

CHANGING SECURITY PARADIGM IN WEST ASIA

Regional and International Responses



Editors

MEENA SINGH ROY

MD. MUDDASSIR QUAMAR

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KW Publishers Pvt Ltd
New Delhi



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New Delhi

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No. 1, Development Enclave, Delhi Cantt.
New Delhi-110 010
Phone: +91-11-26717983
Website: www.idsa.in

ISBN 978-93-89137-59-0 Hardback

Published in India by Kalpana Shukla



KW Publishers Pvt Ltd
4676/21, First Floor, Ansari Road
Daryaganj, New Delhi 110 002
Phone: +91 11 23263498/43528107
Marketing: kw@kwpub.com
Editorial: production@kwpub.com
Website: www.kwpub.com

Printed and bound in India

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4. Turkey's Middle East Policies¹

Mustafa Aydın and Cihan Dizdaroglu

Turkey has consistently avoided being part of the regional politics of the Middle East during most of the 20th century and, thus, has not had a holistic approach towards the region. However, global geopolitical and domestic political changes since the end of the Cold War have brought Turkey increasingly closer to the region. Besides, although unwilling, Turkey has been an important player in Middle Eastern politics, and has occasionally attempted to play an active role, creating the Saadabad Pact in 1937 and the Baghdad Pact in 1955. Though these efforts mostly backfired, these intermittent attempts were never transformed into a fully developed regional policy, and Turkey perceived the Middle East during the Cold War only within the context of East-West rivalry.²

However, the end of the Cold War, enabled Turkey to redefine its priorities in international politics, and allowed it to prioritize its economic connections within its neighbourhood instead of focusing on global security issues.³ While refraining from depicting itself as a Middle Eastern country, Turkey began paying more attention to the region, especially after the rise of the Justice and Development Party (JDP) to power in 2002. The JDP preferred new policy tools to improve Turkey's relations with its neighbours instead of focusing on its long-standing disputes in the region. Especially after its 2nd election victory in 2007, the JDP started to focus more closely on the region, and spearheaded several initiatives with the regional countries.⁴

However, the outbreak of the Arab Spring in late 2010 distorted regional dynamics and produced new security challenges for Turkey, which was caught unprepared by the widespread political instability

in the region. While it had been able to establish a certain *modus operandi* with the existing regimes prior to the Arab Spring events, the developments since then disrupted these connections. While its connection with the autocratic regimes undermined its ambition to become a regional leader, its later policy of supporting opposition forces created further problems and uncertainties.⁵

Accordingly, this essay looks at the recent history of Turkey's policies in the Middle East, focusing on the regional and international developments that influence its policies towards the region. It argues that developments in recent years have provided space for Turkey to seek a more active and assertive role in the region, though Turkey's own limitations, policy choices, and regional dynamics have somewhat restricted its ability to do so.

Economic and Political Relations

After decades of tense relations with some of the regional countries, primarily with Syria and occasionally with Israel and Iraq, Turkey became eager, in the early 2000s, to move beyond its problematic relations in the region. Focusing more on the economic dimension as a result of the economic liberalisation the country underwent in the 1980s, Turkey has gradually developed a new policy line in its foreign policy.⁶ By the time the JDP came to power, the economic aspects of Turkey's foreign policy was already weighing heavily on decision-makers. The new policy line, exemplified by the "zero problems with neighbours" motto, put forward by the then Chief Foreign Affairs Advisor to the Prime Minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, mainly aimed at developing closer relations with neighbours to further economic prosperity.⁷

There emerged several divergences from Turkey's traditional policy line. One of the earlier results was moving away from the exclusive determinacy of security concerns. In its first term (2002-07), the JDP mainly focused on Turkey's approximation with Europe and domestic reforms related to it. This led to beginning of the accession negotiations with the EU in October 2005 which, in general, strengthened political stability, supported economic growth, enabled further democratisation, decreased the role of the military in politics, and helped change the foreign policy decision-making process.⁸

Moreover, the newly emerging Anatolian bourgeoisie also pushed for closer economic relations with the countries in the Middle East, and penetrated into the regional markets utilising Turkey's geographical proximity and their cultural affinity, forcing the government to follow their initiatives.⁹ As a result, until disrupted by the Arab Spring, Turkey expanded its relations with neighbouring countries using new tools such as visa-liberalisation, mediation, establishing free trade-zones, and conducting joint cabinet level meetings. The slowing down of negotiations with the EU after 2007 also paved the way for diversification in foreign policy, and increased engagement with the Middle East.

