

## The Role of Identity in Turkey's New Middle East Policy: The Case of JDP's Palestine Policy

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**Abstract:** Particularly with the advent of the Justice and Development Party (hereafter JDP), Turkey's Middle East policy, has transformed into a more assertive and active policy orientation vis-a-vis the 1990s. This new Middle East policy is more assertive and active, and thus seeks to become an important player in the region. Since 2002, Turkey has involved in a number of mediation efforts for possible settlement of the conflicts such as the Palestine-Israeli issue. Moreover, Turkey actively participated in the Arab League Conferences and has established closer ties with the countries in the region such as Syria, Iran, and Iraq. From the outset, some circles have evaluated this new policy just as a result of Islamic oriented policies of the ruling party. On the contrary, this article claims that this new policy towards the Middle East cannot be merely explained by the Islamic-identity of JDP. Main argument of this essay is, unlike Islamic identity, liberal norms are playing gradually increasing role in regional politics particularly in the Palestine Question. In this context, the paper claims that visible changes in Turkey's foreign policy can be explained comprehensively by using some tools of constructivist IR theory, such as the identity-led politics.

**Keywords:** constructivism, identity, Middle East Policy, Palestine, Turkish Foreign Policy

**Özet:** Özellikle Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP)'nin iktidara gelmesiyle birlikte, Türkiye'nin Ortadoğu Politikası, 1990'lara göre daha iddialı ve aktif bir yönde dönüşüm geçirmiştir. Daha iddialı ve aktif olan yeni Ortadoğu Politikası, Türkiye'yi bölgede tekrar önemli bir oyuncu olabilme açısından arayışa yöneltmiştir. 2002 yılından itibaren Türkiye, bölgede meydana gelen çatışmalara olası çözümler sağlamak amacıyla bir dizi arabuluculuk çabalarında, İsrail-Filistin Sorunu'nda olduğu gibi, yer almıştır. Ayrıca Türkiye aktif bir şekilde Arap Ligi konferanslarına katılmış ve Suriye, İran, Irak gibi bölge ülkeleriyle yakın bağlar kurmuştur. Bazı çevreler, bu yeni politikayı sadece iktidar partisinin İslami yönelimli politikalarının bir sonucu olarak değerlendirmektedirler. Makale, bu görüşlerin aksine, yeni Ortadoğu Politikası'nın sadece AKP'nin İslami kimliği ile açıklanamayacağını iddia etmektedir. Makalenin temel iddiası, özellikle Filistin Sorunu'nda İslami kimlikten öte, liberal normlar aşamalı olarak artan bir biçimde, bölge politikalarında önemli roller oynamaktadır. AKP'nin özellikle iç politika alanında İslami kimlik üzerine artan bir şekilde vurgu yapmasına rağmen, mevcut makale bu durumun dış politika alanında meydana gelen değişimlerin açıklanması için yanlış bilgilendirmelere (yönlendirmelere) neden olabileceğini tartışıyor. Bu bağlamda, makale Türk Dış Politikası'nda gözle görülür şekilde meydana gelen değişimlerin geniş bir şekilde konstruktivizm teorisinin kimlik kaynaklı gibi bazı argümanlarının kullanılarak daha iyi açıklanacağını iddia etmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Konstruktivizm, kimlik, Ortadoğu Politikası, Filistin, Türk Dış Politikası

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## Introduction

The unexpected collapse of the Soviet Union agitated the basic assumptions of mainstream IR theories and created room for new theoretical approaches to IR. One of them, the constructivism has demonstrated a great talent in explaining the foreign policies of the states on the global stage. The central claims of this new theory are as followings; the world is socially constructed, not given (Zehfuss, 2002: 4); structures have a great role shaping the behaviours of social and political actors; identities are important since they inform interests; and last but not least, agents and structures are mutually constituted (See Reus-Smit(a), 2005: 196-197). In addition to aforementioned elements of the constructivism, the concept of ‘identity’ has gained a new meaning in constructivist theory. This paper will endeavor to explain Turkey’s foreign policy towards the Middle East under the rule of the JDP by using the role of identity according to the constructivist theory.

