IJoC | **Turkey, the Middle East & the Media**

# RTÜK, Broadcasting, and the Middle East: Regulating the Transnational

YEŞİM KAPTAN[1]
GÖKÇEN KARANFİL
Izmir University of Economics

Media flows and transnational dynamics have increasingly been seen as key components of both shared and eclectic transformations in the Middle East. While Turkey is emerging as a key political, cultural, and economic player in the region, it is also assuming the role of a significant node in the transnational crossroads that traverse the Middle East. We scrutinize in this article the ways in which RTÜK—initially a national broadcasting regulatory body—has become an international agent in pursuit of forging a transnational broadcasting sphere in the Middle East. The authors argue how, if in any way, the initiatives of RTÜK are decentering the hegemonic position of global media and challenging existing power geometries by way of offering an alternative media sphere in the Middle East.

*Keywords: transnationalism, media regulation, transnational broadcasting, RTÜK, Turkey*

RTÜK, the Turkish acronym for the Radio and Television Supreme Council, is one of the most common words uttered in the mass media, including the Turkish press, since it was established in 1994. It was founded under the Law on the Establishment of Radio and Television Enterprises and Their Broadcasts as an impartial autonomous regulatory authority. When it was legalized in 1994 by the Turkish constitution and authorized for broadcast in Turkey over commercial TV and radio stations, RTÜK was founded out of necessity primarily to regulate radio and television broadcasts and to arrange the distribution and allocation of frequencies within the national boundaries of the country. Therefore, its responsibilities have included setting up rules and regulations for running radio stations and television systems, supervising broadcasting companies, distributing licenses and granting permission for the establishment of private radio and TV stations, monitoring broadcasters, and regulating broadcasting

---

Yeşim Kaptan: yesim.kaptan@ieu.edu.tr
Gokcen Karanfil: gokcen.karanfil@ieu.edu.tr

activities. Among all its duties, however, RTÜK has become famous and highly visible in the mainstream media for its broadcasting bans—especially on television programs (Kejanlıoğlu, Adaklı, & Çelenk, 2001, p. 93).

As can be understood from this brief summary of RTÜK's emergence, its conventional fields of practice, and its functional role within the Turkish broadcasting context, RTÜK emerged and, until recently, evolved as a strictly national institution. However, with both internal and external dynamics pushing Turkey into the globalizing/transnationalizing world conjuncture, in line with the country's foreign politics, RTÜK has recently transformed into an international institution. This article describes the ways in which RTÜK now functions as a transnationalizing agent of a country that claims to have become a transnational power within a particular geography—the Middle East. While we are fully aware that RTÜK is a regulatory body and not a broadcaster, considering the dialectic between broadcasting policies, broadcasting companies, and broadcasted content, we suggest that studying RTÜK as a transnational regulatory body offers insights into the transnational broadcasting sphere in the Middle East as a whole. Therefore, we this article is mainly concerned with the transnational endeavors of an originally national regulatory body. We argue, basically, that the trend of transnationalization among broadcasters is now being followed—perhaps inevitably—by regulatory bodies. In the case of RTÜK, we suggest that this transnationalization process is linked closely to the relatively recent foreign politics of the Turkish Republic. Furthermore, studying RTÜK offers us clues to understanding how the dialectic between the national and the transnational unravels. RTÜK is a telling example of the ways in which a national institution and its practices within a transnational field impact policies and politics within both the national and transnational spheres.

### RTÜK and the Dynamics of Broadcasting in Turkey

To better understand the logic and motives behind the founding of RTÜK and the principles and procedures guiding this institution, it is essential to at least briefly summarize the sociopolitical history of the commercial broadcasting industry in Turkey, which started in 1990 and expanded throughout the 1990s.

As in many developing countries, public service broadcasting in Turkey, as a state-sponsored network, was introduced as part of a nationalist agenda in the process of citizen forming. Following that pattern, state-sponsored television, together with other national media, was molded through neoliberal reforms, challenges from satellite technologies, and transnational and translocal cable television channels in the late 1980s and 1990s (Kumar, 2006; Mankekar, 1999). In the early 1990s, the Turkish broadcasting arena also experienced an unprecedented disordering. This was a period in which the state broadcaster's monopoly was broken and pirate commercial broadcasters invaded the national Turkish media sphere. On the one hand, this was a productive disordering, as Aksoy and Robins (1997) suggest; on the other hand, it brought about the need for organized regulation. RTÜK was founded in 1994 under such circumstances as an institution that would respond to this particular need for the regulation of the broadcasting environment in Turkey.

Until the 1990s, broadcasting in Turkey had been state dominated through the monopoly of the Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT). In fact, TRT followed a broadcasting tradition that was

always elitist and paternalistic, designing programs according to what the state elite believed the public needed. It intended, according to Aksoy and Robins (1997), to forge "a cultural industry that would work to create a Turkish cultural identity in conformity with the elite's modern and now 'official' image" (p. 1944).

The (neo)liberalization policies and privatization—particularly the privatization of public broadcasting—started during the Özal period in Turkey. During his prime ministry (1984–1989), Turgut Özal opened up Turkey's economy to global market forces. His project was to integrate the Turkish economy into the global economic system. Robins (1996) notes that "Özalism was a phenomenon, then, of considerable complexity in its combination of conservatism and change. . . . Transformation was necessary if Turkey was to become 'synchronized' with a changing world" (p. 74). As an important component of this transformation, the Turkish state's monopoly over broadcasting was abolished in the early 1990s, leading to the emergence of commercial broadcasting. As Bülent Çaplı (1996) notes, in September 1990, a commercial channel (STAR 1) took advantage of a loophole in monopoly law and began broadcasting its programs in Turkish via satellite from Germany. STAR 1 provided an example for many other commercially owned broadcasting stations, which quickly mushroomed (Çaplı, 1996). Consequently, the media environment in Turkey went through tremendous changes.