The most dramatic change was seen in the transformation of problematic relations with Syria. Following the signature of the Adana Agreement between Turkey and Syria on 20 October 1998, after a near-war crisis,¹⁰ the relations began to improve. The two countries signed a Free Trade Agreement in December 2004, and established the Turkish-Syrian Business Council to expand economic relations.¹¹

Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) were also signed with Egypt in 2005, Lebanon in 2010, and Jordan in 2011. High-Level Strategic Cooperation Councils were established, and visa requirements were lifted for Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon in 2009. Under Turkey's initiative, the "Close Neighbours Economic and Trade Association Council" was established in July 2010 with Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, and the idea to establish a "Levant Business Forum" to encourage greater economic integration between Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan was floated.¹² With these, Turkey's economic relations with the region expanded and trade volumes increased, especially after the FTA s became operational. As a result, Turkey's overall trade with Syria and Egypt reached to US\$ 5.5 million by 2010.

The closer relationship with Israel, which was established during the second part of the 1990s on the basis of security cooperation, was also expanded with Turkey's attempt to play a facilitator role between Israel, Syria, and Palestine.¹³ However, relations deteriorated after Turkish criticism of the *Operation Cast Lead* in Gaza in 2008.¹⁴

While the strong criticism of Israel increased the popularity of the JDP in Turkey and in the Arab Middle East, it led to the sliding of relations between the two countries. Following the clash between Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Israeli President Shimon Peres at the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2009, and Turkey's suspension of the Israeli participation to the Anatolian Eagle military exercises in October 2009,¹⁵ the relations came to a breaking point with the *Mavi Marmara* incident in May 2010, when Israeli troops attacked an international flotilla, aiming to break Israeli blockade on Gaza, and killed eight Turkish citizens. Though diplomatic relations came to an end, economic relations continued, and trade volumes continued to grow, thanks to the FTA signed in 1996.

Turkey also contributed to international efforts to bring peace to the region, sending a frigate to the UN Interim Force in Lebanon in 2006, and later, together with Qatar, brokering the Doha Agreement that ended the political stalemate in Lebanese politics in 2008. Turkey played a mediator role between Israel and Syria, bringing them together in May 2008 with indirect peace talks under Turkish auspices.¹⁶ In addition, it played a third-party role between Israel and Palestine, launching its "Industry for Peace Initiative" in 2005, and establishing the Ankara Forum to enable the tripartite dialogue mechanism between Turkish, Israeli, and Palestinian business communities.¹⁷ All these initiatives, however, collapsed after the *Operation Cast Lead* in December 2008.

Energy Dimension

The discovery of offshore hydrocarbon resources in the eastern Mediterranean added a new dimension to Turkey's regional policies. Despite the region's potential as an additional energy supplier to Europe, the existing disputes over the maritime borders and sovereign rights constitute an important barrier to its realisation. Specifically, Turkey has not yet concluded delimitation agreements in the region, while the Republic of Cyprus (RoC) signed Exclusive Economic Zone agreements with Egypt, on February 17, 2003, with Lebanon on January 17, 2007, and with Israel on December 17, 2010. In response, Turkey protested its exclusion from the negotiations.