Many pundits of constructivism focus mainly on the social identities of individuals or states since the identity of an individual or a state shapes their quests of interest. For instance, having democratic values may force a country to take critical stance towards authoritarian regimes and make a preference for free-market states (Reus-Smit, 2005: 197). In other words, identity is a frame of reference in which the social and political environment is both recognizable and discernible (Yavuz, 1998: 21). Therefore, the behaviour of any state or individual is a product of her identity. It should be also indicated that identities are not stable or unchangeable. Since identities are constructed through the existing power dynamics, they could be changed under different conditions. In this sense, this article presumes that the JDP’s identity-led policy is different to some extent from previous governments of Turkey and even from JDP’s predecessor Welfare Party (See Balcı, 2010: 87-99).

The first part of this paper briefly explains the main arguments of constructivism. The second section focuses on the definition of the notion of identity by referring to increasing prominence of identity both in foreign and domestic politics. The third section attempts to explore how Turkey’s contemporary Middle East policy has been redefined during the JDP period in general and particularly to what extent this new identity plays a defining role in Turkey’s policy towards the Palestinian Question. Before searching answers for these crucial questions, the study will present some arguments on the JDP’s identity by focusing on some academic texts championing the idea that the JDP’s Middle East policy has been heavily shaped by its Islamic-identity. As opposed to those interpretations, this article argues that the new path in foreign policy especially towards Palestine cannot be merely explained by focusing on Islamic-led identity

considerations, because the JDP acts largely in concert with liberal-democratic ideas vis-a-vis previous governments of Turkey.

### **The Rise of Constructivism and Concept of Identity in International Relations**

During the 1990s, constructivism has emerged in the field of international relations by challenging the dominance of neorealism in IR theory (Hopf, 1998: 171). As commonly stressed, the rationalist theories generally ignore the role of nonmaterial factors such as identity, culture, and memory in the formation of states' perceptions and interests (Kösebalaban, 2008: 9). Therefore, constructivism offers alternative understandings for a number of central themes in the international theory, including; the meaning of anarchy and balance of power, the relationship between state identity and interest, elaboration of power, and prospects for change in world politics (Hopf, 1998: 172). For constructivist scholars, the study of international relations must focus on the ideas and beliefs that inform the actors on the international scene, the shared and established understandings between them and international structures in which actors live (Chap, [www.Oxfordtextbook.co.uk](http://www.Oxfordtextbook.co.uk)). In this context, constructivist scholars think that state interests are substantially constructed by the structure of the system (Wendt, 1995: 72). In other words, both social interaction and international norms have a defining role on state's interests.

According to constructivist scholars, international structures entail equally important regulative and constitutive norms. Regulative norms set basic rules for the standard of conduct by prescribing or prohibiting certain behaviours. Constitutive norms describe an attitude and assign meanings to these behaviours. To put it succinctly, were it not for the constitutive norms, actions would be inconceivable. Constructivist scholars make an analogy for a better explanation of constitutive norms by reminding us the rules of a chess game. In this sense, constitutive norms enable actors to play the game and provide actors with the knowledge, which is necessary to respond to each other's moves in a meaningful way (Griffiths, Roach and Salamon, 2011: 123). In addition to the rules of the game, as exemplified in chess, the selected identity of the players and their perceptions of these rules also shape their policy formation at both domestic and foreign affairs.

The identities and perceptions of majority of states during the Cold War were shaped by the balance of power logic, which is the essential part of the realist tradition in IR. However, rise of ethnic and nationalist conflicts immediately after the Cold War and a remarkable 'return to culture and identity' put identity at the center of the theoretical debates (Williams, 1998: 204). In this way, as a new theoretical framework, constructivism has accepted identity as its starting point, through

which it has tried to explain many developments in foreign and domestic politics. At the same time, to explain interest formation, constructivists focus on the states' identities as well. According to the theory identities are the basis of interests (Reus-Smit (a), 2005: 197). What is more, they perform three necessary functions in a society: they tell you and others who you are and they tell you who others are. By telling you who you actually are, identities imply a particular set of interests or preferences regarding choices of action in particular domains and particular actors (Hopf, 1998: 175).

Therefore, the emergent and already existing identities, namely self-other dichotomy, stemming from the intense interaction with other actors at international arena, both generate and shape interests of states (Katzenstein, 1996). In this logic, the next section explains how Turkish foreign policy toward the Middle East has been transformed with JDP's coming to power and the role of identity in this transformation, with a particular emphasize at Turkey's Palestine policy. In this context, the following questions are to be answered; How JDP constructed her identity? Is JDP's identity merely based on Islamic factors or does this identity also consist of genuine democratic values? Which part of JDP's identity, democratic-liberal or Islamic, is more influential on its policies? To what extent this arguably new identity has an impact on long-established preferences, interests and self-other relations of Turkey?

