



**Economic and Cultural Bridges: Necmettin Erbakan's Southeast Asia Trip  
(Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia)**

Alparslan Onbasi - Esra Polat Onbasi

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**ABSTRACT**

This study analyzes Necmettin Erbakan's Southeast Asia trip, which included Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia, and its outcomes on Turkey's economy and foreign policy. An influential politician, Necmettin Erbakan served as the Prime Minister of the Republic of Türkiye between 1996 and 1997. His term as Prime Minister was a period of significant changes in Turkish foreign policy. Believing that Türkiye should pursue a foreign policy in line with its own values, culture, and history, Erbakan attempted to reorient Turkish foreign policy from a Western to an Eastern focus. Aiming to cooperate with Islamic countries in particular, he planned his first overseas trip in this direction and first visited Iran and Pakistan, two key countries in the Islamic world. Then, turning his attention to Southeast Asia, Erbakan first visited Singapore, an Asian country developed by European standards. Then, he visited Malaysia, which is rapidly growing in Southeast Asia and constitutes the best synthesis of Islam and economic development, and finally Indonesia, which has special importance with its large Muslim population and strategic location in the region. This trip had significant results, including the signing of economic cooperation agreements covering issues such as increasing

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trade between Türkiye and Southeast Asian countries, evaluating mutual investment opportunities, and technology transfer. It also contributed to Türkiye's recognition as a modern, developing, and important country in the Islamic world. As a result, this trip increased Türkiye's strategic importance in Southeast Asia. More importantly, this trip laid the foundations for future diplomatic relations.

**Key Words:** *Necmettin Erbakan, Turkish Foreign Policy, Southeast Asia, Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Traditionally, Turkish foreign policy has been based on two fundamental principles: status quo and Western orientation.<sup>3</sup> Status quo refers to an approach that advocates the preservation and maintenance of the existing social, economic, political, and cultural order.<sup>4</sup> For Türkiye, following a status quo policy means preserving the existing borders.<sup>5</sup> The founder and first President of the Republic of Türkiye, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881-1938), had set the preservation of Türkiye's existence within its own national borders as his primary goal without pursuing excessive and unnecessary dreams.<sup>6</sup> He explained this idea with the following words:

*"Gentlemen, we are not pursuing grandiose illusions. We did this in the past and attracted the odium of the world to this nation. We did not pursue Pan-Islamism. We may have said: "We are doing it" or "are going to do it"; and our adversaries said: "Let us get rid of them to stop*

<sup>3</sup> Baskın Oran, *Turkish Foreign Policy, 1919-2006: Facts and Analyses with Documents*, (United States: The University of Utah Press, 2010),p.19.

<sup>4</sup> Jack Plano and Roy Olton, *The International Relations Dictionary*, (California: ABC Clio,1988),p.9.

<sup>5</sup> Baskın Oran, 20.

<sup>6</sup> İsmet Giritli, *"Nutukta İç ve Dış Politika" Atatürk'ün Büyük Söylevi'nin 50.Yılı Semineri, Bildiriler Tartışmalar*, (Ankara :Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları,1980),p.1990-1991.



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*them from doing it." We did not engage in Pan-Turkism. We said: "We will do it, we are doing it"; and they said: "Let us get rid of them!" Instead of gaining new enemies by talking about dreams we did not or could not carry out, we must know our limitations and, as a nation, seek only the right to live and be independent. Only for these goals do we sacrifice our lives.<sup>7</sup>*

Another principle that Atatürk determined for the status quo policy was the principle of peace at home and peace in the world and he explained this principle as follows:

*"Honesty in our foreign policy, attention to the security and development of our country, guide our course of action. There can be no easier quality than a country that is in a state of fundamental order and development to seriously desire peace and tranquillity both within itself and in its surroundings."<sup>8</sup> This foreign policy implemented by Atatürk was a realistic policy whose success could not be denied under the conditions of the period.<sup>9</sup>*

The second cornerstone of Turkish foreign policy, the orientation towards the West in foreign policy, is a policy that aims to join the international structure centered on the West.<sup>10</sup> With the establishment of the Republic of Türkiye, the West became a goal to be achieved and a party to cooperate with for Türkiye. Thus, during the period of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder and first president of the Republic of Türkiye, Turkish foreign policy towards the West was conducted to establish cultural ties with the West and to modernize.<sup>11</sup> After Atatürk's death, his successors took further steps to solidify Türkiye as an ally of the West. Especially after

<sup>7</sup> Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, *Atatürk'ün Söylev ve Demeçleri I-II-III* (Ankara: Turk Tarih Kurumu, 1997),p.201.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid,374.

<sup>9</sup> Gönlübol Mehmet & Ömer Kürkçüoğlu, "Atatürk Dönemi Türk Dış Politikasına Genel Bir Bakış", *Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi Dergisi* 1, no. 2 (1985): 472 ; Yusuf Sarıay, "Atatürk'ten Günümüze Türk Dış Politikası Hakkında Genel Bir Değerlendirme", *Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi* 16, no. 48 (2000): 863.

