

Meeting the Geopolitical Challenges of the Arab Spring: A Call for a joint EU-Turkish Agenda

by *Günter Verheugen*

This policy brief discusses the potential for cooperation between Turkey and the EU in the countries that are going through political transformation in the Middle East and North Africa. Since both sides have a vested interest in seeing stability, peace and strong economic development in this shared neighbourhood, they must work together and develop a common strategy by which to combine their strengths and advantages while offsetting their weaknesses. The brief highlights how the relationships between Turkey, the EU, and the Arab world are all fraught with difficulties and tensions that prevent coordinated action between the first two parties. Despite these limitations, if the European Union and Turkey managed to cooperate on such a geopolitically important project, it would have an enormous additional benefit: revitalizing the stalled relationship between the EU and Turkey and lending it a sense of urgency and importance.

About the author:

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As the so-called Arab Spring unfolds, it is becoming increasingly urgent to discuss the foreign policy of Turkey, that of the European Union and the role of the EU in the transition countries, and to discuss the consequences of recent developments for both sides. As close neighbors of both the EU and Turkey, the Arab countries – and those in the Mediterranean in particular – possess political, economic and social importance. Since Turkey and the EU both have a vested interest in seeing stability, peace and strong economic development in this shared neighborhood, they would be well advised to cooperate with these countries during the challenging transition phase.

Causes of the transformation

We are currently in a period of transition and a state of uncertainty, unsure of what the Arab Spring signifies and what it will ultimately bring about. What are the underlying reasons for the uprisings? What do citizens protesting in the streets really want?

The different movements throughout the region clearly display similarities: first and foremost a desire for democracy and freedom, especially of opinion and expression, as well as a determination to rid their country of corrupt rulers and a system that abrogated their basic rights. The demographic situation in these countries, especially in Egypt, also played a role, as did negative economic prospects, which were further undermined by the ongoing economic crisis. Protesters sought improved living conditions and quality of life, more

and better jobs, and a certain measure of social security. In short, the regional transformation came about in reaction to a plethora of social reasons.

It is impossible, however, to discern a uniform political movement leading this revolution, as the forces behind the uprisings vary from one country to the next. Past experience tells us that these countries are now entering a very difficult and probably long process of transition and transformation. As Eastern and Central Europe have shown, transitions of this sort require time, and the process is indeed still ongoing in some of these countries.

Shared interest in assisting regional transformation

Turkey and the EU should acknowledge that it is in their common interest to support this transformation to the greatest extent possible. Their primary shared objective is to ensure peace in what is probably the most dangerous region of the world, prone to frequent violence and which has given rise to terrorist attacks in the past – and will likely continue to do so in the future. It is also in both parties' interest to foster positive economic development in countries bordering their own, since economic hardship inevitably spreads. Last but not least, Turkey and the EU have a moral responsibility to care for the wellbeing of those living in adjoining regions.

Given these overlapping interests, it would be useful to develop a common strategy by which Turkey and the EU could combine their strengths and advantages while offsetting their weaknesses. Despite the necessity of developing a joint approach towards the region, we are still astonishing far from devising such a strategy. As the need for uniting our efforts increases, so does the usefulness of analyzing the role of different players and the dynamics between them. The relationship between Turkey and the Arab world, between the EU and the Arab world, and between the EU and Turkey are all fraught with difficulties and tensions.

Turkey's prospects of leading by example

As has already been mentioned, it is impossible to know yet what political structures will emerge in the region. Events were not precipitated by single revolution characterized by clear objectives, a distinct strategy, identifiable leaders and well-defined rules, and a new democratic system cannot be simply created by decree. There must be a commitment from local forces and international actors to establish and sustain a democratic system. Moreover, since these transition countries need guidance in this process, the issue of leadership must be discussed.

The catchphrase here is “role model.” As was already pointed out at the beginning of the process, these countries are clearly looking for an example that can inspire their own development. Turkey, which is in a powerful position, is the only country capable of playing this role and has many opportunities to do so; despite the challenges such a responsibility entails, Turkey is willing to fulfil this task.

The most important factor in favor of a strong Turkish involvement in helping organize the transition is the fact that Turkey has successfully dem-

onstrated that a country with a predominantly Muslim population can fully implement the core values driving the Arab Spring: democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and the protection of minorities. In developing relations with the Arab world, Turkey's strongest advantages are religion and culture, whose importance should not be underestimated. Indeed, because of its cultural background, religion, and geographic proximity, Turkey benefits from greater access to these countries than do the countries of Western Europe or elsewhere.

Prime Minister Erdoğan's declarations in Libya and Egypt were extremely significant in this regard: he stated that new democracy must be secular but that a secular democracy does not preclude the existence of a political movement with strong religious links and values. His emphasis on this point was a frank message directed at powerful political forces in the region that resist the idea of a secular democracy. At the same time, Erdoğan's expression of his views on secularism allowed him to reach out to European countries, where some observers still believe that the ultimate objective of the present Turkish government is to create a non-secular state.