### **General Overview on Turkey's New Middle Eastern Policy**

The ideological and political structure of the Cold War's geopolitical practices and discourses forced Turkey to establish close military and political ties with the West, particularly with the United States. During the Cold War, Turkey participated in various Western dominated security organizations including the NATO in order to protect westerns values and interest against the Soviet threat and to be accepted European state (Bozdağlıoğlu (a), 2000: 20-21). In other words, Turkey became a member of nearly all the Western military, economic and political institutions such as, the United Nations (UN), the Council of Europe (COE), the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in order to underline its western identity. Within this context, the politics of membership in these organizations, for Turkey, was assessed as the realization of its western-centered ambitions, namely becoming a part of European civilization, the foreign policy paradigm the way in which it located Turkey as a European country during the early period of the republic (Bozdağlıoğlu (b), 2008: p. 64).

During the 1990s, Turkey once again tried to establish close ties with the West and was defined mostly as a 'Western-country' because of the NATO-membership. As a result of this fact, it did rarely try to involve in the Middle Eastern issues (Özen, 2009). Moreover, Turkey's NATO membership restrained Ankara from pursuing multi-dimensional economic, political and military relations with the countries other than ones in the Western alliance (Köse, 2011: 624). Increasing concerns regarding the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) attacks, Armenian efforts for the acceptance of so-called genocide resolution in mainly Western countries, and 'Sevr Syndrome' led Ankara take some security measures at both domestic and foreign politics. Thus, Turkey signed a military cooperation treaty with Israel in 1996. After the signing of the treaty, Turkey's relations with Europe and its neighbors such as Syria, Iran and Iraq soured while the relations with Israel and the USA were improved increasingly (Taşpınar, 2008: 10). Having a good relationship with Israel cannot be separated from domestic politics and civil-military relations in Turkey (Balçı and Kardaş, 2012: 101). In other words, during the 1990s, the security oriented foreign policy was one of the main results of the interference of the military at Turkey's domestic and foreign policies, which provide military officers with some privileges to shape Turkey's position at international scene (Balçı (b), 2011: 297). In short, security oriented discourse placed the military as the most dominant actor both in foreign and domestic politics.

With the JDP's coming to power, the security-oriented domestic and foreign politics in Turkey has been rapidly altered, furthermore, Turkey has adopted new foreign and domestic policy orientation, including soft power, "zero problems" with its neighbors and last but not least a mediator role. In parallel with this new foreign policy understanding, Turkey's relations with Israel and the USA seem to be transformed. While it was in concert with Israel, Turkey described Syria as a threat to its stability during the 1990s (Aras, 2008: 3-5). This perception has changed with the new policy adjustment towards the region at the beginning of the 2000s. From that time onwards, Turkey started to change its stance towards the Middle Eastern countries and hardened its attitude to Israel over time due to Israel's bloody attacks on Palestine (Torbakov and Ojanen, 2008: 1-8). Added to this, the JDP Government also started to pursue economy-based cooperation in the region as part of its "new strategic identity"(Alpay, 2010).

Notwithstanding, closer relations with the Middle Eastern countries raised some concerns about the course of the JDP's foreign policy in the future. These concerns mainly stemmed from the JDP leaders' Islamic discourses in the past (Bozdağlıoğlu, 2008: 69) Accordingly, some pundits on Turkish politics argued that Turkey's recent regional initiatives especially in the Middle East have altered its traditional foreign policy priorities, namely the Western-oriented policies. Therefore, Turkey's new policy towards the Middle East reflects a "shift of an axis" (Kardaş, 2011: 1). The

concept of axis-shift is explained in the following ways: steering away from the Western alliance, getting more conservative in domestic and foreign policy, Islamization of foreign policy and getting closer to the model of Malaysia, Pakistan and even Iran (Duran, 2010: 30).

