.

14. The International Baghdad Expo was transferred to Gaziantep for security reasons. The fair was organised as the Expo Gateway to Iraq from 2006 to 2010.

15. Interview with Mehmet Arslan, President of Gaziantep Chamber of Commerce, Gaziantep, June 23, 2008.

16. This protocol for the development of economic cooperation was signed between Diyarbakır Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Erbil Chamber of Commerce and Duhok Chamber of Commerce in May 2008. For the content and Mehmet Kaya’s (former President of Diyarbakır Chamber of Commerce and Industry) and Dara Ali’s (former President of Erbil Chamber of Commerce) declarations see (Haberler May 16, 2008).

17. Interview with Galip Ensarioğlu, President of Diyarbakır Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Diyarbakır, May 13, 2009 (G. Ensarioğlu is currently a deputy of AKP).
18. Interview with Sıdika Halıcıoğlu, President of Iraqi Turkish Businessmen and Businesswomen Association et Erkut Temiz, Vice-president of Iraqi Turkish Businessmen and Businesswomen Association, Istanbul, June 4, 2010.


22. During its third term in office, beginning in 2011, the AKP government modified the structure of ministers with the activities of the Under-Secretary for Foreign Trade being re-structured in accordance with the Ministry of the Economy, which was conceived as a new ministry. This decision indicates the importance that AKP leaders accord to international trade in Turkey’s economy as they see foreign trade (exports) as the spine of the Turkish economy.


25. Ibid.

26. Interview with Deniz Kutlu, Commercial attaché of Turkish consulate in Erbil, September 1, 2011.

27. Interview with Muhammed S., Erbil, January 10, 2011.

28. Official negotiations between Turkish state authorities (government, intelligence services, etc.) and Abdullah Öcalan, founder of PKK, in jail on İmralı Island are at the origin of the peace process (known also solution process).

29. According to a 2010 survey carried out by KONDA with 10,393 respondents, over 40% of Turks do not want to share their private sphere with a Kurd (as a neighbour, partner or relative). Even if Turks and Kurds affirm their willingness for a democratic resolution, 32.4% of Turks still think that only coercive methods can resolve the Kurdish question. See (Konda 2011).

30. Thanks to the visits of Turkish President Abdullah Gül in 2009 and Minister of Foreign affairs Ahmet Davutoğlu in 2011, and finally thanks to the opening of the Turkish consulate in Erbil, bilateral political relations have been normalised.

31. Interview with Mehmet Kaya, Diyarbakır, June 2, 2010.

32. Interview with Ferda Cemiloğlu, Erbil, January 9, 2011.

ABSTRACTS

When the new Iraqi constitution was proclaimed in 2005, Kurds obtained the opportunity to build a de facto state in the north of Iraq. As a neighbour state Turkey has involved in the infrastructure construction of Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) through the activities of businessmen although the formation of a Kurdish state in the Middle East was a taboo in Ankara’s foreign policy. These business activities allowed to Turkey and KRG to build bilateral political relations as well as to strengthen Turkey’s soft power in the region. At the same time, as their activities were considered compatible with the state’s foreign policy strategies Kurdish businessmen of Turkey benefitted from these activities to reintroduce a minority question into the domestic political debate. This article shows how by using their capacity for transnational
action, a group of non-state actors contributes to state’s soft power and challenges at the same
time the state in order to strengthen its influence in domestic politics. Through the case of
Turkey’s businessmen in KRG, this article analyzes how the concept of soft power gains a larger
definition as a means for private actors.

INDEX

Keywords: Kurdish Regional Government, KRG-Turkey relations, non-state actors, soft power

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Challenging the Soft Power Analysis
A Case Study of African Students in the Gülen movement’s Turkey

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I. Introductory remarks

1 In March 17 2013, the first advisor for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Naci Koru (belonging to the AKP majority), declared that the Turkish schools [part of the Gülen Movement, a religiously inspired Turkish movement] were the main actor of Turkish foreign policy in the world (Zaman, 17 mars 2013). Nine months later, the conflict between the Erdoğan government and the Gülen Movement reached its zenith on December 17, 2013, when a Turkish public prosecutor filed a case for corruption against personalities close to the AKP government (including sons of ministers). The Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (President of the Turkish Republic since August 2014) accused the Gülen Movement of being the dark force behind this case¹. Consequently, the official discourse of the Turkish minister of education dramatically changed. From acknowledging the role of the Turkish schools as a positive actor for Turkey’s cultural influence, the discourse shifted to a denunciation of the actions of the Turkish schools in the world as a danger, blaming them for indoctrinating students all over the world, and stating that they should instead become Turkish state-controlled (Maasho 2015). As one of the most striking sign of this disavowal, the Turkish minister of education took back its support from one of the most followed events of the year in the Turkish media: The Turkish Olympiad, organized by associations openly belonging to the Gülen Movement in which children from all over the world, schooled in Gülen schools abroad (known as Turkish schools) would come in Istanbul to perform Turkish poetry, songs and folkloric dances as a testimony to Turkey’s growing influence abroad.

2 What appears behind this surprising shift of public discourse concerning the Gülen Movement’s schools is the idea, taken for granted, of their strong influence (positive or negative according to one’s political orientation) on Turkey’s image beyond its borders. In this article, we will question the concept of soft power with regards to the concrete consequences of the educational action of the Turkish Muslim Movement, the Gülen Movement in Sub-Saharan Africa.
The Gülen Movement: an overview