Notwithstanding Erdoğan's position, the limitations to Turkey's involvement in the region must also be acknowledged. One potential factor that might complicate Turkey's relationship with the Arab world is the fact that these countries were formerly part of the Ottoman Empire. It is necessary to engage in a more serious discussion on how this history affects the policies of today and to what extent it still exists in the collective memory of the people. Given the negative legacy of Turkey's imperial past, certain neighbor countries would be loathe to accept Turkish counsel. With such reservations in mind, Turkey can and should play a leading role in these processes, but it must avoid behaving as a regional superpower that seeks to dominate others. It is prepared, however, to play a leadership role by setting an example, offering help, sharing best practices and giving guidance if wanted.

Can the EU act as a reliable partner for Turkey? The challenge of a common foreign policy

Turkey would need to be strongly supported in these efforts, and the EU is a compelling potential partner. To better comprehend the EU's prospects for playing a role in the Middle East, one must understand the relationship between the EU and the Arab world. The EU is clearly disadvantaged in some respects; it is a matter of fact that members of EU institutions and member states willingly cooperated for decades with rulers who are now overthrown. Their approach was clearly based on *Realpolitik*: a desire to achieve stability in these countries even at the price of violent crackdowns and the suppression of popular demands; guaranteeing stability seemed to override democratic values and human rights. As it turned out, the *Realpolitik* calculation was a very serious mistake.

Nonetheless, the reputation and influence of the EU and some member states in the Arab world is sometimes surprisingly high, and the EU remains the most important political and economic partner for these countries. It therefore has very strong foundations on which to build a working cooperation in the

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region. To do so, however, the Europeans must overcome the current crisis in the EU and manage member states’ competing policies toward the region, especially in regard to energy calculations.

In order for the EU not only to play its own role but also to support Turkey’s part in facilitating this transformation process, it must develop a comprehensive foreign policy, which for the moment is still lacking. The Arab Spring very clearly brought to light the shortcomings of the EU. The decision-making processes, for instance, remain cumbersome and opaque; in the case of Libya, it was not possible to develop a joint strategy because Germany abstained from supporting the resolution of the UN Security Council.

The reaction in EU member states following the uprisings was a mixture of surprise and joy, but also of fear and uncertainty stemming from the impossibility of anticipating the final outcome of these events. Many analysts maintain that there is a clear risk that fundamentalist Islam will take over, in which case this revolution will come to represent a serious threat to the security of European countries. Though many informed analysts reject such views, they must nonetheless be acknowledged in the discussion. Similarly, some European countries are afraid that if the transition process were not handled properly, instability might trigger strong immigration from North Africa that would burden their economic and social systems.

Despite such negative public perceptions of developments in the region, the sway of the European Union in the Arab world is sufficient to justify its role in this transformation, especially if member states and EU institutions manage to coordinate their policies and harness the traditional influence of certain countries. The major instrument available to the EU is its neighborhood policy, which is divided into two parts: the eastern neighborhood and the countries bordering the Mediterranean to the south. Such a distinction reflects the differing status of these two regions concerning possible accession to the EU: while the eastern neighborhood countries, essentially European, could potentially become member states, the Mediterranean countries do not have a membership perspective. Instead, the EU’s relations with the Mediterranean countries are institutionalized through the Union for the Mediterranean. Given its dysfunctional structure, the high expectations invested in the Union for the Mediterranean have yet to be realized, and it is already threatened by the same fate as the Barcelona Process. Nonetheless, the new situation in the Arab world should not discourage us; on the contrary, we should see it as an incitement to try again, hopefully in better conditions.

Developing a common strategy to meet the geopolitical challenges of regional transformation

Turkey and the EU should combine their efforts, define their shared political and economic interests, and develop a common strategy specifying relevant policy tools to jointly address the geopolitical challenges posed in the region as the Arab Spring unfolds. Such work should be undertaken parallel to the EU’s work on developing a common position in Europe. A candid look at the situa-

tion in the Arab world shows that, irrespective of the direction the transformation takes, there is a strong need for the EU and Turkey to build a much closer relationship. If developments take a negative turn, thereby endangering peace, there will obviously be a need to cooperate; if events proceed in the right direction, meaning toward democratic transformation, it is in both parties' interest to make it succeed.

Although Turkey has adopted a pro-democracy position in these countries, it lacks an explicit democratization agenda, and it has not developed tools similar to the EU's conditionality policy to promote transformation in a third country. The European Union, on the other hand, has accumulated experience on how to achieve such change and is equipped with the instruments to do so. Naturally, the same tools cannot be applied in every situation, but the policy is indeed in place. The EU disposes of people with the expertise to instate it, whose knowledge, acquired while promoting democracy in different places in difficult circumstances on the ground, constitutes a valuable source of experience.

Given the advantages of the EU and Turkey respectively, it would be wise to combine their strengths: Turkey's better access to the region on the one hand and the EU's instruments and experience in inducing positive change on the other hand. This is an obvious case for far-reaching cooperation and calls for closer policy coordination between Turkey and the EU.