It is hardly possible to comprehend the JDP's new foreign policy without taking into consideration Ahmet Davutoğlu's academic studies and 'Strategic Depth Book' in which he articulates Turkey's new activism in the region by the help of some references to the "geographical" and "historical" position of Turkey (Kardaş, 2011: 2). The strategic depth theory argues that Turkey is located at the center of important 'geo-cultural basins' such as between the Middle East and the Muslim world (which the theory considers to be identical), the West (Europe and the United States), and Central Asia (Bozdağlıoğlu, 2008: 70). He also states that Turkey should pursue 'zero problems' with neighboring countries and should improve its multilateral and bilateral relations with them by benefiting from its Ottoman heritage as a foreign policy asset (Kirişçi, Tocci and Walker, 2010: 3). Also, Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan has been a powerful advocate of this ambitious vision as well.

From this perspective, JDP leaders have developed a new discourse about the role of Turkey in the international system which differs considerably from its traditional role, reflected in its "bridge" role 'between East and West (Bozdağlıoğlu, 2008: 70). According to Davutoğlu, Turkey's geopolitical importance cannot solely be described as a simple bridge function between West-East, which was accepted as the main policy direction in Turkey during 1990s. Turkey should also be evaluated in terms of its effectiveness in the region, multi-dimensional relations and historical capability in combining and internalizing both Western and Eastern values. As a result of this, Davutoğlu describes Turkey as a central state. Also, he indicates that Turkey should take active and regulative roles in the regions particularly when it feels its security under threat (Davutoğlu, 2008: 78-90). Removing the misperceptions towards Turkey among the peoples and countries in the Middle East with aforementioned changes in Turkey's identity discourse is another and substantial goal of new foreign policy (Aras and Akpınar, 2009: 24). Therefore, the Middle East issue is the most important part of Davutoğlu's foreign policy path.

In this way, such a new approach towards the region seems to differ substantially from another discourse which once determined Turkish foreign policy and saw the region as a conflict-ridden one where Turkey should always have been keep its distance. Presently, it has been becoming apparent that, this situation has mostly changed by the acceptance of a new identity in Turkey (Mercan, 2010: 41). Nonetheless, in this new vision the relations with the West are not viewed as contradictory rather complementary to relations with the Islamic world (Bozdağlıoğlu, 2008: 69-70). While the JDP frequently emphasizes the significance of Turkey's bilateral ties with

the European Union, the United States, NATO and the Central Asian countries, JDP also attributes a special importance to Turkey's relations with Islamic countries. This special importance on the relations with each cultural and geographical sides (Western and Eastern) relate closely to the new democratic-conservative identity in Turkey (Aydoğan, 2012). In this sense, people in the Middle East see the JDP as an Islamic-inclined party (Dağlı, 2012).

Still, from the beginning, some section of domestic and international society insist that the Islamist roots of the JDP, contrary to its democratic and liberal stance, have encouraged it to formulate an Islam identity-based foreign policy toward the Middle East. Additionally, they argue that the relations between Turkey and Middle Eastern countries have been developed since 2002 particularly because of JDP's Islamic orientation and increasing emphasize on the shared culture with Arab states (Kutlay, 2011: 68). In this context, the next section attempt to evaluate the real considerations behind ten-year government, JDP, by benefiting from both these different debates regarding new Turkish foreign policy and main concepts of constructivism.

### **Which Identity Defines JDP? : Different Perceptions on Its Identity**

*“When states construct their identities, they formulate them at both domestic and international levels. They also develop myths and institutions to protect their identities.”(Bozdağhoğlu, 2008: 72).*

With the advent of the JDP, the traditional dynamics in the foreign policy making process has been importantly changed due to entrance of new actors into Turkish political scene. In order to incorporate the new actors with the existing ones, JDP has tried to define democratic-Islamic identity, i.e. conservative democracy, by the help of leading roles of recently Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoğlu. After this process, the JDP has taken some steps to establish its current identity in the party and government circles (Yavuz, 1998: 4). For some, these new steps along with Davutoğlu's insights on the Middle East, summarized in the Strategic Depth book and perceived as Neo-Ottomanism approach, points to the fact that this new direction emanates from long-dated Islamic imagination. In other words, this new emergent identity in Turkey suggests a non-Western and even worse, for some, anti-Western orientation for Turkey. That is to say, this new foreign policy inclination is driven by, to some degree, religious impulses (Özel, 2009: 1-2).