The Gülen Movement (GM) is a Muslim group formed at the end of the 1960's in Turkey whose discourse focuses on the social commitment of its followers to “service” for humanity (hizmet in Turkish, which is the name its members use to describe the Gülen Movement as a whole). Built around the charismatic personality of Fethullah Gülen, a Turkish preacher who currently resides in the USA, the movement is inspired by Sufi writings, and particularly the neo-Sufi Nurcu group (the followers of Sâid Nursî). This religious tradition focuses on education which is considered a way to combine modern reasoning and religious faith thus good morality in order to preserve a threatened Islamic civilization. Fethullah Gülen became famous in the 1970's for the charismatic speeches he was giving as an imam in Izmir. During this period, a small number of university students started constituting this group, organizing reading camps within a military atmosphere. In the next decades, this growing number of individuals organized in religious, educational, financial (Asya Finans), business (with the businessmen association TUSKON) and media institutions (with several press and TV media groups) connected in a vast network with a great capacity to mobilize both human and financial resources. The network used the phases of the political opening of Turkish politics (such as in the 80’s when Özal’s Motherland party’s [ANAP] government and the Gülen movement started to collaborate in the framework of economic liberalization) in order to expand, and tried to lay low during the repressive periods (in 1980 the Gülen Movement supported the military coup trying to show his pro-state vision, but was still persecuted). In 1999, officially for health reasons but linked to trouble with the Turkish judiciary, Fethullah Gülen fled to the USA. Yet in 2002, the arrival of the AKP (the Justice and Development Party, a right wing conservative party) as a governing party opened a new phase of collaborations between these two actors both inside and outside Turkey. Consequently, Ankara relied upon the Gülen movement as a resource for its international opening.

Indeed, the followers of this faith-based movement created a tremendous network around the world. The network of schools dramatically expanded over the past 20 years, starting with Central Asia (Balci 2003) at the beginning of the 1990’s, Africa and the Balkans in the second-half of the 90s and the USA and Europe from the end of the 90s (Van Bruinenssen 2014). Turks started establishing schools in Africa from 1996 onwards, opening schools in more than 40 sub-Saharan countries.

The peculiarity of the Gülen movement, a successful national and transnational religious enterprise, has been widely studied by academics. A first trend of the literature on the Gülen Movement (Yavuz, Esposito 2003; Yavuz 2003; Özdalga 2000, 2005; Turam 2007) in terms of civil society, focuses on the way the Gülen Movement as a religious group can be a democratizing power in Turkey. These authors tend to draw the genealogy of the movement to locate it in the religious and political context of Turkey. A second trend (Balci 2003; Tittensor 2014) characterizes the Gülen movement as a religious organization by inserting it into the framework of globalization. These authors refer to the idea of mission in order to describe the educational activities of this religious movement worldwide. A third trend (Agai 2004; Hendrick 2012, 2013), more centered on a sociology of the movement in itself, implements an organizational analysis describing its functioning from the inside. These authors try to explain the dynamics of commitment in the movement and the way its structure evolves according
to the different social contexts. This article follows the third trend, focusing on a sociological analysis of the Gülen movement as an institution. Yet it attempts to fill in a gap in these works by introducing the point of view of the recipients in a dynamic manner to understand what the Gülen movement as an institution represents for the actors (Turkish or African): their interactions are what constitutes the concrete experience of the Gülen movement, on a daily basis.

**The Gülen Movement between Turkey and sub-Saharan Africa**

Different reasons explain the strong educative investment of the Gülen movement in sub-Saharan Africa. Religiously speaking, Africa is perceived by the followers as a poor continent both economically and morally, necessitating the help of teachers-missionaries willing to fight against “poverty, ignorance, and intolerance”. In this sense, the followers implement a liberal conception of education in Africa focusing on the elite’s formation (Angey forthcoming). What’s more, Africa is a continent with a strong economic potential arousing the interest of emerging countries like China, Brazil and Turkey. In Turkey, businessmen close to the Hizmet work hand in hand with the Turkish teachers to open schools (L’Afrique... 2011). These educational activities by Turkish actors in Sub-Saharan Africa have also been encouraged in the framework of the Turkish opening to Africa betting on the economic potential of Turkish–African exchanges almost nonexistent until the beginning of the 1990’s relying upon the initiatives of private actors such as the Gülen Movement (Angey 2014). Africa has for long been a land of experimentation for hybrid forms of religious enterprises both exterior and local. As such, this article is part of a wider literature concerning transnational religious enterprises in Africa which both “transcend national boundaries and reinvent ‘nations’ that have authority to provide matrices of universality” (Fourchard, Mary, Otayek 2005), thus questioning the authority of states to structure the circulation of its citizens. Among these transnational religious enterprises, a few networks such as Aga Khan (Daftary 2003) and the Gülen movement have been successful in opening elite schools targeting rich students.

Part of the students of the Turkish schools in Africa (whose proportion varies according to the social context, the financial strength of the movement in this country, and the educative opportunities provided to the nationals there) decide to pursue University studies in Turkey. Is it the success of what is often called “Turkish soft power”? 

**Purpose and argument**

According to Nye, soft power relies upon attractiveness, as a means to shape what the other wants in a sense that is convenient without having to resort to coercion or payoffs (Nye 1990). My article will focus on education, which constitutes an element of Nye’s soft power definition. The soft power literature concerning Turkey rather tends to focus on diplomacy and business since Turkey as an emerging country had not been until lately an important education center in the world. The literature on Turkish foreign influence often uses “soft power” without a critical view. It can be presented as a synonym of “diplomacy” as opposed to “military power” (Çandar 2009) that reduces the scope of the definition given by Nye. In other cases, it is used in a normative manner (soft power is seen as the power of a democratized, economically open Turkey whose ability to combine Islam and democracy is seen as an inspiration by Arab
countries) without questioning the power balances hidden behind this concept (Altunışık 2008). In this sense the contribution of Kerem Öktem and Yohanan Benhaïm (in this EJTS issue) shows the political stakes of labelling soft power in Turkey.

9 Through a concrete case study focusing on one aspect of Turkish influence beyond its borders, higher education, this article calls into question the relevance of the use of the concept of soft power in the studies focusing on Turkish initiatives towards foreign countries. Nye (2005) used higher education as an exemplary resource of attraction. In his book *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (2004), Nye focuses on types of attraction that can develop soft power. According to him, the three main vectors of soft power are culture, foreign policy and political values. He divides culture between high culture (education, art, literature), addressing the elites, and popular culture, addressing mass entertainment.