Three years after the first broadcasting of a private channel, in July 1993 Article 133 was added to the Turkish constitution, permitting private radio and television stations to operate in Turkey. The privatization of the broadcasting system and the rapid development of Turkish media transformed the industry. This transformation, however, was attended by chaos in the broadcasting scene, as stations had not been authorized to operate on specific frequencies, so that many stations were competing for the same airwaves. In an effort to take control of the situation, Parliament declared all the stations illegal in April 1993. According to Aksoy and Robins (1997), reasons given for this government action included concern about the popularity of religious channels, the violation of copyright by music radio stations, and Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel's statement that the closure was necessary to create a climate of order so that broadcasting regulations could be introduced. The government was also eager to ensure that the large amount of advertising revenue was taxed. Legalization and therefore regulation of private broadcasting in Turkey finally reached its current status with the passage of an amendment to Article 133 of the constitution in April 1993, and with the establishment of RTÜK in May1994.

Since its establishment in 1994, RTÜK has been a centerpiece in the national arena of broadcasting in Turkey. As a regulatory body, it has been a major actor in the national field of broadcasting primarily responsible for the "orderliness" of the broadcasting arena. Ironically, however, this national institution emerged primarily as a result of transnational broadcasting initiatives. Had it not been for the pirate broadcasts of commercial Turkish television channels that infiltrated the national media environment, there may not have been a need for an institution such as RTÜK. In this sense—and particularly through censorship policies that have targeted content it perceives as inappropriate according to national and cultural values—RTÜK has functioned to regulate but perhaps more importantly to nationalize the content and the context of broadcasting in Turkey. As an institution that was strictly national in inception, until relatively recently, RTÜK has been concerned solely with broadcasting occurring within the national borders of Turkey.

However, as Aksoy and Robins (2000) have argued, what has become clear since the 1990s is that television, and broadcasting for that matter, is not necessarily or inherently national. Developments in telecommunications technologies, and the ways in which these technologies have been deployed by societies around the globe, have shown us that a new (transnational) media order has emerged alongside the conventional national media arena. Since the turn of the 21st century, RTÜK—although not a broadcaster itself—has had to realize that broadcasting was becoming increasingly transnational. This realization, coupled with the changing directions in Turkish foreign policy after the Justice and Development Party's coming to power in 2002, has resulted in fundamental changes to RTÜK, which has evolved from a national regulatory body to an international institution working toward the transnational claims of Turkey within the Middle East.

What forced RTÜK to reposition itself and relegitimize its existence—from a national to a transnational scale? To answer these questions, we need a two-pronged approach. First, we need to be aware of the transnationalization of telecommunications technologies and practices. Second, we need to familiarize ourselves with alterations to Turkish foreign policy as a result of the coming to power of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, or AKP) in 2002.

### Transnationalization of Broadcasting: The Emergence of New Media Flows

At this point, a brief reflection on the developments in the telecommunications field over the last two decades will be useful for better understanding the transnational endeavors of RTÜK.[2] Although broadcasting initially emerged as a national phenomenon, as a consequence of contemporary alterations in the fields of politics, economics, and technology, the model of national broadcasting has become increasingly undermined. Today a new media order is thriving (Aksoy & Robins, 2000). This transnational media order is reshaping the global flow of media through a complex network of products, producers, and viewers (Sinclair, 1997; Straubhaar, 1997). As Jean Chalaby (2005) states, "The transnationalization of global media at the beginning of the 21st century can be comprehended as the third phase in a succession of paradigm shifts in the evolution of international communication from the mid-19th century onwards" (p. 28).

Chalaby (2005) claims that the first and second phases of transformation in international communication are, respectively, the "internationalization" and "globalization" of media flows. The internationalization of media was fueled by various governments' realization of the importance of new communication technologies. According to Trumpbour (2002), it was during the period of internationalization of communication that, for example, Hollywood, under the strong influence of the U.S. Department of State, dominated the international film trade. In the middle of the 20th century, the emerging space-related technologies acted as a juggernaut behind a process that led to the globalization of the media order (Chalaby, 2002). The invention of communication satellites resulted in global networks of international communications organizations such as Intelsat and the International Telecommunication Union (Evans, 1987; Hecht, 1999). At the end of 1990s, CNN emerged as the world's first global channel.

---

[2] For a more detailed analysis on these developments discussed below, please see (Karanfil, 2011).

It had become available "worldwide 24 hours a day with transmission on a Soviet satellite to Africa, the Middle East and the Indian sub-continent" (Chalaby, 2005, p. 29).

Chalaby (2005) suggests that the third phase—the transnationalization of media—is an extension of the two earlier paradigms. The transnationalization of media flows—and, hence, the transnational media order—can be distinguished from its predecessors mainly through the proliferation of countless relatively small transnational media organizations. The unprecedented possibilities that this new phenomenon presented for groups on both ends of these media flows (producers *and* consumers) is a major factor differentiating the transnational media flows from its predecessors. Therefore, transnational communications, unlike its predecessors, is reshaping the global flow of media through a complex network of products, producers, and viewers (Sinclair et al., 1996; Straubhaar, 1997).

To evaluate the emergence of transnational communications, these developments must be situated within the context of "cross border ethnic media in the world" (Çağlar, 2002, p. 11). Karim Karim (1998) states that the most important and the earliest examples of cross-border ethnic media come from

> Mexican and Brazil television networks Televisa and TV Globo, respectively, which have been able to capture cross-cultural markets beyond their borders. They capitalized on the advantages of their own large domestic audiences and the geolinguistic regions— Spanish-speaking Latin America in the case of Televisa and the string of former Portuguese colonies scattered around the planet in that of TV Globo. (p. 5)

As Ayşe Çağlar (2002) notes, "The international expansion of *Televisa* to capture the Spanish speaking population of [the] USA started as early as mid-50s. It created a network throughout the U.S. to distribute programs and sell advertising to them" (p. 11). According to John Sinclair (1997),

> By 1986, a national network of broadcast stations . . . all interconnected by satellite, was reaching a claimed 82% of Hispanic households, or 15 million viewers (bigger than NBC, it was said), supplying them with programs largely beamed up from Mexico City. (p. 161)

These developments within the South American media context induced a tremendous change in the global media order. Today it is possible to speak of rapidly forming, unprecedented media spheres that render geographic, national, cultural, ethnic, and financial boundaries obsolete, all the while contributing to the formation of novel transnational, hybrid cultural formations. This model of contemporary global media— that is, a media that seeks its audience transnationally—is manifested by media flows that transcend borders of all kinds.