For this reason, for them, JDP's new initiative towards the Middle East can be just comprehensible through its present identity rapprochement (Kardaş, 2011: 25-26). In fact, JDP has

largely promoted democratic concepts such as freedom of expression, human rights, free elections toward its neighboring countries in the Middle East, though there are some opposing instances (Duran, 2010: 18). In this respect, it attempts to act in tandem with both Western and Eastern values by behaving as a “central country” in its region rather than “bridge”. As Bozdağlıoğlu stated, Turkey has been positioning against North versus South and East versus West, and furthermore, it holds particular place among different civilizations by having and incorporating seemingly opposing eastern and western values at the same time. He also indicates that although Turkey is a Muslim populated country, it represents a unique version with its secular constitution and law, thus it resembles a Western-style democracy (Bozdağlıoğlu, 2008: 55).

In a similar vein, Arıboğan claims that Turkey’s stance and policy options can hardly be clarified by just single identity ascendance over its domestic and foreign affairs, because of its interlocked geopolitical location that encourage it behave as both western and eastern country at international area. From this perspective, it becomes obvious that Turkey should have multi-faceted identities in an effort to be an opening door for all the regions, which it have borders such as Caucasus, Balkans, West and Middle East (Aydoğan, 2012). In other words, since Turkey takes place between Asia and Europe, behaving as a central country with its both western and eastern identity features seems to a more viable option for it (Aras and Akpınar, 2009: 26). Beyond these interoperations, some scholars such as Aras regard these seemingly considerable changes in Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East as a natural consequent of “Europeanization” process in Turkey (Gündem, 2007).

In this context, unlike other governments in the past, JDP has always become supportive of Turkey’s membership to EU though some drawbacks in the relations between Turkey and EU, which is in line with Turkey’s modernization project. For this purpose, JDP adopted several necessary reform packages demanded by EU to improve its liberal and democratic standards on freedom of expression and human rights (SDE Analiz, 12). This process has also contributed to the transformation of JDP’s identity policy (Yavuz, 2009: 3-4). As an external factor, EU has considerable influence on JDP identity. As commonly emphasized, decision makers have taken into consideration the values that are prevalent at both domestic and international scene. Therefore, those two levels have nearly similar impact on the identity formation of any country and thus existing power (Aras and Akpınar, 2009: 20-41). As a result, since each power attempt to behave in along domestic and international lines, Turkey’s new assertive involvement in the Middle East is not only a result of the change of power in Turkey but it also closely relate to the process of Europeanization (Aras and Karakaya Polat, 2007: 478).

Nevertheless, some analysts insist that the civilization understanding of ruling power is more religious in tone, compared to other governments in the past, whose civilization understanding was laden with more cultural and historical experiments, and thus less religious-oriented (Yanık, 2011: 86). Similarly, until recently the main opposition party under Deniz Baykal leadership (CHP-People Republican Party) and also nearly all its proponents has claimed that JDP has a “hidden agenda” with democratic methods that equals a formation of an Islamic state based on Sharia Law (Duran, 2010: 26). In this sense, active involvement of this leadership in the Middle East is only a repercussion of its Islamic background. JDP seems not to agree with those interpretations, stressing that JDP is not an Islamist party; rather, it is a conservative party respecting Islamic values like Christian Democratic Parties in the EU (European Union) (Bozdağlıoğlu, 2008: 67).

Similarly, Yavuz has fiercely rejected the allegations identifying JDP as an Islamic party, defining Islamist party as follow; “a religious party as one whose ideology is derived from or shaped by religious ideas and which mobilizes grassroots on the basis of shared religious identity” (Yavuz, 2009: 5-8). Therefore, this identity consists of the some principles such as ‘zero problems with neighbors’ and democratic norms of EU rather than Islamic considerations. Attempting to be the leading supporter of EU’ norms at least until mid-2000 in the conflict-ridden Middle East, JDP has tried to spread such global values into the region, aiming to establish permanent stability and peace (Köse, 2010: 624-635). In this context, the new dynamism in Turkey can be seen as a natural result of new identity approach based on win-win model, maximum cooperation and zero problems with neighbors. Therefore, Turkey aims to make some contributions on the possible transformation in the region by benefiting from its unique experiments such as being a secular state with mostly Muslim populated country (Oğuzlu, 2012: 16-17).