Table 1: Turkey's Trade Volumes with the Levant Countries (Thousand Dollars)

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013**
Egypt	444.561	535.175	728.387	954.545	1.101.876	1.555.690	2.312.687	3.240.582	3.177.053	4.141.527	5.021.245	4.831.422
Lebanon	229.260	219.836	381.755	340.883	367.284	509.230	843.835	797.481	846.854	1.001.001	1.022.363	1.006.452
Syria	581.641	671.947	642.334	694.212	796.666	1.057.048	1.438.709	1.643.090	2.297.098	1.946.507	565.408	1.112.202
Israel	1.405.900	1.542.486	2.029.435	2.271.603	2.311.307	2.739.048	3.383.153	2.597.162	3.439.786	4.448.462	3.039.941	5.069.372
Palestine	4.742	6.943	9.570	9.705	21.654	22.008	21.118	29.796	40.881	49.363	63.159	76.847
Jordan	135.032	166.468	243.629	316.969	330.979	400.902	486.026	475.706	613.783	573.318	866.977	815.306
Cyprus*	-	-	-	5.750	12.179	7.965	11.056	1.265	917	1.998	4.076	2.128
TRNC	242.743	354.352	501.768	799.267	925.079	992.617	1.124.315	813.701	1.033.318	1.103.674	1.085.106	1.181.903

Source: Turkish Statistical Institute, www.tuik.gov.tr

* These figures indicate trade volume only with the Republic of Cyprus.

** 2013 figure are tentative.

As a pipeline connecting the regional countries might offer strategic opportunities, it was hoped that the energy discoveries in the region might help resolve some of the regional conflicts. Although it is still early to foresee the final impact of the reserves on regional peace and co-operation, discoveries have already affected regional alliances as well as Turkey's energy strategy.¹⁸ The alignment between the positions of Israel, RoC, and Greece constitutes a shift in the regional balance of power.

In terms of Turkey's energy strategy, the possibility of a new pipeline through Turkey to Europe would contribute to its hope of becoming an energy hub in the region. As Turkey is situated at the centre of the transport routes from the Middle East to Europe, it hopes that any discoveries would move through Turkey, even though the discoveries have occurred at a time when Turkey's relations with Israel were deteriorating, and which, among others, paved the way for the rapprochement between Israel, RoC and Greece.

Arab Spring and Regional Instability

The chain of events that triggered popular unrests throughout the Middle East and North Africa at the end of 2010 created serious challenges for the entire region and, naturally, affected Turkey's relations with the countries in its neighbourhood.

As mentioned earlier, Turkey had developed good political and economic relations with existing regimes during the previous decade. While the Arab Spring disrupted these connections, it became clear that supporting autocratic regimes could, in the long run, undermine Turkey's regional positioning. Thus, Turkey immediately welcomed the collapse of the regime in Egypt, and supported both the interim government and the following election of Mohammed Morsi.¹⁹ However, his removal in a military coup adversely affected Turkey's position, and strong condemnation of the coup by the Turkish leaders resulted in the expulsion of the Turkish Ambassador on November 23, 2013. In response, Turkey declared the Egyptian Ambassador to Ankara *persona non grata*, and downgraded its diplomatic relations with Egypt.²⁰ Since then, despite attempts to restore ties between them, the relations have not recovered.

In Libya, Turkey was initially cautious, and opposed international intervention, mainly due to its economic interests. As the situation deteriorated, Turkey's top priority was the evacuation of around 25,000 Turkish workers residing in the country. However, after it evacuated Turkish citizens from Libya, and the UNSC adopted resolution 1973 on March 17, 2011 authorising members to take "all necessary measures" to protect civilians,²¹ Turkey changed its position, calling for Gadhafi's resignation and supporting the NATO operation. It also recognised the results of the election of General National Congress (GNC) in July 2012, and continued to send humanitarian aid. Yet, as the GNC ceased to be functioning in later months, and two governments emerged instead – one in Tripoli and another in Tobruk – Turkey again found itself in a difficult situation. Nevertheless, the signing of the Libyan Political Agreement on December 17, 2015 with the mediation of the UN eased the tension in the country, allowing Turkey to support the agreement.²² During the ensuing political uncertainty, Turkey emphasised its support to the government, and refrained from working with other groups.

The biggest challenge the Arab Spring created for Turkey has been the unrest in Syria. In fact, it became a litmus test for Turkey's active foreign policy in the Middle East. Although it was initially thought that the personal rapport between Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad during the previous decade, would give Turkey leverage to convince the latter to ease the tension with reforms, he did not respond to please the protesters and reacted with force when faced with popular demands. When this led to an uprising in the north of the country, Turkey reversed its policy, and started to support the opposition groups.