Therefore today, alongside the ever-strengthening and globally dominant Western media giants, there is also a considerable increase in the number and scale of alternate media organizations that have transborder reach. As Chalaby (2005) notes,

> Transnational TV channels have multiplied and grown in diversity over the past 10 years to include some of the most innovative and influential channels of our times. Many of them are at the heart of the transformation of regional media cultures, most noticeably in the Middle East, South Asia and even Africa, but also in Europe. (p. 30)

As a result of the growing importance of these new media flows, combined with the notion of transnationalization, these issues have become significant topics of study (Karanfil, 2009). Scholars whose studies have contributed to the growth and expansion of this field of research include Cunningham and Sinclair (2000); Karim (1998); Guarnizo (2001); Morley (2000); Appadurai (1990, 1996); Chalaby (2002, 2005); Naficy (1993, 1999); Ong (1999); Meyrowitz (1985); Robins (1998); and Aksoy and Robins (2000, 2002, 2003). However, while these and many other scholars have contributed to the growing body of work on transnational broadcasting and the transnational flow of media products, little research has been done on transnational regulatory bodies.

We emphasize here that what can be said with regard to alternative broadcast media organizations equally applies to regulatory bodies from outside of the conventional West. As Karim (1999) states,

> It is clear that the terrain of broadcasting nationally and globally is in the process of undergoing remarkable changes. This has significant implications for state agencies concerned with regulation and policy. It is increasingly difficult to police one's borders given the ability of new communication technologies to facilitate inter-continental links between individuals and groups. (p. 15)

In fact, we argue that the transnationalization of the broadcasting field and its practices have forced the emergence of transnational regulatory bodies and policies. As a key example, RTÜK has become such an effective international agent working toward the transnational claims of the Turkish state that its politics and practices within the transnational sphere have started impacting the national imaginaries as well. This phenomenon involves two interlinked but nonetheless different developments. First, RTÜK has transformed from a national institution into an international one. As a result, it has become an agent of the Turkish state working toward the empowerment of Turkey within a transnational broadcasting sphere. Second, and at least as importantly, RTÜK reminds us of the ever-growing possibility that such institutions foster for a reverse flow of media products and policies. It shows us that broadcasting regulations and policies within a transnational context can impact broadcasters and media spheres initially deemed national. In other words, RTÜK provides a telling example of how national media practices and policies conducted within a transnational sphere can affect domestic media environments.

Today, emerging as a transnationalizing agent of the Turkish state, RTÜK—as an alternative regional consolidation—claims a position within the context of the Middle Eastern broadcasting sphere.[3] Crucially, the coming to power of the Justice and Development Party in 2002 heralded changes in Turkey that altered the nation's international politics in ways that enabled RTÜK to establish a transnational

---

[3] We would like to thank reviewer A for drawing our attention to this important point.

orientation. A realignment of political power has allowed Turkey, struggling for nearly a century to become a part of the West, to turn to the Middle East as well—a move that has become an important component of its foreign politics. In parallel with the AKP's claims to regional power in the Middle East, the transnationalization of RTÜK has proven extremely fruitful.

During the 1990s, Hollywood movies and imported TV programs and series, such as *The Young and the Restless*, *The Bold and the Beautiful*, and *90210*, took Turkish audiences by storm. In fact, this was a period in which Western media products and media cultures were starting to be consumed heavily in many parts of the world, including the Middle East, Asia, and the Far East. Because of the possibilities created by new communications technologies, giant Western broadcasters were dominating the media scene all around the world. However, during the last decade of the 20th century, something rather unexpected also was happening within the global media environment: Many non-Western media outlets began disseminating their cultural products to other parts of the world. Among such media outlets, some of the most prominent are Al Jazeera, established in 1996 in Qatar; former TRT-INT, founded in 1990 in Turkey; and Zee TV, launched in 1992 in India (Karanfil, 2009).

These counterflows, or alternative flows of media cultures, multiplied not only in the centers of customary broadcast fields but in their peripheries, resulting in a highly complex global media environment. One good example of the decentering of the Western media domination is what has come to be known as the "Korean wave." This phenomenon was fueled initially by the spread of Korean TV dramas televised throughout much of Asia in the 1990s, and was followed later by the growing global popularity of Korean music videos. As Cunningham and Sinclair (2000) have shown in their study on Asian migrants in Australia, this broad consumption of Asian media products created a transnational media culture that challenged Western media conglomerates' media dominance around the globe.

Although this process of transnationalization in the media environment initially started with the exportation and foreign consumption of media products, it gradually led to the transnationalization of broadcasting regulations and policies. Predictably, the early transnational broadcast regulators emerged from Europe. The first and most important of these was the European Platform for Regulatory Authorities (EPRA). Set up in 1995, EPRA aimed at providing a forum for cooperation among European regulatory authorities. Today, EPRA has 53 regulatory bodies as its members, including RTÜK. However, in line with Turkey's relatively recent increasing inclusion of the Middle East and the İslamic world in its foreign policy, in addition to its membership in EPRA, RTÜK has emphasized its pivotal position in the hinterland of the late Ottoman Empire, projecting itself as a role model for regulatory institutions of neighboring countries in their emerging media spheres.

### Transformation or Transition? Turkish Foreign Policy After the AKP

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the political and intellectual perspectives that divided the world into the three world systems—the first world (liberal-democratic capitalism), the second world (state socialism), and the third world (undeveloped countries of Latin America, Asia, and Africa)—have dissolved into a multipolar world system (Denning, 2004). While the multipolar world was taking shape during the 1990s and 2000s, Turkey experienced a dramatic shift in its foreign policy, especially in the last decade.