As can clearly be observable from the previous passages, while those opposing sides reach at completely different results on the new identity of Turkey, they use the identity-based approach (constructivism) predicated on the assumption that identities can be redefined through the changes in the power equilibrium (Kardaş, 2011: 1). In this context, the next section also attempts to examine this new understanding in Turkish foreign policy in terms of identity by focusing on especially its ‘more supportive stance towards Palestinian’ (Aras and Akpınar, 2009: 21).

### **The Role of JDP's Identity on Palestine Policy: The case of Palestine-Israel Conflict**

Israeli-Palestinian conflict has remained as a controversial problem in the Middle East since the foundation of Israel state in the 1948. Numerous unfair actions and humanitarian catastrophes facing Palestinian people have prompted anti-Israeli, anti-Western and anti-American feelings

among the Middle Eastern people in general Palestinians in particular (Köse, 2007: 58). Those incidents and bloody attacks of Israel on Gaza have prompted resentment among Turkish public, which also shape the policy options of current government toward Israel and Palestine (Aras and Akpınar, 2009: 29). Immediately afterwards aggressive stance and military operations of Israel towards Palestinian-dominated regions during the last three years, some clashes erupted in the region between Israelis and Palestinians, which resulted in considerable human lost and economic destruction in Palestinian. In this sense, the rapid and heavy condemnations of Erdoğan, Davutoğlu and President Abdullah Gül on these bloody Israeli attacks can be assessed as a crucial part of the JDP's new identity, namely its conservative-democratic identity.

Indeed, JDP has initially made some efforts to seek a solution for this long-dated problem between Israel and Palestine by using its closer ties with each side in order to prevent the human tragedy in Gaza (Aras and Akpınar, 2009: 24). When JDP lost its faith to a possible peace between Palestinian and Israel after 2009, it have intensified its mediation efforts between Palestinian rival groups, Hamas and Al Fatah, and invited Halid Meşal to Ankara to discuss the alternative ways towards the reconciliation of these groups (Larrabee, 2007: 7). At this meeting, Hamas leader wanted JDP to increase its diplomatic efforts to lift blockade that had been implemented by the Israel toward Palestine for some years (Aras and Akpınar, 2009: 37). After that meeting, Turkey has attempted to lift this blockade and prevent the clashes between the rival groups in Palestinian (Duman, 2009). However, these peaceful efforts could not be materialized because of deterioration of relations between Turkey and Israel.

Davos Congress, convened in 2009 following Gaza War in order to tackle the severe humanitarian crisis, resulted in a new crisis between Ankara and Tel Aviv. In this meeting, Erdoğan held the Israel President Simon Peres responsible for the harsh conditions facing Palestinians and numerous deaths in the wake of the Israeli operation on Gaza and left meeting angrily. Another and most destructive event was the Mavi Marmara operation of Israel that Israel killed nine Turkish citizens who were voluntary to deliver humanitarian aid to Gaza via Mavi Marmara flotilla. Condemning this bloody attack, Erdoğan stated that ‘The act was a kind of terrorism and we are not going to give up our support and aid to Palestinians’ in the Grand National Assembly (El Basel, 2020: 363). As a consequence of those events, JDP left its nearly seven-year positive stance towards Israel and demanded several things including ‘official apology’ for Mavi Marmara incident in order to repair its relations with Tel-Aviv (Göksel, 2012: 113).

Turkey cancelled the joint military exercises and the military agreements with Israel due to increasing anti-Israeli sentiment among both regional and domestic public ( Balcı and Kardaş, 2012: 115). Thus, as it has remained close to and further embraced Palestinian demands, Turkey's

image and perception has largely increased among the peoples in the Middle East. In other words, Turkey's recent positive image relates to seemingly radical change in its own 'self-identity', which once perceived by regional countries just as a western oriented that led Turkey to remain indifferent to regional issues (Göksel, 2012 : 113). In this context, Turkish decision makers consider the Palestinian question as an area of responsibility and opportunity to claim its constructive and trustworthy role in the region (Aras and Karakaya Polat, 2007: 478) and also they believe that Israel-Palestine conflict is the biggest obstacle to establish permanent peace and to promote democratic values in the region (Ulutaş, 2012). For these reasons, by incorporating its western identity into its long-dated eastern identity and attempting to solve Palestinian Question Turkey has aimed to establish a peaceful and democratic environment in the region after 2002 through (Keyam, 2012: 3-4). Towards that end, Turkey has also benefited from its cultural affinity with the region (Oğuzlu, 2012: 16).