<sup>10</sup> Baskın Oran, 20.

<sup>11</sup> Idris Bal, *Değişen Dünyada Uluslararası İlişkiler: Uluslararası Siyaset Uluslararası Hukuk ve Temel Sorunlar*, (Ankara: Lalezar Kitabevi, 2006), p.21-22; Pinar Bilgin, "Securing Turkey through Western-Oriented Foreign Policy", *New Perspectives on Turkey*, no. 40 (2009): 120; Fahri Yetim, "Atatürkçü Dış Politika Bağlamında 1919-1922 Arası Türk Dış Politikası", *Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi* 8, no.3 (2006): 207; Mehmet Gönlübol, *Atatürk'ün Dış Politikası, Amaç ve İlkeler, Atatürk Yolu*, (Ankara: Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi Yayınları, 1995),p. 237-251



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World War II, Türkiye joined almost all major Western military, political, and economic organizations, including NATO, the Council of Europe, and the IMF. As a result, Türkiye identified itself completely and openly with the West. This identification with the West was intense during and after World War II. At the same time, while many nations and governments were reassessing their power dynamics and shifting their allegiances, the Turks saw no reason to abandon their Western-oriented foreign policy.<sup>12</sup> Also, the Ankara Agreement, signed by Türkiye with the European Economic Community on 12 September 1963, is considered a serious indicator of this Western-focused foreign policy because it symbolizes the beginning of Turkish economic and political integration with the West. The agreement encouraged Türkiye to adapt to Western institutions and norms and enabled Türkiye to take concrete steps toward becoming a part of Europe.<sup>13</sup> However, from the early 1970s onwards, there was a discrepancy between the economic and political developments in Türkiye and the dynamics of the European Union, and Türkiye's full membership in the European Union began to be looked upon with distaste. Indeed, Türkiye's full membership application in 1987 was rejected 2.5 years later.<sup>14</sup> For Türkiye, European Union membership was not only a political and economic partnership but also a symbol of modernization and civilization, and therefore, the government's rejection of Türkiye's European Union membership was met with great disappointment.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, (London: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.296.

<sup>13</sup> Selim İlkin, *A History of Turkey's Association with the European Community* in Ahmet Evin and Geoffrey Denton, *Turkey and the European Community* (Opladen: Leske & Buldrich, 1990), p.35; Ziya Öniş, "Turkey in the Post-Cold War Era: In Search of Identity", *Middle East Journal* 48, no. 1, (1995): 50

<sup>14</sup> İhsan Dagi, *İnsan Hakları ve Demokratikleşme: Türkiye-Avrupa Birliği İlişkilerinde Siyasal Boyut, Türkiye ve Avrupa*, edited by Atilla Eralp, (Ankara: İmge, 1997), p.120-176.

<sup>15</sup> Atilla Eralp, *Turkey and the European Community in the Changing Post-War International System*, in Canan Balkir and Alan M Williams, *Turkey and Europe* (London and New York: Pinter Publishers, 1993), p. 24.



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A new era began in Türkiye - European Union relations with the Customs Union Agreement in 1995. Türkiye signed the Customs Union Agreement without its full membership in the European Union, which led to intense debate and serious concerns. Many politicians expressed their concerns that there would be an import boom, especially with the removal of customs duties on imports.<sup>16</sup> The most important politician who criticized this agreement is Necmettin Erbakan. According to him, this agreement is against Turkish national interests in every way and is a decision that only looks after Western interests. It is also a decision that prevents Türkiye from becoming a strong industrial country. More importantly, this agreement is an agreement that aims to make Türkiye a market for the West and to colonize it, and it has no other purpose than to make Türkiye a slave to the West.<sup>17</sup>

When evaluated in general, it is concluded that Türkiye has made more economic concessions than the European Union with the Customs Union. An example of these concessions is Türkiye's lack of access to the European agricultural market. Furthermore, Türkiye was not given any role in deciding on European Union policies that fundamentally affected it, such as determining the common external tariff. Despite these economic problems, Türkiye's main complaint against the Customs Union was that Turkey was not granted full membership. In this case, Türkiye was condemned to second-class status in the European family of nations and was even completely excluded.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, in March 1997, the leaders of the European Christian Democrat parties, including German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and former Belgian Prime Minister Wilfred Martens, made a joint statement after a meeting in Brussels, saying, "The European Union is a civilization project and Türkiye has no place in this civilization project,

<sup>16</sup> Kemal Kirisci, "Turkey and the European Union: The Domestic Politics of Negotiating Pre-Accession" *Macalester International* 15, no.10 (2005): 58.

<sup>17</sup> Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi Tutanak Dergisi 19, no. 83 (1995).

<sup>18</sup> William Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy since 1774*, (London: Routledge,200), p.128.