It seemed that Turkey, having seen the regime changing powers of popular uprisings in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya, underestimated the power of the Assad regime in Syria, as well as the role of third parties' such as Russia and Iran. While Turkey initially tried to persuade the international community to intervene, global actors were not willing to get involved. This led to a situation where Turkey found itself on the same side with Saudi Arabia and Qatar in aiding the opposition groups, while its inability to organise

them into a workable alternative contributed to the reluctance of other countries to get involved. Moreover, Turkey's active involvement in the crisis created a negative narrative and failing international image, including accusations of pursuing a sectarian foreign policy.²³

Subsequently, the humanitarian side of the crisis became Turkey's major concern, as it has received more than 3.5 million Syrian refugees.²⁴ Besides the obvious difficulties in taking care of such numbers without much international support, the fact that the Turkish-Syrian border almost ceased to function and became an open line for all sorts of movements, including radicals going to fight in Syria, has complicated the issue for Turkey.

Moreover, the threat level in Turkey in connection with radical groups operating in the region rose considerably due to the Syrian civil war which, entangled with the conflict in Iraq, caused the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL or ISIS) from 2011 onwards. The involvement of international forces to support various groups complicated the situation even further.

The destructive impact of the conflict extended into Turkey, with several terror attacks in Reyhanlı (May 2013), Diyarbakır (June 2015), Suruç (July 2015), Ankara (October 2015), İstanbul (January and March 2016), and Gaziantep (August 2016) by ISIS affiliated individuals. Moreover, when ISIS forces, coming out of Iraq and occupying a sizeable chunk of northern Syria, clashed with Kurdish groups over the control of the town of Ayn al-Arab (or *Kobane* in Kurdish), Turkey found itself under heavy international pressure to help out the Kurds, while no other international actor was willing to send ground forces.²⁵

The Syrian crisis, intertwined with the conflict in Iraq, impacted Turkey's domestic politics as well. The fighting between Kurdish groups and ISIS forces along the border with Turkey, sparked unrest inside Turkey in October 2014 when Turkey refused to get involved on behalf of the Kurds.²⁶

Furthermore, the ISIS became a direct threat for Turkey in Iraq when it seized the city of Mosul, and captured 49 Turkish Consulate staff as hostage on June 11, 2014.²⁷ In response,

Turkey gradually aligned itself with the US-led coalition against ISIS, and agreed (February 19, 2015) with the USA to “train and equip” the Syrian opposition groups. The agreement provided manoeuvring space for Turkey, and it intensified its contribution to the US-led coalition forces by allowing the use of İncirlik and Diyarbakır airbases in Turkey for the airstrikes against ISIS on July 23, 2015.

The active involvement of Russia in the Syrian civil war in late September 2015 impacted Turkey's strategic interests in the region. While Russian operations targeted Syrian opposition rather than the ISIS, the increased Iranian activity in Syria alongside Russia, and the substantial support received by the Kurdish groups both from Russia and the USA, weakened Turkey's hand in the regional balance of power. Moreover, Turkey's downing of a Russian fighter jet when it violated Turkish airspace (November 24, 2015) led to the suspension of its flights over Syria.²⁸ The later thaw, however, again changed the equation, allowing Turkey to return to the Syrian theatre. Since then, Turkey has been playing an active role in Syria, both in terms of active military operations and through its contribution to a political solution.

The USA's preference to cooperate with the Kurdish groups on the ground against the ISIS since autumn 2015 strained Turkey's relations with the USA, and resulted in Turkey's *Euphrates Shield* and *Olive Branch* operations in northern Syria to eliminate perceived threats from the region. It also sent troops to the Idlib province to monitor the de-escalation zone agreed with Russia and Iran within the Astana Process. Eventually, a combination of factors ranging from regional dynamics to disagreements between Turkey and its Western allies, as well as the thaw in Turkish-Russian relations eased Turkey's insistence on the removal of Bashar al-Assad, and gradually aligned Turkey with the Russia-Iran bloc in Syria, leading to the Russia-led Astana process.