As is clearly observable, this new approach has contributed Turkey's credibility and positive assessment in the region as a promoter of democracy, peace and human rights in the region (Doster, 2012: 20). Therefore, the leading figures in the JDP have given special importance in the settlement of Palestinian Question, which they consider as the basic source of all the problems in the Middle East. That attitude is observable in Gül's comments on Palestinian Question; "Because Palestine and Gaza issues are not just matter of Palestinians and Arabs, it also concerns closely Turkey and all of the Muslims in the world (Ürdünden Ortadoğu Mesajları, 2009). Therefore, we will do all one can since establishment of independent Palestine become fact (Mezopotamya Ortak İstikrar Alanı Olmalı, 2009). When Israel falls itself to ready for permanent peace solution (Gülden İsraili Liderlere Tavsiyeler, 2011) and accept to obey the international laws we will do everything to promote this process (Zeitung, 2010).

Another leading figure of JDP Erdoğan also indicated that 'We always take Palastine's side, because they are our brothers (Erdoğan: Filistinli Kardeşlerimizin Yanındayız, 2012)'" and 'we know all of the Muslims are brother' (Filistinli Kardeşlerimizin Davası Davamızdır, 2012) and he considers that Palestinians are oppressed due to Israeli military and economic embargo on Palestinian. These discourses prove that Turkey has increasingly shown its solidarity with the Muslim population in the region. However, such a new stance does not emanate from the JDP's Islamic background; instead, it is the natural consequence of democratization process in Turkey and thus increasing public opinion in the foreign policy, which is also reflected at new identity formation, conservative democracy.

That is why Turkey's both Middle Eastern and Palestine policies are in tandem with the conservative-democratic identity. All in all, although some Islamic discourses have substantial

positive impact among Arab peoples, in fact, the democratic stance of Turkey towards the region, which is based on human rights, free elections, encouragement of welfare and stability, have lead people reassure Turkey's new role in the region positively (Larrabee, 2007: 8). Through the conservative-democrat identity, Turkey during JDP period has attempted to gather enough domestic and regional legitimacy in order to present itself as a reliable and democracy oriented actor in the region. Since Turkey considers that no permanent peace can be found without seeking solutions on the long-dated problems between Palestinian and Israel, it maintains to play its central role through its multifaceted identity (Aras, 2008: 3-5).

## **Conclusion**

This article has attempted to examine the emergent changes on Turkey's Middle East orientation through JDP's democratic-conservative identity. Since coming to power in 2002, JDP has increasingly involved in the region, and its new and active role has raised several questions concerning Turkey's new identity. What is more, some people have regarded JDP's new policy option as a disengagement from EU. To make these debates comprehensible, this article has benefited from the theory of constructivism and its identity concept to seek plausible answers on Turkey's new Middle East policy after 2002. Claiming that the new identity has a defining role in this new orientation towards the region, the paper gave special importance to the explanation of identity in terms of theoretical perspective.

It becomes obvious that the changing identity is a natural result of the new domestic and international developments. That is to say, the formation of the new identity does not only emanate from the applications of existing power, but also and most importantly the JDP's acceptance of new identity arises from the changing internal and external environment. Therefore, Turkey has been following more assertive and active foreign policy in the Middle East especially since 2002s when compared to 1990s. During 1990s, the military apparently was the sole and dominant actor in the shaping of foreign and domestic decisions. During these years, through the substantial impact of military on decision making process Turkey advanced its military and political ties with both the USA and Israel and kept its distance towards the Middle East.

With the advent of JDP and reposition of the domestic actors, Turkey's approach has changed towards the region. Above all, the new authority has sought to solve Turkey's problems with its neighboring countries through diplomatic and economic channels rather than military ones which were more preferable during 1990s. That is to say, this new power regards "soft-power" more useful than "hard power". In this context, JDP has attempted to take place in the region with

democratic and conservative values which are expected to change Turkey's previous position and image in the eyes of Middle Eastern countries. Furthermore, JDP has realized that Turkey is the largest economy with its effective military strength in the region. Therefore, Turkey has struggled to benefit from its presently trustworthy regional role to seek coherent and permanent solutions on Palestinian Question.

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