10 In this perspective, our theoretical criticism of the concept of soft power will be structured around 3 points.

11 First of all, according to Nye, education is a source of soft power, understood as attractiveness, as a way to shape others' desires. Students who come and study in a country would keep a close link with the country they studied in which would in turn be useful for the country of reception, when those students take over positions of power in the economy or the political sphere of their own society (Nye 2005). Consequently, many academics convey this type of idea as an obvious truth, without testing it. We are not denying the possibility for an experience of educational socialization in a country to have a consequence over one person’s trajectory, making him more sympathetic with the country. Yet empirical evidence must be gathered in order to confirm this hypothesis. Indeed, as Stuart Hall’s famous case study focusing on the encoding and decoding of media messages shows, we know that emitting a message or putting in motion an action does not mean it is going to be taken for granted by those who receive it (Hall 1973). In this case, my criticism would focus on the obvious idea that African students schooled in Turkey will be part of the rapprochemen between Turkey and the African continent. This idea cannot be asserted as a generality without any proper ethnographic study. Studying the “decoding” by African students of the Gülen Movement’s objectives is a way to reintroduce the recipients into the equation, and thus refuse along with Michel de Certeau to consider them as passive. Consequently, I intend to study the “arts de faire”, the inventive tactics of the African students as “the ingenious ways in which the weak make use of the strong, thus lend[ing] a political dimension to everyday practices” (Certeau 1984: XVIII).

12 The second set of criticism focuses on the unclear conceptualization of the relation between public and private actors in the soft power theory. In Nye’s theory, it seems that the action of private actors will necessarily go in the way of a wider national soft power. Or whenever it goes the other way, Nye just seems to give both private and state actors the possession of different soft powers without going further. The soft power concept thus fails to describe the complexity of situations of expansion of public and private actors outside Turkey and the complicated conflictual, negotiated, supportive, “discharged” (Hibou 1999) type of relations that exist between them.

13 The last set of criticism questions the centrality of “attractiveness” in the soft power theory. The fact that a country is capable of bringing students from foreign countries to its universities is analysed as one of the main proofs of a country’s attractiveness, a sign of a country’s strength. Yet, from the African students’ point of view, educational
choices are entailed in a field of possibilities (“champ des possibles” in French). Taking into account the national, cultural, historical and economic frames in African students’ choices is necessary to produce a rigorous analysis of their experience in the Gülen Movement.

I argue that the concept of soft power can be considered as a “category of practice” (used by actors in everyday settings to make sense of themselves, of their activities, of what they share with, and how they differ from, others). However, it cannot be accepted as a “category of analysis” (the “experience-distant categories used by social analysts” in an academic context) (Brubaker, Cooper 2000). In an effort to go “beyond the concept of soft power”, I will stress the complexity of situations of influence, types of actors and interactions between them. The relations between Turks and Africans in a situation where the Turkish actors try to gain influence over Africans will be at the centre of the article.

Here I intend to show how the strategy of influence developed by a private actor such as the Gülen Movement whose members are moved by their own agendas can be re-appropriated, re-interpreted by African individuals that experience their own trajectory from Africa to Turkey in this movement. To do so, I will rely upon a micro-level study of the migration of African students to Turkey who came through the channel of the gülen Turkish schools in Africa to pursue their studies in Istanbul.

The methodology used is a qualitative one with interviews with seventeen African students or former students who came to Istanbul through the GM: three from Nigeria (a man and two women), eight from Senegal (five women and three men), two men from South Africa and three men from Kenya. Sixteen of the interviewed were schooled in a university close to the Gülen Movement (Fatih University) which includes in its ranks students who just finished the Gülen secondary schools all around the world. In the framework of my PhD thesis research in Kenya, South Africa, and Senegal I developed connexions with African students in Fatih University. The Nigerian students are the main African group of students in Fatih University (along with Malians) and I met them while socializing with other African students and attending social events in the university. All those students had just finished high school when they first arrived in Istanbul. When interviewed, they were between 19 and 26 years old (one of them had already graduated and was a businessman in Istanbul by that time) at undergraduate or post-graduate levels in scientific, information and communication technologies and management areas (which is the speciality of Fatih University). Most of the interviews were informal, given that interknowledge networks had brought us together. Participant observation has also been conducted in the Light Houses of Istanbul, apartments where students of the Gülen movement stay together. I was invited to stay over at some Light Houses for female students (since gender separation in home spaces is strict in the Gülen Movement) and also attended events where the “African community” would gather as such in the public spaces of the university. This research was carried out between 2011 and 2014.

I argue that unlike the preconceived idea that any education would be both a sign of attractiveness and a source of ability to shape other’s countries desire in the way the Turkish state would want to (what a soft power type of analysis would conclude), the migration of African students to Turkey through the Gülen Movement represents a real challenge for the Gülen movement itself. Furthermore, it would even represent an
obstacle in its strategy of influence on African elites and on the deepening of Turkey’s collaboration with them.

II. The Role of the Gülen movement in African students’ mobility in Turkey

First of all, I will describe the factors through which African students schooled in a Turkish school in their country of origin decide to come to Istanbul in order to pursue their university studies.

Reaching elite families

Turkish schools are established in around 40 African countries. The school fees are high (between 3,500 and 8,500 euros per year with boarding in the studied countries) allowing the schools to recruit children from rich families (to which can be added a proportion of students receiving a scholarship on a criterion of excellence). African parents send their children to these schools because of their very effective preparation for national exams based on a very competitive conception of education.

As a university professor and a member of the Board of the Gülen Movement’s schools in South Africa puts it during an interview in Johannesburg:

The people we are targeting are going to be important political leaders or businessmen. By educating them and making them respectful human beings with a sense of responsibility they will behave well with their inferiors who will do so with their inferiors and so on.

This relies upon a pyramidal conception of society and an elitist vision of social progress. From a strategic organizational perspective, imposing such high fees furnishes economic resources for the schools to grow (schools are part of non-profit organizations where the money earned aims at expanding the network of schools). As one of board member of the South African network puts it “If we chose to open charity schools we would open one school in each country. Since it is private, we can open ten schools instead of one”. But above all, the objective is to target potential economic and political resources through the African students. Indeed, this strategy provides a direct access to a number of rich African families, most of them active in business or politics that are very useful resources for the Gülen movement. For example, the father of a Senegalese Turkish school student is doing both politics and owns one of Dakar’s football teams. The Senegalese businessman and Turks of the Hizmet in Senegal have been doing business and he is now renting the field over which the new school of Dakar has been built. Lastly, it provides a link with the future elite of the African country and some access to resources. As an important figure of the Gülen Movement in Istanbul states:

Of course we tend to reach rich and remarkably clever people. Because their reach within the society will be wider than the reach of a taxi driver or a bakkal owner for instance. If we can touch them, we can also touch more individuals. These people will have influence.