Since the establishment of the modern Turkish Republic, Turkey has assumed an orientation to the West based on the objective of "achieving civilization" for its society, or, in the words of Kemal Atatürk, "to reach the level of contemporary civilizations."

During the 1990s and even after the AKP came to power in 2002, especially within the first four years of its government, Turkish foreign policy remained anchored to Europe with the goal of integration into the European Union. In November 2002, the AKP won the general elections, and it took a significant step toward Turkey's membership in the European Union in December with the Copenhagen European Council negotiations. However, the European Commission put the negotiations on hold in 2005. As Valeria Giannotta (2012) states, since 2005, the AKP's foreign policies entered a new phase for "launching Turkey towards a more assertive and independent role in its neighborhood" (p. 1). In this new phase, the AKP government has concentrated on improving political, economic, and cultural relationships with neighboring countries in the Middle East and the Balkans as well as with regional states, including the Turkic nations in Central Asia.

To elaborate, Giannotta (2012) argues that there have been two phases of AKP foreign policy. Between 2002 and 2005, the AKP prioritized Turkey–EU relations and the democratization process; yet, after 2005, "a certain loss of enthusiasm on the focal point of joining the EU, and a deviation towards a 'soft eastern' strategy can be discerned" (Giannotta, 2012, p. 1). However, this new policy approach brought about strong criticisms. The first of these criticisms was neo-Ottomanism. Neo-Ottomanists assert that the AKP's shift in foreign policies reflected two aims: to restore Turkey's predominance in the former hinterland of the Ottoman Empire, which was lost during the establishment of the Turkish nation state, and to heighten Turkish dominance over the economic, cultural, and political spheres in these regions. The second criticism came mostly from the leftist-Kemalist perspective, which has been popularly described as a "shift of axis." According to this view, Turkey aimed to boost its economic and cultural relations with the Middle East and Balkans. This shift toward the East triggered the waning of Turkey–EU relations at a time when Europe was struggling with its own economic crisis.

A key figure in the forging of Turkey's international politics in the AKP period has been the foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu. Davutoğlu explains the Turkish government's new approach to foreign policy as "strategic depth," or as encompassing a "strategy of depth." In his book *Strategic Depth*,, Davutoğlu (2001) clearly describes his vision. His purpose is to increase the cultural, economic, and political roles of Turkey in regions that previously composed the Ottoman domain, currently the hinterland of modern Turkey. He also promotes Turkey's social, economic, and political engagement with many countries beyond the borders of the former Ottoman Empire. Davutoğlu proclaims that the strategic depth of Turkey is predicated first on Turkey's *strategic geopolitical location*, near the Bosporus and its neighboring countries in the Middle East, Europe, and Caucasia, and second on *historical depth*, in that it shares a common history with all these regions as the heir of the Ottoman state (Davutoglu, 2001, p. 2003).

In addition to Davutoğlu's foreign policy perspective of strategic depth, the AKP's ascension to power has resulted in a Turkish foreign policy discourse formulated around the objective of "zero problems with neighbors." On the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the zero-problem policy is defined by emphasizing the changing milieu in neighboring regions:

It is thus incumbent on Turkey to assume more responsibilities in her region. As a matter of fact, one of the rare common denominators of many countries, which have significant disagreements over deep-rooted problems in our region, is their confidence towards Turkey. Likewise, the level reached by Turkey in the field of economic development and democracy has broadened her foreign policy outreach and increased her power of impact in this domain. This has made the resolute and constructive foreign policy adopted by Turkey ever more needed and sought after in the region. Today, being aware of her increasing tools and capabilities, and the responsibilities emanating from these, Turkey pursues a multi-dimensional foreign policy which is pre-emptive rather than being reactive. . . . While implementing her foreign policy on a global scale with this understanding, Turkey attaches special importance to seeing its positive outcomes in her immediate vicinity, that is to say, in her relations with neighbors. In this context, the discourse of "zero problem with neighbors" is a slogan summarizing Turkey's expectations with regards to her relations with neighboring countries. Turkey wants to eliminate all the problems from her relations with neighbors or at least to minimize them as much as possible.[4]

This statement needs to be read as a declaration that Turkish foreign policy is taking a dramatic turn, as Turkey is starting to face its neighbors not only in the West but also in the East. It also clarifies the new perspective of the AKP government with regard to both Turkey, as a global player in world politics and the heir of the Ottoman legacy, and to the countries in the former Ottoman hinterland. The statement makes clear that, rather than offering mutual negotiation and collaboration, Turkey is positioned as first and foremost an actor for finding solutions to problems with its neighbors. In a similar vein, in many interviews, Davutoğlu consistently emphasizes the loss of the central position Turkey had occupied in the Ottoman Empire. For Davutoğlu, Turkey's transformation from an empire to a nation-state means a shift from the center to the periphery within the global political and economic realm. Its peripheral situation is one of the major problems that modern Turkey has to deal with today (Davutoğlu, 2013).

Murinson (2006) argues that the current multidimensional foreign policy doctrine of the AKP needs to be understood as the extension of the Özal and Erbakan periods in the 1980s and 1990s. It is possible to suggest that these two leaders of Turkey—both of whom were religiously oriented and conservative—built close ties with the Middle East and Muslim Asian countries, hence laying the foundation for the AKP's current foreign policy (Murinson, 2006). Perhaps what is important to note here is that because of the foreign policy changes initiated by the AKP, Turkey has also strategically shifted from a Kemalist-nationalist (West-oriented) to a neo-Ottomanist paradigm (Murinson, 2006, p. 946).

Kemalism, the founding ideology of the Turkish Republic, has carried the burden of the Ottoman legacy by attempting to create a rupture with its historical and cultural past and rejecting the Ottoman multiethnic model in the process of the establishment of a nation-state. Although one of the main mottoes of the founder of modern Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, has been "Peace at home, peace in the world"

---

[4] Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (n.d.). *Policy of zero problems with our neighbors.* Retrieved from http://www.mfa.gov.tr/policy-of-zero-problems-with-our-neighbors.en.mfa

(*yurtta barış, dünyada barış*), the other maxim that is deeply embedded in Turkish popular culture and foreign policy discourse based on nationalist historical experience is "There is no other friend of a Turk, but a Turk" (*Türkün Türkten başka dostu yoktur*). Therefore, for a long time, Turkish foreign policy has been built on conspiracy theories, with one of its main tenets being constituted by a suspicion toward foreign societies and state powers, especially toward the ones that caused the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, such as Western European countries and Turkey's current neighbors.

