



## THE POSSIBILITY OF “TRANSFORMATIONAL PARTNERSHIP” BETWEEN TURKEY AND THE EU: WILL “OPPORTUNITY” BECOME REALITY?

Although both Turkey and the European Union have accepted the need to respond to the turbulent transformation process in the Arab world – albeit with a certain amount of delay – they have not yet approached the region jointly, an alternative offering the opportunity to craft a more effective, value-based and forward-looking strategy (Soler i Lecha 2011: 27). Indeed, the EU and Turkey as yet lack any institutionalized process of dialogue regarding the transformation in the Arab world, much less a combined strategy. However, the two have both a historical responsibility and a present-day opportunity to act together by combining their energies and potential in the design of a new policy toward the region. The transformation in the Arab world will not only check the attractiveness and transformative power of the post-enlargement EU and change the dynamics of Turkey’s relationship with the Union, but will also test the new role Turkey has sought for itself in the Middle East (Krastev 2011: 1).

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.tepav.org.tr/en/ekibimiz/s/1139/Nilgun+Arisan+Eralp>

### **Turkey's present instruments and strategies for supporting Arab countries undergoing transformation**

In examining Turkey's present efforts to support Arab countries undergoing transformation, instruments are more clearly discernible than strategies per se. The main factors driving government behavior in this area include the country's newly active foreign policy within its region and its increasing attempts to "lead by example." The regime's guiding idea seems to be to serve as a "source of inspiration" or to provide a "demonstrative effect" (Ülgen, December 2011: 1).

As Daniel Dombey pointed out in a Financial Times article titled "Turkish Diplomacy: An Attentive Neighbor" on 26 February 2012, "not since the fall of the Ottoman Empire nine decades ago has Turkey played a more active role in the Middle East and beyond." This active policy, which has also been described as a "sea change" (Tocci and Walker 2011: 1), started with Turkey playing a more significant role as a regional mediator, followed by a diplomatic activism enhanced by economic and trade links and a liberal visa policy toward nearby countries (Soler i Lecha 2011: 27). The declared objective was to promote a stable and prosperous neighborhood through encouraging greater economic integration between Turkey and the Arab world (Kirişçi Insight Turkey 13 (2): 2011: 43), putting a special emphasis on the free movement of people.

This essentially autonomous foreign policy has been shaped by a number of broad international currents, including the end of the Cold War and the world's emerging multipolarity, the events following 9/11, the U.S. invasion of and withdrawal from Iraq, the fragile nature of global economic system, the exclusion of Turkey from Europe's architecture by some EU member states and the subsequent stalling of EU accession negotiations, and finally the vacuum in the region created by the reduction of U.S. influence. All these factors have redefined Turkey's geopolitical situation and increased the regional emphasis in its foreign policy (Kardaş 2011: 34).

However, in the environment created by the recent transformations in the Arab world, conditions have become less conducive to autonomous action (Özel 2012: 4), especially as the number of cases necessitating multilateral action and assistance (such as Libya and Syria) has increased. This has again brought Turkey closer to its Western partners. The rising number of other actors competing for influence in the region, with Iran and Russia serving as prominent examples, has played a significant role in this rapprochement.

In this context, although Turkey has adopted a pro-democracy position vis-à-vis the transformation in the Arab world, it lacks an explicit strategy toward this end. Yet even in the absence of such a strategy, Turkey has exerted a definite appeal for countries going through uncertain transformations. Affinities in the areas of religion and culture have played a crucial role in this regard, although other important factors are also in play.

A recent survey covering 16 Middle Eastern countries by the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV), an Istanbul-based think tank, showed Turkey to be the most highly regarded country in the eyes of the people of the region (TESEV 2012: 21). Interestingly enough, in survey respondents' citation of the country as a model for the region, as its future economic leader and as the country that contributes most to peace, Turkey's Muslim identity was only the third most important factor, behind the fact of its democratic rule and its working economy.