Having an influence over local elites is a way to spread the movement’s values but also to obtain facilities (in infrastructures, business, political support, etc.).
The strategic ambiguity in the African settlement

Joshua Hendrick defines the Gülen Movement as a “graduated network of affiliation” structured in different circles. These circles correspond to different degrees of adhesion to the values of Fethullah Gülen and of commitment to the social actions of the movement. The most central circle is the Cemaat, the hierarchized circle at the core of the community. The second one is constituted by the Arkadaşlar, a large network of devout persons living according to the teachings of Fethullah Gülen. Then come the Sympathizers, supporters of the action of the Hizmet who participate from time to time in activities organized by the movement to support them. Last but not least, the consumers are those individuals who, sometimes without even knowing it, “buy” products of the GM’s (education, business) for the mere reason that they are the best available in a competitive market place.

“Strategic ambiguity” means members of the Gülen Movement would adopt different practices and discourses according to the different circles of sociability they are in. “The Gülen Movement network mobilizes in accordance with an ambiguous prescription of action (aksiyon) which allows its followers to consistently redefine their identity to meet any obstacles or challenges that might arise” (Hendrick 2012: 207). According to the location of an individual in the circles, there is a change of discourse and practices that characterizes the “strategic ambiguity” of the GM as a whole. This is the scheme on which the Gülen Movement based its expansion. It is one of the reasons why our research reveals most of the African students coming to study in Turkey did not know of Fethullah Gülen before coming to Turkey and had no idea of the existence of a vast network of followers over the world (see below).

Here I will examine the factors of African students’ choice of mobility in Turkey.
The Gülen Movement’s ability to attract through flexibility and transnational resources

The Gülen Movement ability to attract students from Africa to Turkey relies upon the strength of its network as a horizontal space of integration. Indeed, it connects different housing institutions, schools and businesses in a transnational space. The network allows the GM to have facilities for the transfer of students from Africa to Turkey, since it has the economic and social resources to do so. In spite of it being widely spread, the GM distinguishes itself by its effectiveness in creating bonds with outside people such as African students. As a Senegalese student in Istanbul puts it, “Once you are with them, they will not let you down”.

The capacity of the movement to integrate individuals and produce circulation between different spaces constitutes the main explanation of the success of the movement in bringing African students in Istanbul. Indeed, when asked what motivated them to go to Turkey, the African students in Istanbul mention the following reasons:

Firstly, the decision of African students to study in Turkey is entailed in the field of possibilities open to them when they are in Africa. The decision to go to Turkey appears when their planned project of study in their home country, Europe, the USA or Canada fails. It can be a problem with the visa (to Europe or the USA) or overly expensive fees. It is also the case when the national education offer is perceived as unsuitable by the students and their parents. It reveals that Turkey’s universities are not yet competitive with the American, Canadian or European ones in the students’ imaginations.

The trajectory of M., a Senegalese male, former student in Istanbul, illustrates this motive: “When the Turks [here the Turkish teachers of the Gülen school in Senegal] offered me to go to Turkey for my studies my first reaction was to refuse because, well, I know them and they are too narrow-minded for me and at school well I was not a big fan of them. But my mum told me I had to go to a foreign country and that, well, Cheick Anta Diop’s university (Dakar’s most prestigious public university) was a mess, always on strike, no money. So eventually I decided to go to Fatih University (in Istanbul)”.

D., another Senegalese former student in Istanbul, now living in Dakar, goes further: “Actually, my dad sent me to the Turkish schools because they [the Turks from the Gülen Movement in Dakar] let him know that I could obtain a scholarship for university in a foreign country afterwards. And of course I wanted to go study in a foreign country. That’s the thing in Senegal; we all wanted to go outside, to the States, Canada, and France. In Senegal it’s almost compulsory if you want to work in a big company. My dad and I really wanted me to go to Canada. After my baccalauréat, I applied and even got accepted in a private university in Ottawa. But the fees were so high and the people in my [Turkish] school could only help us to go to Turkey. So at the last minute, I accepted the offer to go to Istanbul”.

Here we can see that unlike what is presented in Nye’s theory, Turkey as a whole is not perceived as an attractive country. Instead, the students prefer Western countries’ universities to pursue their studies. Even more, a private Turkish actor identified as such by the African students, the Turkish schools of the GM, is perceived as attractive because it might give them opportunities to study in the USA or Canada (but not Turkey which is never presented as a first wish by students). Entailed in a limited
horizon of possibilities, African students reassess their projected career by accepting to go to Turkey. Here we can see the importance of the different local contexts and opportunities offered to students. As our field research revealed, much less students from South Africa came to Turkey to pursue their studies than Senegalese students. Indeed, the educational opportunities in South Africa are greater and provide different possibilities from selective quality public universities (University of Kwa Zulu Natal, University of Wits) to private universities. Asked about this issue, a teacher in South Africa stated “Of course for us it is tougher to send students to Turkey. Because in South Africa, there are many good universities, so students are not as eager to move as in other African countries”.

Secondly, one of the main reasons brought up by African students who came to Istanbul through the GM is the dedication of the teachers in their Turkish schools to persuade them to go to Turkey.

After her baccalauréat in the Turkish school of Dakar, a Senegalese girl, now a student in Istanbul, had first registered in the Senegalese university of Cheickh Anta Diop in medicine. “But we were more than 600 students in the medicine amphitheatre. While you know in Yavuz (the Turkish school in Dakar) they took too much care of us. So I was not used to it”.

While she was hesitating to give up university in Dakar, she received a phone call from the human resource responsible of her former Turkish school offering to enrol her for the next semester in a Turkish university and to take care of all the administrative steps. She finally accepted and has been studying in Turkey for 4 years.