The Changing Balance of Power

The developments in the Middle East over the last decade – the failure of Israel-Palestine peace process; the US invasion of Iraq;

the discovery of offshore hydrocarbons; the Arab Spring; and the emergence of new players, including non-state actors – have had a serious impact on the regional balance of power.

In addition to regional countries, extra-regional powers – chief among them the USA and Russia – have been seeking to maintain and/or increase their influence throughout the region via military presence and political alignments. The USA has had strategic advantages in the region since the days of the Cold War, and has been able to consolidate its status after the end of the Cold War, while Russia has had to withdraw.²⁹ Nearly all the countries along the southern shores of the Mediterranean are a part of the NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue Programme, and the USA has access to their ports. In contrast, the military presence of the Soviet Union came to an end with the end of the Cold War, though the Russian Federation has been trying to re-establish it.³⁰ The Syrian crisis paved the way for Russia to do so within a rather short time.

The US strategy in the Levant part of the Middle East has been based on two triangular partnerships: US-Turkey-Israel and US-Egypt-Israel.³¹ The emergence of several disagreements within these partnerships, and their changing geometries over the last decade, have affected the US policy in the region, and resulted in independent moves by Turkey, Egypt and Israel, sometimes clashing with the US priorities.³²

There have been problems especially in the US-Turkey-Israel triangle. The bilateral relations between the USA and Turkey were severely damaged by the refusal of the Turkish Parliament in 2003 to grant permission to US troops to pass through Turkey *en route* to Iraq prior to the invasion, and later, the internment of Turkish soldiers in Sulaymania, northern Iraq, by US soldiers. These developments led to the rise of persistent anti-American sentiments in Turkey.³³ Though tension between the two countries eased somewhat after the election of President Barack Obama in 2008, the divergent policy lines remained, and took a downturn after the 15 July 2016 coup attempt in Turkey.³⁴

On the other hand, the rise of ISIS and its rapid advance in Iraq and Syria from the summer of 2014 onwards created a dangerous

security vacuum at the core of the region. To prevent further advance by the ISIS, the USA started air strikes in early August, along with the “coalition of the willing.” While the USA sought an increase in the Turkish contribution, along with permission to use the İncirlik airbase, Turkey insisted on prioritising the removal of Bashar al-Assad and the creation of a buffer zone in northern Syria. It allowed İncirlik to be used only for logistical and humanitarian support. The alignment of positions between Turkey and the USA took some time. Even after the two countries signed a protocol on the “train-and-equip” program for the Syrian opposition on February 19, 2015 (which was shelved because of failure after a while), and an agreement that allowed coalition forces the use of İncirlik and Diyarbakir airbases for airstrikes on July 23, 2015, they continue to diverge on the priorities of the operation and over the final outcome. Particularly, starting from autumn 2015, the US support for the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK)-affiliated Democratic Union Party (PYD), paved the way for Kurdish groups to become de-facto ground forces for the USA's effort to fight against the ISIS, and put the two allies at loggerheads.³⁵

At the same time, the Turkey-Israel part of the US-Israel-Turkey triangle suffered heavily since 2010. After Israeli soldiers killed Turkish activist in the *Mavi Marmara* raid, Turkey recalled its ambassador, cancelled joint military exercises, called for an emergency meeting of the UNSC, and expelled Israel's ambassador, reducing diplomatic representation. Despite several attempts to patch up the relations, the gridlock remained until US President Obama brokered an apology from the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on March 22, 2013 with a phone call to Prime Minister Erdoğan, and the much sought-after re-connection came with an agreement on June 26, 2016 to normalise the diplomatic relations.³⁶ The problems in the US-Turkey-Israeli triangle naturally affected regional calculations.