On the other hand, Davutoğlu offers the quite different perspective of "a truly original neo-Ottoman thinker" (Murinson, 2006, p. 948). The neo-Ottomanist perspective is rendered in Davutoğlu's critique of nationalism. According to Davutoğlu, nationalism is an ideology and fiction of the West that neo-Ottomanists reject (Murinson, 2006). From this perspective, as opposed to a Eurocentric conceptualization of invented nationalism, Islam offers universal and encompassing genuine identities. Although Davutoğlu rejects and criticizes Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilization" thesis, he evidently stresses the clash of national and religious identities by prioritizing the latter over the former. He suggests that Islamic civilization should be revived, and that this revival should be followed by the unity of *ümmet* (the Islamic community) on a global scale. In Davutoğlu's vision, Turkey plays a major role in the unanimity of Islamic countries and holds a prominent position in the Muslim world. RTÜK, as a convinced follower of the AKP`s foreign policy, eagerly aspires to lead and regulate the newly emerging transnational broadcast order, especially in the neighboring regions. In the light of Turkish foreign policy, RTÜK's attempts to predominate may be analyzed as ventures of a transnationalizing agent to prepare the ground for the centralization of Turkey's position in the transnational media landscape of the Middle Eastern geography.

### Contemporary Turkish Foreign Policy Initiatives and RTÜK

Soon after RTÜK commenced its duties, the Department of International Affairs (DIA) within RTÜK became one of the most active divisions in the institution due to the transnationalization motives of this national regulatory body. On RTÜK's official website, the DIA's duties are described as follows:[5]

> Together with the Department of Legal Affairs with respect to the issues of current international regulations on the field of radio and television broadcasting, and together with the relevant departments for the technical issues; to implement relations with the relevant foreign or domestic authorities and institutions, to make periodical and necessary consultations, to make assessments on the results of these consultations and represent its proposals to the Supreme Council.[6]

With respect to the creation of the Department of International Affairs, 2007 is a strategically important year to understand and analyze the transnationalization of RTÜK and Turkey's current foreign

---

[5] The authors have been unable to obtain any printed reports from RTÜK regarding its foreign policies and strategies. Therefore, data regarding RTÜK's international practices have been acquired from the institution's website.

[6] See http://www.rtuk.org.tr/sayfalar/English.aspx; see International Activities.

policies. On July 22, 2007, the AKP won the general elections by getting 46.58% of the votes in Turkey. This is considered a great achievement, since the percentage of votes for the AKP had increased from 34.26% to 47% after the election of 2002.[7] Since 2007, in line with the official foreign policy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the transnationalization and international activities of RTÜK have visibly accelerated. Alongside Turkey's initiatives as a nation-state pursuing transnational political recognition and power, RTÜK has become an active regulatory agent in the broadcasting sphere of long-neglected regions such as the Black Sea, the Middle East, the Balkans, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. This negligence on behalf of both the Turkish state and RTÜK has never been accidental; nor is the sudden interest of these two agents in these geographies coincidental. As stated, this shift in international focus needs to be read in light of the changing strategies and priorities of Turkish foreign politics after the second period of the AKP's governance beginning in 2004.

The popularity of Turkish TV series and RTÜK's success in selling program formatting to many neighboring countries has helped RTÜK to become more active in these regions (see Vatikiotis & Yörük and Kraidy & Al Ghazzi, this issue). Similar to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, RTÜK also embraces the Ottoman heritage, and, in alignment with Davutoğlu's perspective, RTÜK's policies emphasize the embeddedness of Turkey in the Balkans and the Middle East. Davutoğlu notes that

> Turkey is not just any old Mediterranean country. One important characteristic that distinguishes Turkey, from say Romania or Greece, is that Turkey is at the same time a Middle Eastern and Caucasian country. Unlike Germany, Turkey is as much a European country as it is an Asian country. Indeed, Turkey is as much a Black Sea country as it is a Mediterranean one. (Quoted in Murinson, 2006, p. 952)

As we discuss below, the international institutions primarily initiated by RTÜK, especially the Black Sea Countries Broadcasting Regulatory Authorities Forum (BRAF) and the Islamic Countries Broadcasting Regulatory Authorities Forum (IBRAF), can be considered outcomes that are aligned with the strategic depth and zero-problem policy perspectives of the government.

### Transnational Regulatory Protocols: BRAF and IBRAF

The recent RTÜK policies represent the AKP's primary desire "to harmonize Turkey's European and Islamic identities" (Giannotta, 2012, p. 1). Accordingly, the web page of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is offered in two foreign languages: English and Arabic. In other words, the activist policies of the AKP, such as improving relations with neighboring countries, led to emphasizing Turkey's Middle Eastern and Islamic identity while also acknowledging its European characteristics and the indisputable necessity of its transnationalization in a global world. In an interview on religiously oriented STV on October 3, 2001, Davutoğlu stated that a shared historical experience of the Ottoman Empire carries an important weight to understand strategic depth as a policy of Turkey, pointing out that the Ottomans and Andalusia are focal points of direct contact with the West (Davutoğlu, 2002, p. 130). From Davutoğlu's perspective, these two empires are vanguards of Islamic civilization. In this context, RTÜK can be considered an agent that

creates contact points within the new geopolitical structure. Davutoğlu refuses to use the word *bridge* because of the pejorative meaning he claims it has acquired in scholarly and popular literature. Yet, for him, the word signifies the articulation and hybridization of cultures and civilizations.