This brings us to another strength of the movement as a network positioned in different social spaces: it offers to take care of all the administrative steps such as getting a visa and enrolling in a Turkish university for the African students. It also offers to host them in dormitories or shared flats. To sum it up, the resources of the social transnational space constituted by the GM between its different countries of settlement and Turkey are used to organize the transfer of students. This is made possible not only through the dedication of the teachers who do the follow-up, but also through the network’s ability to mobilize the resources of its transnationality from Africa to Turkey.

Lastly, when trying to encourage the parents to send their children to Turkey, the Turkish teachers in the Turkish schools of Africa may promote the image of Turkey as a Muslim conservative country, more appropriate than the Western countries for a student. Here when Turkish teachers in Africa try to persuade their Muslim students’ parents to send their child to Turkey they promote an idea of good Muslim morality. Reportedly, Turkey is presented as the heir of the Ottoman Empire, a country of pious Muslims at the image of their action in Africa. Here they project a model of Turkey as an antithesis to Western countries (notably France and the USA), supposedly in moral decay.

When asked why she came in Turkey after studying in a Turkish school a Muslim female-student from Nigeria in Istanbul since 2011 answered:

I don’t know, my dad convinced me. Because my dad says according to them in Turkey I would be in a country with an Islamic background. And my dad wanted me to have an Islamic background here. But of course it is the opposite here. Most of them here [the Turks of Istanbul] don’t even pray, they don’t really cover their heads. Here they have more of a European culture.
Turkish teachers in Africa manage to create an image of good morality which is reassuring for parents when they have to take the decision of sending their children away from home.

Criticizing the vision of Nye concerning academic institutions as a source of soft power, Todd Hall, associate professor of International Relations at Oxford University explains, “it is difficult to parse out attraction from other possible mechanisms” (Hall 2010). Indeed, as demonstrated, the choice to study in Turkey for African students results more from the strength of the network format of the Gülen Movement and from the field of possibilities in which the African students are embedded than from an attraction towards Turkey and its education system.

Furthermore, we can question another aspect of Nye’s theory according to which each country would promote a fixed set of what constitutes its “values” to enforce its soft power. Attaching specific sets of values to a country (as Nye did with the USA, whose soft power would come from the values of democracy and liberalism it embodies and promotes) in a normative way, blurs the reality of the competition of different groups for the definition of a nation’s values. In Nye’s literature, soft power is sometimes “employed to advocate and justify a certain set of values and a specifically liberal conceptualization of American identity as central to US international power” (Hall 2010: 196). Similarly, the soft power literature concerning Turkey tends to essentially associate with Turkey a specific set of values (changing according the time and the authors) such as Turkey as a model of “laïcité” for the Muslim countries or in the 2000s, Turkey as a synthesis between capitalism, democracy and Islam. Yet, values are promoted by different groups (state and non-state actors) with their own framings and conception of what is considered as good and evil, and an ideal society and their own agendas. There is no essential set of values that would characterize Turkey. Instead, different Turkish groups (various state actors -the army or the foreign ministry-, and civil society actors - business associations, NGOs and religious networks like the Gülen movement) are trying to promote abroad political values they associate with Turkey according to their own agenda. In the case of the GM, promoting Turkey as a conservative Muslim country to the Muslims students’ parents is a way to attract them to Turkey. It also corresponds to the ideal of the core followers of Fethullah Gülen in Turkey as the cradle for an Islam based on self-sacrifice, community and social activism.

As we see, this African student who later on discovers Turkey has a fairly different experience of what she perceives as Turkish culture.

D., a former Senegalese student in Istanbul, now working in a Turkish school in Dakar, Senegal, describes this discrepancy:

("The fact that many students have difficulties in Istanbul is due to the discrepancy you see there in Istanbul. On the one side, they [the Turks from the Light houses in Istanbul] are very strict, very conservative, which would be okay for us. But on the other side, we can see that apart from the Hizmet [named given by the followers of the GM to their group], the Turks don’t live this way. They drink, smoke and all. We don’t want it but it’s just that they impose a frame to us and we can see that people are not really living like this in Turkey. I mean in Istanbul at least.")

This student describes the experience, necessarily out of phase with the vision promoted by the Turks in the Senegalese school, of a complex Turkish society in which different ways of life cohabitate.
III. The African students’ trajectory from the margins to the core of the GM

The success of the movement is demonstrated through its ability to channel an African elite, with a strong economic potential, to Turkey where it will be schooled in universities close to the movement. The students pass through the transnational social space of the Gülen Movement experiencing the different circles of sociability of the movement.

The movement from the consumers to the core of the GM

In their country, African students are part of the fourth circle corresponding to the consumers. They enrol in a Gülen school because it “is the best available in a competitive market place”. This idea is confirmed by interviews led both in the schools in Kenya, South Africa and Senegal and in Turkey with African students showing that most of them did not even know of Fethullah Gülen until they came to Turkey. Once arrived in Istanbul, the African students channelled through the GM get closer to the core of the GM, since they are included in the circle of sociability of the Arkadaşlar, those devoted friends of the GM (yet not pertaining to the decision-making group of the movement, the Cemaat). As a South African student in Istanbul puts it, “That’s only when we arrived here [in Istanbul] that we realized the big machine we were into”. In Istanbul, the students are indeed entirely socialized into the core of the movement’s activities.

As part of the strategic ambiguity, the existence of different circles of sociability also implies a variation in the practices and discourses in the Gülen Movement itself. While they were still in Africa, the Turkish teachers playing the role of intermediaries between Africa and Turkey informed them that they could be offered housing in Istanbul, which most of them accepted easily. Once arrived, students discover a rather constraining context. A conservative life organization is much more strongly imposed in the Arkadaş circle of the movement than on its fringes. First of all, the housing furnished to the African students is mostly Light Houses (İşık Evleri). Funded according to Gülen’s recommendations, these are places for the students to live according to Muslim values. They are conceived as a protective cocoon for Muslims against a decaying Turkish society. In the GM’s Light Houses, every foreigner has to share his flat with 3 to 4 other Turks so that he is encouraged to learn Turkish quickly. Then, the students have to conform the strict gender separation promoted inside the Arkadaş circle of the movement according to which houses are gender separated and any mixed social activity is strongly discouraged inside or outside the university. The curfew is at 6pm (in general, there is a certain room for manoeuvre in the different houses) and internet is forbidden (even though every student now has it on his cell phone). At last, the Muslim students from Africa are encouraged (even if it is not compulsory) to pray 5 times a day and are enticed to join the lecture camps where Nursi and Gülen’s books are read. These rules are enforced by the abi (old brother) or abla (old sister) who look after their fellow students in each house.