As the recent discoveries of offshore energy resources have heightened competition in the region, traditional alliances are being replaced by new partnerships in line with the changing interests. One of the more significant changes has occurred in connection with

Israel. While it was previously closely allied with Turkey on many international issues, with the downturn in the relations, it has moved to cultivate closer relations with Greece and RoC.³⁷

Russia, too, has been trying to increase its military presence in the region, particularly in Syria. The hands-off policy of the Obama administration in Syria gave Russia a chance to return to the Middle East where it had been absent since the end of the Cold War. Although Russia had been supporting the Syrian regime through diplomacy and arms supplies since the beginning of the crisis, the direct involvement of Russian troops came on September 30, 2015, when the regime weakened to a point where the loss of the Russian naval base in Tartus became possible. The active involvement of Russia in the Syrian civil war with a military build-up changed the balances not only in Syria but also in the region. The intense Russian airstrikes which did not distinguish between the ISIS forces and other rebel groups strengthened the regime, and halted the advance of rebel groups and ISIS forces. Furthermore, Turkey's downing of a Russian jet in November 2015 provided Russia with an excuse to strengthen its forces with missiles and an additional airbase in Hmeimim, near the city of Latakia.³⁸

Conclusion

In addition to its long-standing problems, the outbreak of the Arab Spring created new challenges for the entire Middle East. New actors, such as radical groups like ISIS, emerged which triggered a realignment in regional structures. Under such conditions, Turkey's relations with the region started to transform in the late 1990s, and continued during the JDP governments. The political transformation of the country and the emergence of new business communities, eager to operate in the region, encouraged such change.

However, the emergence of new challenges especially following the Arab Spring, limited Turkey's actions in the region significantly, and its policies came under attack for a lack of understanding of the regional dynamics. While the increased instability in the region affected Turkey's political relations the most, sustained crises have also undermined its economic connections. Moreover, Turkey's

over-activism in the region before and after the Arab Spring led to domestic and international charges of ‘neo-Ottomanism’, eventually leading to collapse of its regional policy. Its earlier attraction to local populations and leverage over the countries mainly stemmed from its democratic features and connection with the EU. However, as its democratic credentials increasingly came under suspicion and the EU connection got damaged, Turkey’s appeal and leverage in the region has weakened.

So much so that Turkey’s political relations today with the Middle Eastern countries are not even at the level of pre-Arab Spring era, with negligible or decreased diplomatic representation in Syria, Egypt, and Israel. This diplomatic and political disconnect has undermined Turkey’s economic connections. While its geographic position at the centre of the transportation routes might in future assist Turkey in its ambition to become an energy hub, existing tensions hinder its realisation.

Notes

1. This is an earlier draft of a longer paper (M. Aydın and C. Dizdaroglu, “Levantine Challenges on Turkish Foreign Policy”) published in a Special Issue of *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol. 16, No. 60, November 2018 and reprinted in M. Aydın (ed.) *The Levant; Search for a Regional Order*, Tunis, KAS, December 2018, pp. 184-213. I would like to thank C. Dizdaroglu for allowing me to use this draft for my presentation at the Third West Asia Conference (New Delhi, September 2018), which gave rise to these proceedings.
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4. The JDP government expanded Turkey’s relations with neighbouring countries using new tools such as visa-liberalization, free trade-zones, and joint cabinet meetings.
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 10. The bilateral relations between Turkey and Syria came to the brink of war in the late 1990s due to the Syrian support for the PKK. Following the signature of the Adana agreement, Syria undertook to a commitment to end its support to the PKK, and this eased bilateral relations.
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 12. Kemal Kirişci, “Arab Uprisings and Completing Turkey’s Regional Integration: Challenges and Opportunities for US-Turkish Relations”, *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 2013, p. 193; see also, Tür, “Economic Relations with the Middle East”, op. cit., p. 597.
 13. Meliha Benli Altunişik and Esra Çuhadar, “Turkey’s Search for a Third Party Role in Arab-Israeli Conflicts: A Neutral Facilitator or a Principal Power Mediator?” *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 15, No. 3, 2010, pp. 371-392; see also, İlker Aytürk, “The Coming of an Ice Age? Turkish-Israeli Relations since 2002”, *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 4, 2011, pp. 675-687.
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