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thus clearly revealing the European Union's perspective on Turkey".<sup>19</sup> This arrogant and prejudiced statement that Türkiye was not a civilized country confirmed Necmettin Erbakan's views on the European Union. Erbakan described the European Union as a "Christian club"<sup>20</sup> and argued that Türkiye, which is already unwanted in this community, should establish a common market with Eastern countries with which it has historical and cultural ties.<sup>21</sup> With these statements made before Erbakan became prime minister, he gave signals for the changes he would make during his time in power, and he made every effort to change the traditional pro-Western attitude in Turkish foreign policy during his time in power.<sup>22</sup>

### The Formation and Progress of Necmettin Erbakan Political Vision

Erbakan, the prime minister of the Republic of Türkiye from 1996 to 1997, is an influential politician, engineer, academic, and intellectual. Also, Erbakan is the first devout president in the history of the Republic of Türkiye. Throughout his life, he studied the problems in Türkiye and tried to produce solutions.<sup>23</sup> One of the important reasons why Erbakan entered politics was the idea of industrialization. He entered politics to develop domestic and national industry with the encouragement of the *Gümüshanevi* Dervish Lodge of which he was a member and his teacher Mehmet Zahit Kotku.<sup>24</sup> He applied to be a Konya deputy candidate from the *Adalet Partisi* (Justice Party) in 1969. However, Justice Party members did not want Erbakan to join

<sup>19</sup> Meltem Müftüleri-Baç, "The Never-Ending Story: Turkey and the European Union", *Middle Eastern Studies* 34, no. 4 (1998): 241.

<sup>20</sup> William Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy since 1774*, p.177.

<sup>21</sup> Necmettin Erbakan, *Mecliste Ortak Pazar*, (İzmir: Tek Yol Neşriyatı, 1973), p.12-13.

<sup>22</sup> Hidayet Erbil, *Turkish Foreign and Security Policies in the post-Cold War Era: success or failure? 1989-1999*, PhD Theiss, Kings College University of London, 2006, p. 147.

<sup>23</sup> Esra Polat Onbasi, "Necmettin Erbakan's Views on Turkey's Modernisation Process," *IUM Journal of Human Science* 5, no.2 (2023):98.

<sup>24</sup> İrfan Ersin, *Necmettin Erbakan'ın Ekonomik Söylem ve Uygulamaları*, M.A Thesis, İzzet Baysal Üniversitesi, 2015, p.6.



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the party because he was religious.<sup>25</sup> Erbakan, who received a negative response from the Justice Party became an independent parliamentary candidate from Konya.<sup>26</sup> He held a rally in Konya on 8 October 1969, which rally made a great impression. Thus, Erbakan won the 1969 elections and became an independent deputy from Konya.<sup>27</sup>

Erbakan founded his first political party, the National Order Party, on 24 January 1970. This party, which had the distinction of being the first party established based on “Islamic references” in the Republic of Türkiye, was a conservative and right-wing party.<sup>28</sup> However, this party, founded by Erbakan with great hopes, was short-lived and was closed on May 20, 1971, because it was “contrary to the nature of the secular state and the principles of protecting Atatürk's revolutions”.<sup>29</sup> Following the closure of this party, Erbakan established the National Salvation Party on 11 October 1972.<sup>30</sup> However, since Erbakan was banned from politics, he did not take an active role in the establishment of the party and continued his political life independently for a while. Therefore, Süleyman Arif Emre (1923-2019) became the National Salvation Party’s chairman.<sup>31</sup>

In the 1973 elections, the National Salvation Party received 11.8 percent of the votes and became the third-largest party in the Turkish Grand National Assembly.<sup>32</sup> However, according to the election results, neither party had the votes to form the government alone. Thus, on 17

<sup>25</sup> Oral Çalışır and Tolga Çelik, *İslamcılığın Üç Kolu*, (İstanbul: Güncel Yayıncılık, 2006),p.34.

<sup>26</sup> Muhammed Khan Kayani, *Islamist Prime Minister of Turkey & His political Thoughts*, (İstanbul: The Ummah, 1996),p.18.

<sup>27</sup> Abdul Kadir Macit, *Bitmeyen Mücadele Erbakan*, (İstanbul: İlke Yayıncılık,2018),p. 31-32.

<sup>28</sup> Soner Cagaptay, *The New Sultan, Erdogan and The Crisis Of Modern Turkey*, (London: I.B.Tauris &Co. Ltd, 2017), p.40.

<sup>29</sup> Ruşen Çakır, *Ayet ve Slogan Türkiye’de İslami Oluşumlar*, (İstanbul: Metis Yayınları, 1995), p.231.

<sup>30</sup> Jacob M. Landau, “The National Salvation Party in Turkey”, *Asian and African Studies* 11, no.1, (1976): 6.

<sup>31</sup> Fahrettin Poyraz, *Türk Siyasal Yaşamında Milli Görüş Hareketi*, PhD Thesis, Hacettepe Üniversitesi, 2006, p.106.