What’s more, most of the students attend universities close to the Gülen Movement in Istanbul, such as Fatih University or Süleyman Şah University which have agreements with the Turkish schools all around the world, which explain why most of the African
students are directed towards them. In these universities, a lighter yet still present social control is enforced, leaving them limited spaces for other types of behaviours.

47 As a consequence, when coming to Turkey, the students experience a change of position from the “Consumers” to the “Arkadaşlar” circle of the movement which provokes strong reactions from the African students. This is a negative consequence of the “strategic ambiguity” of the movement due to an imbalance of information between what African students expected and what they are confronted with when they arrive in Turkey. This informational imbalance strengthens the opposition reactions of African students (see below “African students’ reappropriation and diversions”).

48 In Istanbul, during the preparation meeting of the festival “This is Africa” organized by African students of Fatih University to promote Africa in their school, one of the African students expressed himself on the debate over extra-school activities which are always separated between men and women, as the rest of the African students complained. He declared: “We have to be able to adapt to this country and to this university. By accepting to come here we knew what to expect”. Interestingly enough, the rest of the African students in the public, answered vigorously “No, precisely, that’s what we did not know! That’s the point”. Eventually, the speaker corrected himself and admitted they [African students] might not have been aware of the way of life they would be imposed in Istanbul, but that still now that they were here, they should adapt21.

49 I would argue that the strategic ambiguity of the movement is a problem in the attempt to “transfer” African students from the local African space in which they are only consumers of the GM into the Turkish space where they are expected to become active members of the GM.

50 Here again, the Christians students, coming from Africa through the Turkish schools to Turkey should be differentiated. First of all, their number is, according to my research in Fatih University, very limited (a few from South Africa and from New-Guinea). According to the testimonies, this would not be due to a discriminating approach by the Turks in their schools in Africa, but rather to a self-limitation of the students themselves who identify Turkey first of all as a Muslim country and are less attracted. Then, the Hizmet Abi and Abla seem to try to find a negotiating way for the non-Muslim students who arrive in Turkey. Non-Muslim students are offered to learn more about Islam, they are enticed to join the reading camps but are not compelled to convert and to pray22.

51 As a Muslim Senegalese male student sums it up: “I think with the Christians they [the Turks from the Hizmet] don’t really know how to behave. Generally they are cooler with them. The Christians are freer than we are. They accept behaviours from them that they would never tolerate from us, that’s for sure! 23”.

Strategies and tactics in the integration of African students in the Gülen Movement

52 Sending students from Africa to Turkey is interesting from the point of view of the GM since the inclusion of outside elites in its ranks is a way for the movement to keep growing beyond Turkey’s borders.
The integration of African students is part of the GM’s strategy of growth as an organization.

The students from Turkey living in the Light Houses in Istanbul and studying in the same universities as their African counterparts, who accept to become active members of the “Arkadaşlar” circle, are seen as future active collaborators of the movement. They are offered to become teachers or local managers of a school or a hospital created by the movement in the world and if they succeed, they are destined to make a career in the movement by circulating from country to country. They are then expected to enter the transnational space of opportunity opened by the GM and to pursue their career and experience a strong social promotion.

Even though they are socialized with their Turkish peers in the Light Houses in Istanbul, the African students are not offered the same type of opportunity. They are asked to play the role of intermediaries in the local insertion of the movement in their country of origin, but not to do a career in the transnational space of the GM. For example, in South Africa, the Fountain Educational Trust offers South African students scholarships to study Islamic and educative studies in Istanbul. These studies are targeted in order to educate students in Istanbul who will then be fit to collaborate with the Turkish managers of the schools and play the role of intermediaries in the South African territorialisation of the movement as teachers, for instance. The objective of the managers of the Turkish schools in Africa is to have locals (i.e., Africans) managing the Turkish schools in their own country of origin. A., a male manager or Turkish schools in South Africa declares: “We want the schools to be run by locals in Africa as it is the case in Central Asia. But these persons must support our values: we would like them to be Hizmet-conscious.”

African students are offered to become intermediaries in the local African space for the Gülen movement but never a position as manager of the Gülen movement, as can be the case for their Turkish peers.

When asked about the reason why Africans are not offered the same opportunities as the Turkish students, the same manager adds:

Because we need them: in South Africa there are teachers from Azerbaijan and even Mongolia because now most of the schools in Central Asia are ruled by locals. So teachers from Central Asia can become teachers in other countries. If it is not the case for Africans, it is because we still need them locally in their own countries. [He later admits:] But until now it did not work so much. We are still learning in Africa.

The attempt of insertion of African students as local intermediaries in the local insertion of the GM in Sub-Saharan Africa seems to have a limited success. Interestingly enough, the African students are not offered to circulate even in the African space, where circulation of teachers is still limited to Turkish members of the Gülen movement or Central Asians. The Central Asian former students, one of the regions where the Gülen schools have been organized for the longest time and where an historical and cultural common history is shared, tend to play a large role in the ranks of the Gülen missionaries all around the world. While African students, arguably only for pragmatic management reasons (the Turkish missionaries still need to have African intermediaries in the schools) are still only directed to their country of origin. Of
course, other questions could be raised: the matter of cultural distance, the racial frontier. But we cannot say anything conclusive on this topic, and can only stick to the observation that for now, African students are only offered a limited possibility of social promotion in the Gülen movement.

Consequently, African students tend to re-appropriate or even divert the frameworks in which they are put.