Turkey's "demonstrative effect" operates through its economic performance and liberal trade policies, accompanied by its liberal visa policy (Kirişçi 2011: 46). On the other hand, being "a country with a predominantly Muslim population which can fully implement the core values driving the Arab Spring: democracy, the rule of law, human rights and the protection of minorities" clearly plays a crucial role (Verheugen 2012: 3). To a considerable extent, Turkey owes the establishment of these values within its domestic sphere to its EU accession process, which has served as an important catalyst in the country's recent political, economic and social transformation.

It is hence clear that Turkey's appeal in the region is an important instrument, and that the country's EU accession process has played a significant role in the construction of this appeal, alongside the country's own economic performance and political model. In order to convert this appeal to political leverage within the region, Turkey should share its experience in areas such as political reform, economic reform and institution building, thus contributing to economic growth and sustainable democratization in the region.

### **Where could the EU and Turkey cooperate?**

The European Union has long struggled to promote democratic reform and economic modernization in North Africa and the Middle East, typically by engaging in regional cooperation and trade liberalization in the form of bilateral association agreements. Although it largely failed to achieve its regional objectives, the EU has been motivated by the belief that establishing EU norms and practices in the Mediterranean would reduce the significant economic and political gap between the EU and countries in the region (Soler i Lecha 2011: 27).

Since 1995, when the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) was created, the EU has implemented specific policies geared toward the Mediterranean region; however, these have not included policies similar to the EU project itself.

From the EMP's initiation in 1995 to the 2004 incorporation of Mediterranean countries into the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) and the 2008 launch of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) as a replacement for the EMP, and even in the case of the "Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean" of 2011, the European Union has struggled to find a successful framework and strategy for relations with its Mediterranean partners. The various efforts have in many respects sought to complement one another: The ENP focuses on EU's bilateral relations with

each partner, for example, while the EMP and its successor UfM have provided forums where all the countries can meet together.

Unfortunately, these policies have not successfully closed the region's income and democratic-governance gap with the European Union. Indeed, they even served to strengthen authoritarian regimes (Grant 2011: 1), resulting in a loss of credibility for the EU in the region. The main weakness of the UfM and its predecessor EMP was a focus on states or governments, with comparatively less emphasis on private sector and NGO development. On the other hand, ENP has focused extensively on improving the economic environment rather than putting any significant emphasis on the promotion of democracy, human rights or the rule of law.

Consequently, the European Union has decided that in creating a regional policy better adapted to the current circumstances, it should offer more in terms of "money, markets and mobility," while implementing stricter terms of conditionality (Grant 2011: 2).

Taking all these past weaknesses into consideration, the EU has responded to the transformation in the Arab world with 2011's "Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean." The emphasis of this program is on democratic transformation and institution building through person-to-person contact, as well as urban and rural development through the improvement of educational and health systems. Further areas of engagement include the protection of fundamental freedoms, constitutional and judiciary reform, and the fight against corruption (Schumacher 2011: 109). The approach taken to implementation is one of "more for more and less for less," in the sense that delivery of aid is to be conditional on performance in the areas of democracy and human rights. In other words, unlike in the past, the EU aims this time to associate a strict conditionality with its aid.

Despite its weaknesses, the EU's greatest asset at the moment is the rich expertise regarding the North Africa and Middle East region acquired through the pursuit of its previous policies. There is wide consensus that these policies have enabled the EU to acquire financial and institutional resources that Turkey lacks. Conversely, Turkey enjoys a level of popularity within the Arab public that the EU has lost over the last decades. It would thus be wise for the EU and Turkey to combine their strengths, as both parties have an interest in fostering economic development as well as a sustainable pattern of broader development within their joint neighborhood. This gives the two parties a foundation on which to build working cooperation in the region.