<sup>32</sup> Feroz Ahmad, *The Turkish Experiment in Democracy, 1950-1975*, (London: C. Hurst for the Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1997), p.331.



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October, the parties began negotiations for the formation of a coalition government. As a result of long negotiations,<sup>33</sup> the Republican People's Party, which was founded by Atatürk in 1923 and ruled Türkiye alone for 27 years until the multi-party system<sup>34</sup> and National Salvation Party leaders made mutual concessions and agreed on a coalition. After that in 1974, a coalition government was formed, and Bülent Ecevit became the prime minister, and Erbakan became his deputy.<sup>35</sup> However, it was clear from the very beginning that this alliance was extremely difficult and unstable. The members of the Republican People's Party, who were loyal to Atatürk's principles and reforms, did not want to be in a coalition with the National Salvation Party, which advocated Islamic values and was considered to be against secularism, and this situation caused extreme discomfort within the Party.<sup>36</sup> Similar problems were experienced in the National Salvation Party, and as a result of the coalition, there was a deep division and fragmentation among party members. Even important supporters of Erbakan withdrew their support. The most important of these was the withdrawal of support by Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, a Turkish poet, novelist, and Islamist who was loved by conservatives in Türkiye.<sup>37</sup>

This situation could have been an opportunity for both the Republican People's Party and the National Outlook movement. The founding leader of the Republican People's Party, Atatürk, set the goal of "a fully independent Turkey" as the fundamental and most important objective in the establishment of the Republic of Turkey. He emphasized that full independence could

<sup>33</sup> William Hale, *Turkish Politics and the Military*, (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 216.

<sup>34</sup> Esra Polat Onbasi, Syed Ahmet Arvasi's (1932-1988) Critique Of Turkish Nationalism, M.A Thesis, International Islamic University Malaysia, 2021, p. 37 ; Karpat, Kemal, *The Republican People's Party, 1923–1945 in Political Parties and Democracy in Turkey* edited by By Jacob M. Landau & Metin Heper, (London: Routledge,1991),p.24

<sup>35</sup> William Hale, *Turkish Politics and the Military*, p.216.

<sup>36</sup> Rustam Alkhazurovich Tovsultanov, Malika Sharipovna Tovsultanova and Galimova Liliya Nadipovna, Cyprus Problem In Domestic Political Life Of Turkey In 1960-1970's, International Scientific Conference, Social and Cultural Transformations in the Context of Modern Globalism, 2021,p.1555.

<sup>37</sup> Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, *Raporlar 3/4*, (İstanbul: Büyük Doğu Yayınları, 2009), p.121.



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only be achieved through economic independence, and in this context, Atatürk aimed to establish a state based on national sovereignty, where the Turkish nation would be free from colonial powers and stand on its own feet, highlighting the importance of domestic and national industry to minimize foreign dependency.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, the leader of the National Outlook movement, Necmettin Erbakan, focused on the goal of "a fully independent Turkey" throughout his political career and aimed to reduce the country's foreign dependency by developing industry and technology (Erbakan, 2020). In this context, Erbakan's rise to power could have provided a common ground for both parties to unite. However, this potential cooperation was not fully realized due to differing ideological approaches.

While internal political frictions were already ongoing between these coalition partners with opposing ideologies, the disagreements reached their peak with the outbreak of the Cyprus problem.<sup>39</sup> Prime Minister Ecevit was thinking of going to England and meeting with the British Prime Minister as a solution to the question of whether to intervene in the occupation of Cyprus by the Greeks. However, Erbakan claimed that going to England was a waste of time and would not yield any results<sup>40</sup> because the Cyprus issue was very important and urgent for Erbakan. He explained the necessity of intervening in Cyprus as follows: "Cyprus is the insurance of Turkey's integrity. Cyprus means Türkiye, Cyprus is of great importance for the peace of the Middle East, the peace of the Islamic world, and the protection of Türkiye".<sup>41</sup> Despite the decision of Ecevit and his supporters, Erbakan took a great risk and initiative, and decided to launch an operation in Cyprus on 20 July 1974. In spite of the rejection of England and the ceasefire decision of the United Nations, Erbakan carried out this move and

<sup>38</sup> Afet İnan, *İzmir İktisat Kongresi 17 Şubat-4 Mart 1923* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu,1989),p.11.

<sup>39</sup> Abdul Kadir Macit, p.35.

<sup>40</sup> Fadime Tosik Dinç, "Necmettin Erbakan ve Kıbrıs Barış Harekatı", *ESAM Ekonomik ve Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi* 3, no. 1, (2022): 130-131.

<sup>41</sup> Necmettin Erbakan, *Davamız*, edited by Yusuf Aktaş, (İstanbul : Aktaş Yayınları,2020),p.184.