**African students’ reappropriation and diversions**

The African students arriving in Istanbul realize the informational imbalance in the GM. Indeed they went from a consumer role, where they had no awareness of the existence of the Gülen movement, to a central circle of the movement with the highest level of constraints on their life. Meanwhile, they also notice that the only career proposed to them is a local carrier for the Hizmet movement back in their country of origin, and that there is no possibility of social promotion for them in the Gülen Movement’s transnational social space. What’s more, Africans also have their own projects for themselves in their country of origin or in Turkey, taking into account that most of them come from wealthy families providing them with social and economic capital which widens their horizon of possibilities.

Consequently, the African students tend to express their discontent and convert the constraints of their experience into resources. By this I mean, they implement tactics (Certeau 1984) in order to reappropriate some power relations:

I call a ‘tactic,’ [...], a calculus which cannot count on a ‘proper’ (a spatial or institutional localization), nor thus on a border-line distinguishing the other as a visible totality. The place of a tactic belongs to the other. A tactic insinuates itself into the other’s place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance. It has at its disposal no base where it can capitalize on its advantages, prepare its expansions, and secure independence with respect to circumstances. [...] because it does not have a place, a tactic depends on time — it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized ‘on the wing.’ Whatever it wins, it does not keep. It must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into ‘opportunities.’ The weak must continually turn to their own ends forces alien to them (Certeau 1984: XX).

In the framework of this new environment in which African students are immersed with its own unknown codes, Africans are going to invent tactics, seizing opportunities in their everyday life in the Gülen Movement’s Istanbul to renegotiate their position. To describe their varied behaviors, I shall use the typology proposed by Albert O. Hirschman (1995), in which the different types of demonstration of discontent in an organization are categorized. He presents exit, voice and loyalty as three possible conducts in case of disagreement or dissatisfaction. I added the category of “exit with benefits” as a fourth possible conduct.

Exit consists in the silent demonstration of discontent by leaving a social group. Numerous students coming from Turkish schools in Africa decide to leave the movement totally.

A 20 year-old Nigerian female student in Bahçeşehir University decided to leave the Light House and then the whole movement after only a week:

I just kept crying and crying because I was afraid to be alone [She was the only Nigerian in the house and the other Turks were not speaking good English] and
they were controlling everything I was doing. It was too much. So I just decided to register in the dormitory of my university, here in Istanbul. At first they were calling me to try to make me take part to the activities they even called my dad to scare him, saying that I would not be able to manage by myself in Istanbul. But now they totally gave up and I have literally no contact whatsoever with the movement.

This student, coming from a wealthy family quickly decided to get out of the Light House, where she felt the constraints would be too heavy. Through a Nigerian friend she got to know in the university she decided to take her independence extremely quickly and cut the contacts with the movement. As we can see, she came to Turkey through the movement, which persuaded her to come and helped her with her application process for university and the visa but then decided to get out of the movement, which could easily be done since her family was rich and her dad supported her choice.

What I call “Exit with benefits”, is a progressive exit from the movement while using the resources it can procure for the construction of one’s own career. Africans can use the resources proposed by the GM in Turkey in order to prepare their future exit from the movement.

The following profile corresponds to a Senegalese male former student. During his university studies, this student slowly took his distance from the movement, left the Light House until cutting every contact with the core of the movement at the end of university. But he used the network of businessmen he met and his knowledge of the Gülen movement’s economic institutions like TUSKON to be hired in an African company located in Turkey. He used the resources he could access through his experience in the GM (learning language, economic networking) that he developed patiently for years in the prospect of making a career for himself.

Many students are in this same situation. Very few of them abruptly leave the movement after a few months only. Most of them keep a link with the movement even if they leave the Light Houses (which is very common in the African students’ community). They take part in the business summits organized by TUSKON as translators, for instance. While progressively leaving, they take advantage of the networks and resources made available to them in Turkey by the Gülen Movement.

Hirschman defines Voice as an individual or collective protest aiming at changing the organization or one’s position in the organization from the interior.

A rich Senegalese student in Fatih University refused to pray and did not respect the curfew. As a strategy to impose her desire for more freedom, she threatened to call her father, with whom the Turks from the Turkish schools are doing business in Senegal. The supervisor of their flat was afraid that she would complain and tarnish the reputation of the Turkish schools and teachers in Dakar. They decided to let her be. She is the only girl I know in all the Light Houses provided with a single bedroom and a more flexible curfew.

Here exit and voice can reinforce each other. Indeed, to be really efficient, the voice strategy must be coupled with the threat of exit (Bennani-Chraibi 2009). This case is extremely relevant since it shows the negotiations of power between Turks and Africans using the different territories of the movement. This student used her powerful family in Senegal to re-establish a balance of power with the Turkish members of the GM she is in contact with in the Light House of Istanbul. By playing the
card of “the movement’s image in Senegal” she managed to secure a comfortable position for herself in Turkey. She converted her social capital in Senegal in the Turkish space using it as a threat.

72 The fourth type of conduct in the case of discontent is loyalty. Loyalty reveals a feeling of faithfulness and duty towards the organisation.

73 A Senegalese female student in Fatih University, who at the time of the interview had been in a Light House for 3 years states:

I decided not to do anything. I decided I would rather participate and try to benefit from the experience, you know. Even if some aspects annoy me I am not as angry as others [other African students]. And they [the abla from her house] lately asked me if I wanted to be an abla (Angey forthcoming). I still hesitate because I know that they [the Turks from the GM] don’t give you anything without asking you for something in return. At first I was really criticizing them, but you know they have good ideas and good people in here, it is just that sometimes their actions, the way they behave are wrong. But that’s because they don’t know much.29

74 Most of the students interviewed resort to this type of behaviour. They stay in the movement which bring them comfort (housing and food is paid for by the businessmen of the GM), a securing circle of sociability (many African students if they are critical of the project of the Light Houses tend to highlight the personal bonds created with Turks of their Light House) and at the same time find spaces to express their discontent when they are with other African students with whom they socialize a lot once they are out of their house (in the university or in cafes).

75 Finally, I shall describe the success of integration of some African students. Some of them agree to become local intermediaries in their local African space of origin. In this case these former students do not only decide to stay loyal to the movement but they express a positive experience in the movement. Most of them acknowledge awkwardness from the Turks taking care of the Light Houses but find justifications for it.