This perspective reflects the policies of RTÜK during the 2000s. In line with the foreign policies of the Turkish government regarding the Middle East, the Balkans, the Caucasus, and the Black Sea region, RTÜK took the lead in founding BRAF and IBRAF to improve its relationships with countries in these areas. RTÜK took the initiative in creating these two organizations because of Turkey's historical and geographical connections to the regions under their purview through "historical depth." RTÜK's actions must be considered in the context of the government's neo-Ottoman polices and its determination to carry out AKP's shift-of-axis policy in the realm of broadcasting. For example, RTÜK established protocols with two nation-states with which Turkey has organic symbiotic relations: Northern Cyprus and Azerbaijan. The Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus is considered a satellite state not fully independent from the political and economic control of Turkey. The common phrases *anavatan* (motherland) and *yavru vatan* (babyland) signify a hegemonic, dependent, and unhealthy relationship between them (İlter & Alankuş, 2010; Way & Akan, 2012).

The protocol signed by Turkey and Northern Cyprus in 2003 aims to reinforce and reaffirm coordination and cooperation between the two parties. Similarly, the relationship between Turkey and Azerbaijan has been described as "one nation, two states" (Baran, 2002), emphasizing common cultural and linguistic bonds between the two countries. The same phrase is used in the international protocol signed between RTÜK and Azerbaijan's National TV and Radio Council (NTRC) in 2004. During his visit to RTÜK, the chairman of the NTRC, Nuşiravan Maharramov, stated that "the relationship between the two countries is based on the 'one nation, two states' motto, and we take RTÜK as an example."[8] The broadcasting protocols signed between RTÜK and these countries implicitly offers Turkey as an economic and political model to Northern Cyprus and the postcommunist state of Azerbaijan, especially in the cultural and social realms. Therefore, the protocols signed among these regulatory bodies and the discourse and tone of RTÜK reinforces the vision of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in key respects.

In addition to its orchestration of international protocols, RTÜK took a major role in initiating two transregional broadcasting authorities. Figuratively speaking, transnationalism has blurred the boundaries of nations and definitions of nationalism by transcending the national identities and functions of institutions such as RTÜK. These institutions now belong to transnational networks and are forced to reformulate their institutional identities through these networks. Because of the paradigm shift discussed above, RTÜK's identity is no longer based on conceptualizations of nationhood. This reformulated identity is explicitly indicated in the joint declaration of IBRAF, which begins with the acknowledgement that "with the development of the transfrontier nature of broadcasting, countries have felt the need for common standards in broadcasting."[9]

---

[8] See http://www.rtuk.org.tr/sayfalar/IcerikGoster.aspx?icerik_id=e0293dfa-0a97-43b6-b01c-e9b5f04555e7

[9] See http://www.rtuk.org.tr/sayfalar/IcerikGoster.aspx?icerik_id=4a9c9061-0006-4115-b43b-5933ef641054

Addressing this same concern, in 2011, at a forum organized in Istanbul, RTÜK advanced the formulation of the OIC Member Countries Broadcasting Regulatory Authorities, briefly known as the IBRAF. Although the full proper name of the organization is OIC Member Countries Broadcasting Regulatory Authorities Forum, the abbreviated form of its name (the Islamic Broadcasting Regulatory Authorities Forum) manifests its institutional identity. The forum's joint declaration clearly states:

> [T]he establishment of a Forum among the Islamic Countries Broadcasting Regulatory Authorities or the like would contribute to enhanced co-operation in the Muslim world [and thus we submit that] the Charter of the Organization of the Islamic Cooperation will be the guiding document of the Forum.[10]

The institutional structure of the IBRAF consists of five administrative organs, including the annual conference, working groups, a committee of experts, a permanent secretariat, and a chairmanship. The annual conference is the main decision-making instrument of the IBRAF. The working groups are assigned specific tasks at the annual conference. The national broadcasting regulatory authorities and those governmental bodies with similar functions are represented in the committee of experts. The main function of the permanent secretariat is to provide secretarial services for the IBRAF. The chairmanship, as a unit of coordination, includes a chairman and a vice chair who are elected for a year to be responsible for all activities and their implementation. Among all these agencies, the permanent secretariat is of special importance for Turkey. As clearly stated in the charter document, it is headquartered in Ankara, Turkey's capital city. RTÜK single-handedly bears the financial burden of the operation of the secretariat, and the executive secretary is appointed by "the organization hosting the permanent secretariat," which is RTÜK in this case.

In 2011, the joint declaration of the IBRAF designated 10 member states and 1 observer country: Azerbaijan, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Indonesia, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan, Libya, Brunei-Darussalam, and Tajikistan as the member states and the Turkish Cypriot State as the observer. However, except for Azerbaijan, none of the states shares a border with Turkey. While Muslim OIC member countries in Southeast and Central Asia were involved in the foundation of a transnational Muslim broadcasting organization, Turkey's Muslim neighbors—Iraq, Iran, and Syria—were not represented in the IBRAF. Considering the transborder nature of broadcasting and the fact that Turkey has close economic cooperation, historical ties, and cultural dialogue with all three o countries, the question arises as to why these countries were not among the member countries of the organization in 2001. However, a document promulgated the following year, the Charter of the OIC Broadcasting Regulatory Authorities Forum, listed 25 countries, including Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, and the Russian Federation.[11] The distinctive difference between the two documents regarding member countries of the IBRAF, with the monumental change in the number of the countries in a single year, both indicates the success and necessity of the initiative and

---

[10] See http://www.rtuk.org.tr/sayfalar/IcerikGoster.aspx?icerik_id=9ed52239-594a-4afb-b343-26e69ea9a104

[11] See http://www.rtuk.org.tr/sayfalar/IcerikGoster.aspx?icerik_id=b1192234-198f-4e31-b3c7-ba276337226b

affirms the expansive Islamic vision of the AKP that was already transcending the regional borders of the Middle East.