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succeeded.<sup>42</sup> As can be seen, the success of the Cyprus Peace Operation undoubtedly belongs to Erbakan. However, his success was deliberately attributed to Ecevit and his party. For this reason, there was serious tension in the relations between the Republican People's Party and the National Salvation Party; and as a result, the alliance broke down. Thus, the coalition officially ended on 17 November 1974.<sup>43</sup>

On 12 September 1980, the Turkish Armed Forces staged a military coup and seized the government. The National Security Council assumed all legislative and executive powers and all political parties were closed and their leaders detained. Necmettin Erbakan was detained along with other leaders.<sup>44</sup> However, while other party leaders were released, Erbakan was sent to the *Mamak* Martial Law Court for questioning. On 15 October 1980, Erbakan and a group of National Salvation Party members were arrested and tried on charges of anti-secularism and illegality. They were released in July 1981 and acquitted of all charges in 1983. However, he and some of his close friends were banned from politics.<sup>45</sup>

Erbakan founded the Welfare Party with his former party mates in 1983, and after his political ban was lifted in 1987, he was elected party leader.<sup>46</sup> In the general elections of 20 October 1991, Erbakan took place in the parliament as a deputy of Konya. In the 1994 local elections, the Welfare Party won a majority in metropolitan cities such as Ankara and Istanbul.<sup>47</sup> On 24 December 1995, Welfare Party Chairman Erbakan achieved the most important success of his

<sup>42</sup> Abdul Kadir Macit, 35.

<sup>43</sup> Muzaffer Ayhan Kara, *Türk Siyasal Yaşamında 1961 Sonrası Bir Olgu Demokrasi Ve Uzlaşma Kültürü Açısından Koalisyonlar*, (İstanbul: Otopsi, 2004), p.128.

<sup>44</sup> George S. Harris, "Military Coups and Turkish Democracy, 1960–1980", *Turkish Studies* 12, no.2, (2011): 212; Esra Polat Onbasi, Syed Ahmet Arvasi's (1932-1988) Critique of Turkish Nationalism, p.40.

<sup>45</sup> Ekrem Kızıldağ, *Herkesin Hocası Erbakan*, (İstanbul: Hayat Yayınları, 2011), p. 222.

<sup>46</sup> Hakan Yavuz, *Modernleşen Müslümanlar :Nurcular, Nakşiler, Milli Görüş ve Ak Parti*, (İstanbul: Kitap Yayınevi, 2005), p.13

<sup>47</sup> Alessio Chiriatti and Ozgur Tufekci, *Domestic and Regional Uncertainties in the New Turkey*, in *The Trajectory of Political Islam in Turkey*, in *The Trajectory of Political Islam in Turkey* by Necati Anaz and Mustafa Cuneyt Ozsahin, (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), p.59.



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political life. In the general elections, the Welfare Party became the first party to receive the most votes with 21.37 percent. He established a coalition cabinet with Tansu Çiller the chairman of the True Path Party on 28 Jun 1996 and Erbakan became prime minister of Türkiye.<sup>48</sup>

As can be seen, Erbakan had once again entered into a coalition. Although many people criticized him for being in coalitions with opposing political parties, there were many reasons why Erbakan was in coalitions, the most important of which was that he wanted to develop industry and technology in Türkiye. For this reason, the Ministry of Industry and Technology established within the coalitions he formed was always given to Erbakan's party. He wanted to develop Türkiye's industry and thus make Türkiye a modern, developed country. This was the main dynamic of Erbakan's refusal to give up politics despite all the prohibitions and obstacles.<sup>49</sup> He took serious steps towards these goals from the moment he became Prime Minister. He implemented the policies, had been working on since entering politics and achieved serious success in the economy.

The government's demand for borrowing from the markets decreased with the policies implemented by Erbakan. In January 1997, civil servant salaries were first increased by 30% and then by an additional 25%. While the minimum wage was \$182 in 1995. When he came to power, he raised the minimum wage to \$210 with a 20% real increase. This increase corresponded to an increase of approximately 10% in terms of the value of the Turkish lira. While the average monthly gross wage in the public sector was \$655 in 1996, it increased to \$993 in 1997. The salaries of *Bağ-Kur* (pension fund for the self-employed) retirees increased by 300% in 6 months. Erbakan managed to contribute \$13 billion to the budget by

<sup>48</sup> Sevket Kazan, *Refah Gerçeği I*, (Ankara: Kesif Yayınları, 2004), p.144-149.

<sup>49</sup> Necmettin Erbakan, *Arkasındakilerle ve Türkiye'nin Kayıplarıyla Darbe*, edited by Tacettin Çetinkaya, (Ankara: MGV Yayınları, 2021), p.23.