76 As D., now a teacher in Dakar puts it:

I cannot complain. They were harsh sometimes, but for me it was normal, I was Muslim myself so had no problem with the religious duties we had. And I think it was my education, but I thought that it was normal they were strict. It was the same at home in Dakar so I guess that’s why I adapted. And also this curfew thing I can understand, because in Istanbul there are lots of drugs and everything. So the early curfew was for our safety that’s all.30

77 A significant part of these students agreeing to become local intermediaries for the GM (but certainly not all of them) corresponds to former grant-holder students of the Turkish schools in Africa, from poor origin. They fell indebted to the GM for the help they received and accepted a position in the Gülen Movement where they become local intermediaries. Bourdieu and Saint-Martin (1982) talk about “oblats” in the Christian Church: these young people from poor origins who are put in the Church early and dedicate their life to it because they feel they owe the movement their life. This is the case for the following profile.

78 D.C., a 30 years-old Kenyan teacher corresponds to this profile. A very good student from a modest family, D.C. had studied in the public school of Nairobi until high school when he was recruited by the Gülen school of the Light Academy with a scholarship according to his results in a national exam. In 2004, D.C. was proposed to study in Hacettepe Ankara with a movement scholarship. He was then offered a job as a
professor in a secondary school in Nairobi. In the interview, D.C. kept expressing his gratitude to the Hizmet, explaining that he could not have studied for such a long time and discover the world if he had not been contacted by the Gülen Movement when he was 15 years old.

Circulation and blockings

The GM’s opening to African students is a challenging experience for the GM since it brings to light the limits of its strategy of expansion. Indeed, the lack of information on the reality of the movement and the rigidity of its core structure where practices and discourses differ from the one in the fringe circles create reactions of opposition that are counter-productive in the objective of the GM to spread its influence over the future elite of African countries. Beyond this, however, lies the question of the strategy of development of the GM: the “strategic ambiguity”, which characterized the movement’s adaptability and allowed it to grow by using different discourses and practices according to the places in order to reach a much wider population than those of the faithful followers of the Cemaat. This is the biggest strength of the movement but might also become its biggest limit: How to integrate foreigners in such a movement?

Above all, our analysis tried to show the limits of the concept of soft power for characterizing a concrete situation of influence of a Turkish private actor in Africa and the theoretical bias it implies.

First, opposing the idea of passivity of African recipients of a Turkish soft power in the form of the Gülen schools, students arriving in Istanbul will put into motion “tactics” in order to bypass, negotiate or reappropriate the strategies of management of the Gülen movement. Here the fact of possessing economic and social capital seems critical for the terms in which students agree to play the institutional game of the movement.

Then, in terms of the precision of the term ‘soft power’, the idea that every initiative led by a private or public actor would necessarily promote Turkish soft power, also has to be questioned. Indeed, our case study, without denying the link with the AKP in the Turkish schools’ expansion, shows here most of all a private group’s own strategy of expansion, in which organizational stakes come first, even though their effects tend to go against the interest of Turkish state in the long run (since students refuse to “play the game”). Reciprocally, the latest crisis opposing Erdoğan’s government to the Gülen movement exemplified in a very striking manner how much Turkey’s strategies of power abroad are the result of different social groups which can collaborate during certain periods (as was the case for the AKP and the Gülen Movement until December 2013) and then oppose each other violently in other periods (as it has been since then). This has been to the point that the Turkish government leads a campaign of lobbying on African states to push them to close the Gülen schools (known as the Turkish schools in Africa), an initiative that is clearly threatening to weaken Turkey’s representation abroad (Maasho 2015), contradicting furthermore the relevance of a single and vague “Turkish soft power”.

At last, the idea that the attractiveness of Turkey would be increased by the Turkish schools in Africa has not been confirmed by the field research. If those schools manage to channel students to Turkey or a Turkish university, it appears that they do so because of a curtailed horizon of possibilities, in a period where worldwide mobility has
never been so constrained for Africans, rather than by the supposedly growing attractiveness of Turkey, which is impossible to measure.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


**NOTES**

1. Concerning the Gülen/Erdogan crisis, see Balcı (2014a; 2014b).
2. *Hizmet*, meaning “the service” in Turkish, is one of the higher duties of Islam. The followers of Gülen call the GM the *Hizmet*. When referring to the Hizmet as the religious group, capital letter will be used, while the *hizmet*, as a duty is written in small letter. About neo-brotherhoods, see Roy (2002: 127).
3. A first attempt has been done briefly and unsatisfyingly by Tittensor (2014) in its chapter 4 “Voices from within, voices from without”.
4. The three evils of humanity according to Said Nursi.
5. The other one was left in another private university not pertaining to the movement, but was socialized in the religious group.
6. *İşık evleri* ("Light Houses") are apartments for students to stay where they can learn the teachings of Fethullah Gülen and lead their lives according to his principles.
7. Istanbul is the main destination for African Students from the Gülen Movement, but they are sometimes directed to other cities in Turkey where Universities close to the Gülen Movement exist such as Zirve Üniversitesi in Gaziantep. Our field research only focuses on Istanbul.
8. 8,500 euros in Nairobi, 3,500 euros in Johannesburg and 4,000 euros in Dakar for school fees and boarding for the year 2015/2016.
9. Interview conducted in Turkish, Johannesburg, October 9, 2013. Translation by the author.
15. Yet it should be noted that Turkish teachers in Africa do not only target Muslim students. During our research we met two non-Muslim African students (from South Africa) who decided to study in Istanbul thanks to the movement. According to them, Turkish teachers would not mobilize the same type of discourse when talking to the Christian students.
This article will try to challenge the concept of soft power relying upon a case study of African students coming to Turkey through the channel of the Gülen Movement, a religiously inspired social movement. Through a micro-level analysis of African students’ trajectories and experiences in the Gülen Movement, I will try to show the limits of the concept of soft power as a category of analysis showing that it is not only vague, but can also be proven wrong in its theoretical grounds.

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Keywords: education, Turkey, Sub-Saharan Africa, Gülen Movement, Soft Power

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