Revitalize the membership process: a project of geopolitical significance

If the European Union and Turkey managed to cooperate on such a geopolitically important project, it would have an enormous additional benefit: revitalizing the stalled relationship between the EU and Turkey and lending it a sense of urgency and importance. Mired in its own internal crisis that began around 2005, the EU has been unable to send clear and encouraging signals of its appreciation of Turkey's progress, thus resulting in the current stalemate. Successfully collaborating on a project of this significance, however, could create an historic opportunity comparable to Eastern Enlargement.

Although an accession process is not always a strategic or geopolitical project, in Turkey's case it absolutely is. The most compelling single argument for Turkish accession has been of a strategic and geopolitical nature, and this remains the case. Today, Europeans must understand that we are living in a changing world, hence a changing environment. In the twenty-first century, regional alliances are not sufficient; we need strong global cooperation to solve our problems. At the time of a deepening crisis within Europe and emerging challenges worldwide, Europeans have to understand that the EU must become a global player, without which it will be sidelined, marginalized and bypassed as other powers make the decisions. This does not have to be our future.

Obligated to compete with markets such as India and China that have three times as many people, Europeans need to be politically and economically strong, and Turkey as a regional power complements the EU's need for a partner. If Tur-

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key tried to become a superpower in its part of the world, it would face enormous problems with other states, namely Iran and Russia; but as a strong and leading player in the region, it will remain a driving force for integration and cooperation.

Turkey’s pursuit of a regional power role is sometimes criticized as derauling membership efforts, when in fact Turkey’s greater engagement and increasing influence are a compelling reason for its integration into Europe. It would be a considerable advantage for the EU to have a member state capable of playing a strong role in the Middle East, Central Asia or other regions of mutual interest. Moreover, Turkey is economically and culturally oriented towards Europe. The European Union is not only its biggest trading partner, but also by far its most important investor, with more than 90 % of the direct investment in Turkey coming from the EU. This solid foundation should provide the base for a future partnership that can be carried to new levels.

Recommendations

There is a risk that the transformation process in the Middle East may involve conflicts among various groups seeking power, which is one of the reasons why it is imperative to support a democratic transition. Democratization cannot be achieved overnight; it requires training the people who can implement it, as well as fostering the spread of democratic norms and institutions. Given the urgency of the matter, Turkey and the EU must strengthen reformist forces in the Middle East and North Africa that truly desire a democratic transformation.

In ensuring that the transition process in the Arab world leads to closer alignment with European and Turkish systems, institutions like the Union for the Mediterranean can play a vital role, and efforts should be made to implement such instruments more effectively. Unfortunately, consensus is lacking within the EU on such a perspective, both at a governmental and a societal level. It would be wise to devise mechanisms to address those intra-European differences.

In order to translate their shared interest into a common policy, Turkey and the EU must collaborate more closely. Here, they could draw lessons from the successes and failures of past EU policies, specifically geared towards the Arab world, that sought to strengthen democracy and empower NGOs. In particular, they could develop projects that aim at capacity-building at a grassroots level.

Policy makers in Turkey and the EU must also learn from the fall of the Soviet empire and the autocratic rulers in the Arab world: the long-term stability of a society is not possible if people are deprived of their rights and freedoms. Democracy and the rule of law remain the necessary conditions of lasting stability, and helping create political systems that respect those principles should be the focus of joint European and Turkish efforts in the region.

Furthermore, policy makers in the EU must accept that there is a significant difference between a policy based on Islamic values and an Islamist policy. Parties with a religious background exist everywhere in the EU and are the leading forces in a number of countries. The Europeans must accept that similar parties might also work as legitimate political forces in the Arab world and in Turkey, and they should be prepared to work with these actors.

We can use the new geopolitical situation in the Middle East and Africa to create new momentum for Turkey-EU relations. Working together towards inducing a positive transformation in countries that are undergoing a regime change offers the best opportunity to revitalize the Turkey-EU partnership. Europeans must be patient and uphold their decision that Turkey shall become a member of the European Union, while Turks should acknowledge that the political circumstances inside the EU can change relatively quickly. In less than two years, a completely different political picture might emerge in key European countries, creating more favorable conditions for the membership process. ♦

Recommended Reading

Şaban Kardaş, "Turkey and the Arab Spring: Coming to Terms with Democracy Promotion?," *GMF On Turkey* (October 2011).

Kemal Kirişçi, "Turkey's 'Demonstrative Effect' and the Transformation of the Middle East," *Insight Turkey*, vol. 13, no. 2 (spring 2011), 33-55.

Tobias Schumacher, "The EU and the Arab Spring: Between Spectatorship and Actorness," *Insight Turkey*, vol. 13, no. 3 (summer 2011), 107-119.

Omer Taspinar, "An Uneven Fit: The 'Turkish Model' and the Arab World", *The Brookings Project on US Policy Towards the Islamic World*, no. 5 (August 2003).

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