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implementing four separate resource programs. In addition, the income and purchasing power of villagers, workers, civil servants, and retirees increased. Thus, the Turkish economy went through a great “period of abundance”.<sup>50</sup>

### **Turkish Foreign Policy During the Period of Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan**

According to Erbakan, foreign policy should not only contribute to strengthening Türkiye but also serve the peace and salvation of humanity. In this context, he based his foreign policy goals on four basic principles:

- 1- Strong Foreign Policy: Türkiye must pursue a foreign policy that is compatible with its own values, culture, and history, and preserve its own identity and originality in international relations.
- 2- Protection of Rights: It is necessary to pursue a foreign policy that is fair, egalitarian, and respectful of human rights.
- 3- Leader Türkiye: Türkiye should be the leading country in international relations.
- 4- Cooperation: Türkiye needs to take an active role in international relations by cooperating with other countries in economic, political, and cultural fields.<sup>51</sup>

Erbakan, who thought that Türkiye's increasing dependence on the West was not to Türkiye's advantage, tried to develop different alternatives against the pro-Western Turkish foreign policy during his time as prime minister. In this context, by turning Türkiye's face from the West to Islamic countries, he tried to show that Türkiye was not dependent on the West and to develop political, economic, and cultural cooperation among Islamic countries that were

<sup>50</sup> Ghazala Shahnaz and Obaidullah Fahad, “Religious Reforms and Revival in Turkey: A Study of Erbakan”, *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 25, no.2, (2020): 68; Fahrettin Poyraz, 135; İrfan Ersin, p.258-260.

<sup>51</sup> Necmettin Erbakan, *Erbakan Külliyyatı Cilt 4*, edited by Tacettin Çetinkaya, (Ankara: MGV Yayınları, 2014), p. 415.



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historically and culturally close to Türkiye.<sup>52</sup> Thus, he made his first trip abroad, first to Iran and Pakistan, two important countries in the Islamic world. He then turned his route to Southeast Asia and planned a trip to Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia.<sup>53</sup> In addition to journalists, the Independent Industrialists and Businessmen Association, formed by Islamic businessmen, also participated in this trip.<sup>54</sup>

### Singapore

Singapore was Erbakan's first stop, he paid a three-day visit there on 14 August 1997. Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, who was very pleased with this visit, hosted a dinner to celebrate Erbakan's visit to Singapore.<sup>55</sup> He expressed that Türkiye and Singapore had warm and friendly relations and that he was happy to host Erbakan and the Turkish delegation in Singapore. He also stated that Singaporean businessmen desired to learn about the business potential in Türkiye.<sup>56</sup> As a result of the intensive visit that lasted for three days, it was decided to increase the trade volume between the two countries to \$2.5 billion in 2-3 years and to sign agreements on the mutual encouragement and protection of investments as soon as possible. It was also decided to encourage Singaporean tourists to come to Turkey for holidays and to provide military ammunition to each other.<sup>57</sup> More importantly, it was planned to train Singapore's F-16 pilots in Türkiye and to cooperate on the development of Trabzon and Iskenderun ports.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Mustafa Efe, "Erbakan Hoca'nın Dış Politika Yaklaşımı", *Anadolu Gençlik Dergisi*, Necmettin Erbakan Özel Sayısı, (2015): 323-333.

<sup>53</sup> İhsan Dagi, Kimlik, Soylem ve Siyaset: Dogu-Bati ayriminda Refah Partisi Geleneği, (Ankara: Imge Yayınevi, 1998), p.119; Saban Taniyici, "Transformation of Political Islam in Turkey Islamist Welfare Party's Pro-EU Turn", *Party Politics- Sage Journal* 9, no. 4, (2003): 473.

<sup>54</sup> Hakan Akpınar, 28 Şubat Postmodern Bir Darbenin Öyküsü, (Ankara: Ümit Yayıncılık, 2001), p.84.

<sup>55</sup> Ravi Velloor, Singapore Offers to Help Turkey Forge Business Link for Asia, *The Straits Times*, 16 August 1996, 2 <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/page/straitstimes19960816-1.1.2>

<sup>56</sup> Press Release, Release No: 41/AUGUST 15-1/96/08/16, National Archive Singapore.

<sup>57</sup> Ömer Bolat, *Başbakan Necmettin Erbakan'ın Doğu Asya Gezisi (10-20 Ağustos) ve MÜSİAD'ın Bosna-Hersek gezisi (7-11 Ağustos 1996) Raporu*, (İstanbul: Müstakil Sanayici ve İşadamları Derneği, 1996), p.41.

<sup>58</sup> Işıl Arpacı, *Türk Siyasetinde Erbakan*, (İstanbul: Kopernik Kitap, 2017), p.316.