As this account demonstrates, RTÜK has wholly adapted Davutoğlu's perspective, which can be summarized in his own words: "Turkey cannot be restricted to its specific geography. It cannot be contained in between [two continents].  Turkey must develop cross-border regional policies beyond itself" (Davutoğlu, 2002, p. 179). Regarding the unity of Islamic countries, this position clearly offers an ambitious and comprehensive vision in parallel with the current policy of the Foreign Ministry. Davutoğlu's statement also implies transnationalism, and it offers a new standpoint that shifts the idea of the center and the periphery by refusing to position Turkey between the West and the East, the North and the South, and the Muslim and the Christian. From this viewpoint, Turkey is constructed as one of many centers in a global world. Therefore, it is also meaningful that the joint declaration for the establishment of IBRAF was signed in Istanbul in 2011. And even though the IBRAF's second meeting was held in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, in October 2012, a press release by RTÜK made clear that the general secretary of IBRAF is located in Ankara and that the institution's secretary was appointed by RTÜK.[12] In promoting RTÜK's critical role, its authorities work closely with OIC Secretary General Eklemeddin Ihsanoğlu, who is a Turkish scholar and diplomat.

At the 2007 Black Sea Economic Cooperation summit in Ukraine, four years before the IBRAF was instituted, RTÜK proposed the creation of a common platform for broadcasting regulatory authorities. The following year, BRAF was established with the cooperation of 12 countries, including Armenia, Greece, and Bulgaria, neighboring countries that have been in constant conflict with Turkey since the establishment of the modern Turkish Republic. Regarding the zero-problem policy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, RTÜK took the initiative to foster transnational regulatory institutions in collaboration with mostly the hinterland countries of the Ottoman Empire. BRAF members include Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Greece, Georgia, Moldova, Romania, Ukraine, Serbia, the Russian Federation, and Turkey.

The discourse addressing the raison d'être for the establishment and characteristics of the BRAF, expressed in a press release on June 24, 2009, deserves close analysis to gain insight into similar actions conducted by RTÜK, and to grasp the institution's position in strategic regions. The press release reads, "BRAF has emerged as a unique and promising multisided political and economic enterprise which was established to support good relations and neighborliness within the Black Sea region."[13] The press release circulated by RTÜK on June 24, 2009, addressing "the inauguration of Turkey" through the establishment of the BRAF, particularly emphasizes Turkey's contribution to "regional cooperation" and "its leading role in media industry." As a result of all these developments, it notes, "Turkey has become more visible."[14] Another eloquent reminder of this visibility is that the permanent secretariat of the BRAF, like that of the IBRAF, is located in Ankara, and its general secretary was also appointed by RTÜK. However, the working

---

[12] See http://www.rtuk.org.tr/sayfalar/IcerikGoster.aspx?icerik_id=2c2b850f-e9f7-4f72-81eb-dc8644070fce

[13] See http://www.rtuk.gov.tr/sayfalar/IcerikGoster.aspx?icerik_id=c0d1c692-b3c5-4c01-a373-ba7e170b862e

[14] Ibid.

languages of the BRAF annual conference are English and Russian, because Russian is a common language in post-Soviet countries.

**Conclusion**

The transnationalization of the Turkish media environment started long before the AKP came to power in Turkey. As Haluk Şahin and Asu Aksoy, among others, state, the ways in which Turkey has used new communication technologies have been instrumental in making it one of the biggest transnational broadcasters in the world, even in the early 1990s (Şahin & Aksoy, 1993). The transnationalization of Turkish broadcasting started with TRT-Avrasya and various commercial channels beaming their signals, first in the early 1990s to Turkish diasporic viewers in Europe and later, in the early 2000s, to viewers of Turkish origin in the Americas, Australia, and Africa (Karanfil, 2009, 2011). At the same time, the official state television station, TRT, had become the central instrument for disseminating Turkish national cultural values to its various subsidiaries (Şahin & Aksoy, 1993), such as TRT International (TRT-INT) for Europe, TRT-GAP for southeast Turkey, and TRT-Avrasya for the emerging Turkic Republics of Central Asia.

This process of transnationalization, which, until the turn of the 21st century, was mainly based on the dissemination and consumption of media products, accelerated when RTÜK—as a regulatory body—started investing in its transnational claims. Therefore, RTÜK has played a significant role in the integration of Turkey into global political and economic spheres through the transnational endeavors and practices among its affiliated broadcasting regulatory bodies. According to Kejanlıoğlu, Adaklı, and Çelenk (2001), RTÜK is similar to other international regulatory institutions in its organizational structure and duties. They emphasize, however, that RTÜK is influenced by various political actors, because Turkey's political culture relies on partiality and nepotism (Kejanlıoğlu et al., 2001, pp. 136–137). As a result, despite RTÜK's powerful image among various media, it is a culturally conservative political institution whose autonomy is continually under threat (Kejanlıoğlu et al., 2001).

RTÜK sense has employed a multifaceted policy to become an active agent of the international broadcasting sphere by taking a lead role in transnationalizing previously national institutions. It has turned into an intermediary agent between the national and the transnational, and it now reinforces presence and leadership within a transnational media arena. BRAF and IBRAF are the first institutional organizations of their kind. Considering the AKP's current foreign policy within the context of transnationalized broadcasting regulations and decentralized control on an international scale, acknowledging RTÜK's leadership in bringing both BRAF and IBRAF into being is critical to understanding developments in contemporary transnational spheres.

RTÜK has been a contributing agent of the Turkish state in its endeavors to establish and enforce a sphere of soft power in the Middle East region. However, we have not dealt with the latest political developments in Turkey in relation to RTÜK. Turkey, as an extremely dynamic country, is experiencing a great deal of transformation due to recent uprisings organized around Istanbul Gezi Park and is losing ground in the Balkans and the Middle East because of its foreign policy approach to Syria. Because of page limitations, we have not tackled the issue of how these recent changes affect and shape the media

landscape in Turkey. What we have tried to unravel here is how, through the deployment of RTÜK and the field of broadcasting, the Turkish state has been working toward the formulation of a sphere of transnational politics in which it positions itself as a rising leading actor. We have also shown how RTÜK, which began as a strictly national regulatory body, has become an international actor working toward the forging of a transnational regulatory node in the Middle East initiated mainly by Turkey. Finally, by questioning the long-held discursive dichotomy between the West and the non-West, our argument has been that this emerging transnational regulatory node presents itself as a regional power base that strives to create another transnational player in an extremely competitive global field by decentering those players who originated from the European and North Atlantic power bases.