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### **Malaysia**

After Erbakan visited Singapore, he visited Malaysia on 16 August 1996 for economic and political talks.<sup>59</sup> Malaysian Prime Minister Dato Seri Dr. Mahathir Bin Mohamad hosted a dinner for Erbakan, during which Mahathir expressed his satisfaction that Erbakan had chosen Malaysia as one of the first countries he visited abroad. He also announced that Malaysia and Turkey had agreed to continue to strengthen their relations, especially in economy and trade.<sup>60</sup> As a result of official talks, Türkiye and Malaysia reached an agreement to strengthen the activities of the Islamic Development Bank and for Malaysia's oil company PETRONAS to invest in Türkiye. In this context, it was decided to cooperate in the automotive, high-tech, and electronics industries. In addition, it was decided to import 60-70 thousand qualified workers from Türkiye to fill the insufficient labour supply gap in the face of Malaysia's rapid economic development.<sup>61</sup> More importantly, Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim said that since Türkiye's defence industry is much more advanced than Malaysia's, Malaysia could purchase military vehicles from Türkiye to enhance its defence equipment.<sup>62</sup> Also to these commercial and political meetings, Erbakan visited the International Islamic University in Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia, and received information about the university from Rector Dato Dr. Abdul Hamid Ahmed Abu Suleiman and Vice-Chancellor Prof. Dr. Mohd. Kamal Hasan. He also lectured approximately 1,000 students who filled the University's Melik Faisal Hall and met with Turkish students studying in Malaysia.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Lawatan Rasmi TYT Prof. Dr. Necmettin Erbakan, Perdana Menteri Republik Turki ke Malaysia -16.08.1996-18.08.1996, National Archive of Malaysia, 356 1999/0025650.

<sup>60</sup> Dato' Seri Dr. Mahathir Bin Mohamad, Jamuan Makan Malam Meraikan TYT Professor DR. Necmettin Erbakan, Perdana Menteri Republik Turki, 17-08-1996, National Archive of Malaysia.

<sup>61</sup> Ömer Bolat, p.50.

<sup>62</sup> Turkish PM Arrives Today, The Straits Times, 14 August 1996, p. 2 <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/article/straitstimes19960814-1.2.7.4>

<sup>63</sup> Protocol Division Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Malaysia, Official Visit by His Excellency Necmettin Erbakan Prime Minister of Turkey to Mahathir Muhammed 16-18 August 1996, National Archive Malaysia.



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### **Indonesia**

Erbakan arrived in Indonesia, the last stop of his trip, on 18 August 1996.<sup>64</sup> This trip was Erbakan's second to Indonesia. He had previously attended the First Conference of the International Islamic Science, Technology, and Human Resources Development Forum held in Indonesia. At this conference held in Jakarta on December 6-8, 1996, Erbakan gave a speech on "overcoming the economic crises faced by Muslim countries". In his remarks, he emphasized that the West was facing a civilization crisis due to its ignorance of the spiritual aspects of human life and that the West was only interested in material development. He called for developing an Islamic Economic System based on cooperation among Muslim countries.<sup>65</sup> During Erbakan's second visit to Indonesia, to further strengthen the material and spiritual ties between Indonesia and Turkey, his first stop was the aircraft production facility in Bandung.<sup>66</sup> This factory, established in 1976 to develop Indonesia's national aviation industry, succeeded in producing the CN235 model transport and passenger aircraft under the Spanish CASA license in the 1980s. More importantly, despite all the obstacles from Western countries, it managed to produce the N 250 aircraft with a capacity of eight passengers, completely domestically and at a price 20% cheaper than the West. Erbakan, who was very impressed by Indonesia's success in aviation, held official meetings with the Indonesian Minister of Research and Technology Development Yusuf Habibi, and other ministers to cooperate in the aviation sector. As a result of the meetings, it was planned for Yusuf Habibi to come to Ankara within 1 month and develop economic cooperation in all areas. In addition, an agreement was reached

<sup>64</sup> Keven Sullivan, Turkey offers to be S'proe's springboard to Central Asia, The Business Times, 17 August 1996, 2 <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/article/biztimes19960817-1.2.9.7?qt=erbakan&q=erbakan>

<sup>65</sup> Syed Serajul Islam, "International Islamic Forum for Science, Technology and Human Resources Development", *Intellectual Discourse* 5, no.1, (1996): 82.

<sup>66</sup> Yavuz Donat, *Öncesi ve Sonrasıyla 28 Şubat*, (Ankara: Bilgi Yaymevi, 1999), p.263.



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to develop tourism trips related to Hajj and Umrah to encourage Indonesian tourists to come to Türkiye.<sup>67</sup>

Erbakan returned with great hopes from his trip to Southeast Asia, which he deemed necessary and went with great hopes. For him, this trip was beneficial trip for both Turkish and Southeast Asian businessmen. In addition, this trip was a mutual awakening trip for the statesmen of both countries. More importantly, the perception that Türkiye was only cooperating with Western countries was destroyed by this trip. As a result, for Erbakan, this trip was a trip that produced great results in terms of taking cooperation to the highest level and showing the determination to cooperate.<sup>68</sup> One of these great results was undoubtedly the Eight Developing Economic Cooperation Organizations (D-8).

### **Eight Emerging Economic Cooperation Organizations (D-8)**

Erbakan established the D-8 during his term as prime minister, in opposition to the economic order dominated by the West. The D-8 was officially established under the leadership of Erbakan on 15 June 1997, in Istanbul, at a meeting attended by the prime ministers of Türkiye, Iran, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia, Egypt, and Nigeria. The main purpose of the D-8 to develop economic cooperation within the framework of joint projects and to strengthen the position of developing countries in the world economy.<sup>69</sup> Other goals of D-8 can be listed as follows; the Establishment of a Common Market Order and Union instead of the European Union, the use of a Common Currency of Muslim Countries instead of the United States dollar and Euro, the establishment of the United Nations Organization of Muslim Countries instead of United Nations, the establishment of Defense Cooperation Organization of Muslim

<sup>67</sup> Ömer Bolat, 63.

<sup>68</sup> Necmettin Erbakan ,10-20 Ağustos 1996 Tarihleri Arasında Yapılan İran-Pakistan-Singapur- Malezya-Endonezya Resmî Ziyaretleri hakkında Başbakan Prof. Dr. Necmettin Erbakan'ın Basın Toplantısı (21 Ağustos) (Ankara: Başbakanlık Basımevi,1996),p.26-27.

<sup>69</sup> Necmettin Erbakan, *İslam Birliği*, edited by Tacettin Çetinkaya, (Ankara: MGV Yayınları), p.172.



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Countries instead of NATO, the establishment of Cultural Cooperation Organization of Muslim Countries instead of UNESCO.<sup>70</sup> Also, D-8 countries have 6 basic principles; These are the principles of Peace instead of Conflict, Dialogue instead of Conflict, Justice instead of double standards, Equality instead of Discrimination, Cooperation instead of Exploitation, and Democracy instead of Oppression.<sup>71</sup> As can be seen, D-8 aims to create an alternative to the economic and political order created by Western countries.

Erbakan's moves to shift Turkish foreign policy to the East and especially his establishment of the D-8 disturbed Western countries.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, some circles in the West especially in America openly expressed their hostility towards the D-8 and saw this as an unacceptable hostility towards the West.<sup>73</sup> Therefore, for those disturbed by Erbakan's foreign policy, establishing the D-8 was the long-sought proof of Erbakan's Islamist and anti-Western tendencies. After establishing the D-8, Erbakan's rule was ended "by a post-modern military coup on 28 February 1997, with the joint efforts of the army and various groups and institutions in Türkiye".<sup>74</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Throughout his political life, Erbakan, who has tried to implement policies that are not dependent on the West and prioritize Türkiye's national interests, has tried to find an alternative to the policy of turning to the West which has been dominant in Türkiye for years during his Prime Ministry. In this context, to show that the West is not the only alternative for Turkey, he

<sup>70</sup> Recep Karabulut, "Günümüz Dünyasından D-8'e Yeniden Bir Bakış, International Periodical for the Languages", *Literature and History of Turkish* 12, no.8, (2017): 422.

<sup>71</sup> Necmettin Erbakan, *İslam Birliği*, p.175.

<sup>72</sup> William Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy since 1774*, p.210.

<sup>73</sup> Shadi Hamid, "From Erbakan to Erdoğan: The Evolution of Turkish Foreign Policy", *Insight Turkey* 6, no.1, (2004): 114.

<sup>74</sup> Berdal Arar, An Inquiry into the D-8 Experiment: An Incipient Model of an Islamic Common Market?", *Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations* 4, no.1&2, (2005):101.



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has made official visits with broad participation to Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia, notable for their rapidly growing economies, increasing political influence, and strategic locations in the 1990s. With this trip, which was carried out to contribute to the efforts to diversify Turkish foreign policy and pursue an independent foreign policy, it was decided to make joint projects and agreements between these countries and Türkiye on issues such as tourism, education, and technology transfer. These agreements and projects, adding new visions to Turkish foreign policy, could not be completed because Erbakan had to leave the Prime Ministry. However, the Justice and Development Party, founded by Erbakan's students and in power since 2002, has taken important steps towards realizing his dream. The Justice and Development Party government, which continues the path initiated by Erbakan, has significantly increased the trade volume between Türkiye and ASEAN countries, of which Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia are members. Also, Türkiye became a party to the ASEAN Friendship and Cooperation Agreement in 2010. In addition, a Sectoral Dialogue Partnership was established between Türkiye and ASEAN in 2017. Moreover, within the framework of the "Asia Anew Initiative" announced by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in 2019, efforts have been made to establish strong relations with the Asian countries visited by Erbakan. The main motivation behind the "Asia Anew Initiative" is Turkey's desire to diversify its foreign policy partnerships, as Erbakan aimed. In this context, it is aimed to prioritize economic and commercial cooperation with Asian partners.

As can be seen, the strategic steps taken by Erbakan to show that the West is not the sole choice for Turkish foreign policy have found a response in Turkish foreign policy. These policies, which are not limited to his term as prime minister, continue to have an impact. As a result, Erbakan's trip has gone down in history as a strategic move in Turkish foreign policy, reflecting



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Türkiye's adoption of a multifaceted approach to foreign policy and its efforts to pursue an independent foreign policy that is not dependent on the West.

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