## References

Aksoy, A., & Robins, K. (1997). Peripheral vision: Cultural industries and cultural identities in Turkey. *Environment and Planning, 29*(11), 1951.

Aksoy, A., & Robins, K. (2000). Thinking across spaces: Transnational television from Turkey. *European Journal of Cultural Studies, 3*(3), 343–365.

Aksoy, A., & Robins, K. (2002). Banal transnationalism: The difference that television makes. *Transnational Communities Programme Working Paper Series*, WPTC-02-08.

Baran, Z. (2002). The Caucasus: Ten years after independence. *The Washington Quarterly, 25*(1), 221–234.

Çağlar, A. (2002). Media corporatism and cosmopolitanism. In S. Vertovec & R. Cohen (Eds.), *Conceiving cosmopolitanism: Theory, context and practice* (pp. 180–190). Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press.

Çaplı, B. (1996). *Televizyon ve siyasal sistem* [Television and political system]. Ankara, Turkey: İmge Kitabevi Yayınları.

Chalaby, J. (2002). Transnational television in Europe: The role of pan-European channels. *European Journal of Communication*, 17(2), 183–203.

Chalaby, J. (2005). From internationalization to transnationalization. *Global Media and Communication, 1*(1), 28–33.

Cunningham, S., & Sinclair J. (Eds.). (2000). *Floating lives: The media and Asian diasporas.* Brisbane, Australia: University of Queensland Press.

Davutoğlu, A. (2001). *Stratejik derinlik: Turkiye'nin uluslararasi konumu* [Strategic depth: Turkey's international position]. Ankara, Turkey: Küre Yayınları.

Davutoğlu, A. (2002). *Küresel bunalım: 11 Eylül konuşmaları* [Global crisis: September 11 talks]. Istanbul, Turkey: Küre Yayınları.

Davutoğlu, A. (2013). *Teoriden pratiğe:Türk dış politikası üzerine konuşmalar* [From theory to practice: Talks on Turkish foreign policy]. İstanbul, Turkey: Küre Yayınları,

Denning, M. (2004). *Culture in the age of three worlds.* London, UK: Verso.

Evans, B.G. (Ed.). (1987). *Satellite communication systems.* London, UK: Peter Peregrinus.

Giannotta, V. (2012). Turkish foreign policy evolution and goals under the AKP government. *Balkanalysis.* Retrieved from http://www.balkanalysis.com/turkey/2012/01/19/turkish-foreign-policy-evolution-and-goals-under-the-akp-government

Hecht, J. (1999). *City of light: The story of fiber optics.* New York, UK: Oxford University Press.

İlter, T., & Alankuş, S. (2010). The changing configurations of self-(m)other dialogue in North Cyprus. *Social Identities, 16*(2), 261–284.

Karanfil, G. (2009). Pseudo-exiles and reluctant transnationals: Disrupted nostalgia on Turkish satellite broadcasts. *Media, Culture and Society,* 31(6), 887–899.

Karanfil, G. (2011). Medya ve diyaspora: Türkiye'de ulusaşırı yayıncılığın dinamikleri [Media and diaspora: Dynamics of transnational broadcasting in Turkey]. *Kültür ve İletişim*, *14*(1), 37–69.

Karim, K. H. (1998). *From ethnic media to global media: Transnational communication networks among diasporic communities.* Transnational Communities Programme Working Paper Series, WPTC–99–02.

Kejanlıoğlu, B., Adaklı, G., & Çelenk, S. (2001). *Medya politikaları: Türkiye'de televizyon yayıncılığının dinamikleri* [Dynamics of TV broadcasting in Turkey]. Ankara, Turkey: İmge Kitabevi.

Kumar, S. (2006). *Gandhi meets primetime: Globalization and nationalism in Indian television*. Urbana-Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Mankekar, P. (1999). *Screening culture, viewing politics: An ethnography of television, womanhood, and nation in postcolonial India.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Meyrowitz, J. (1985). *No sense of place: The impact of electronic media on social behavior*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Murinson, A. (2006). The strategic depth doctrine of Turkish foreign policy. *Middle Eastern Studies*, *42*(6), 945–964.

Naficy, H. (1993). *The making of exile cultures: Iranian television in Los Angles.* Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Ong, A. (1999). *Flexible citizenship: The cultural logics of transnationality*. London, UK: Duke University Press.

Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (n.d.). *Policy of zero problems with our neighbors.* Retrieved from http://www.mfa.gov.tr/policy-of-zero-problems-with-our-neighbors.en.mfa

Robins, K. (1996). Interrupting identities: Turkey/Europe. In P. D. Gay & S. Hall (Eds.), *Questions of cultural identity* (pp. 61–87). London, UK: SAGE Publications.

Robins, K. (1998). Spaces of global media. *Transnational communities programme working paper series,* WPTC-98-06.

Şahin, H., & Aksoy, A. (1993). Global media and cultural identity in Turkey. *Journal of Communication, 43*(2), 31–41.

Sinclair, J., Jacka, E., & Cunningham, S. (Eds.). (1996). *New patterns in global television: Peripheral vision.* London and New York: Oxford University Press.

Sinclair J. (1997). The decentring of cultural imperialism, televisa-tion and globo-ization in the Latin world. In K. Thompson (Ed.), *Media and cultural regulation* (pp. 120–134. London, UK: SAGE Publications.

Straubhaar, J. (1997). Distinguishing the global, regional and national levels of world television. In A. Sreberny-Mohammadi, D. Winseck, J. McKenna, & O. Boyd-Barrett (Eds.), *Media in global context: A reader* (pp. 284– 298. London, UK: Arnold.

Trumpbour, J. (2002). *Selling Hollywood to the world: US and European struggles for mastery of the global film industry, 1920–1950.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Way, L. C. S., & Akan, A. (2012). Electricity and nationalism: Different nationalisms in Turkish news media coverage of Cypriot events. *GMJ: Mediterranean Edition, 7*(1), 18–28.