Although the European Union has not itself been regarded as a political model within the Arab world, European or universal values have played a significant role in establishing Turkey as a source of inspiration. Arab protesters do not regard European societies as a model for imitation, but during the uprisings they have demanded that important European values and norms such as democracy, freedom and an end to corruption be respected – all of which have to a certain extent been established in

Turkey through the country's EU accession process. These are also the norms that the European Union has long aspired to institutionalize in these countries. The primary areas of engagement within the EU's new strategic approach to the area – specifically, protection for fundamental freedoms, constitutional and judicial reform, and the fight against corruption – have long been important constituents of Turkey's own transformation process, again due to the EU accession process. For this reason, Turkey's appeal in the region gives it the potential to fill Europe's "credibility gap" (Soler i Lecha 2011: 27).

In the above-noted TESEV survey, respondents were asked whether a Turkish accession to the EU would benefit the Union in the region overall. Sixty percent of respondents said Turkish accession would have a positive effect on the EU's regional role (TESEV 2011: 22).

Hence, cooperation between EU and Turkey would seem to have the potential to create a positive political and economic transformation in the Arab world, particularly if the parties can strengthen reformist forces in the Arab countries by developing projects that aim at grassroots-level capacity building. Turkey's business community and civil society can play an instrumental role toward this end. The declared willingness of the EU and Turkey to cooperate more closely in their foreign policy toward the region shows promise in this sense, although there has as yet been no sign of a joint strategy or even the establishment of a process of working dialogue on the issue.

While Turkey's recent economic and political transformation process offers a very good showcase for the establishment of EU norms in the region, the country's customs union with the EU could also be very useful (Ülgen October 2011: 2). If this experience could be extended to the region as a whole, replacing the EU's free trade agreements with individual Arab countries, it might initiate a process of economic integration able to trigger much-needed economic growth in addition to political transformation.

### **Possible obstacles to successful partnership**

Although the prospect of an EU-Turkey strategic partnership vis-à-vis the Arab world holds strong potential for the stimulation of sustainable democratization and economic growth, significant obstacles to any such cooperation may yet stem from the EU, from Turkey and/or from the relations between them.

Internal EU problems such as the euro crisis, persistent threats to the Union's economic and financial foundations, and the potential collapse of the Schengen system (Soler i Lecha 2011: 29) could disrupt an otherwise successful partnership between Turkey and the EU. The EU financial crisis might easily limit the amount of money allocated to new policy toward the Arab world. On the other hand, the (already extant) risk of an immense inflow of illegal migrants and the specter of Islamic fundamentalism could easily result in widespread objections within the European public to the provision of additional EU support to the Arab world.

Another potential impediment to efficient partnership between EU and Turkey stems from shortcomings in the construction of EU's foreign policy. EU countries in many cases lack consensus, making it difficult to arrive at a joint strategy. Unless there is efficient coordination of member state policies, bilateral problems between Turkey and any individual member state could undermine joint activity between the broader Union and Turkey toward the Arab world.

Turkey's vulnerability as a source of inspiration is another factor that could become a serious disruption in any partnership between the EU and Turkey. This vulnerability stems both from the slowdown in Turkey's domestic political reform process and the instability of its economic performance. Turkish democratization is still a work in progress, and has suffered serious recent setbacks, particularly in the areas of fundamental freedoms and the rule of law. If such a situation were to persist, it would seriously undermine the country's transformative power in the region. In addition, the Turkish economy's sensitivity to rising oil prices and dependence on the performance of EU economies both comprise risk factors in the country's ability to assist Arab countries during the difficult period of transformation.

Turkey's fragile democratization process is closely linked with its EU accession process, which has been stalled for several years. In principle, the initiation of accession negotiations constitutes the beginning of an irreversible process in which the candidate country's membership prospects become gradually clearer over time. However, this has not been the case for Turkey (Arısan Erdoğru 2011: 1), as half of its negotiation chapters have been blocked for political reasons. Although Turkey has been engaged in accession negotiations for more than six years, joining the EU has domestically become almost a non-issue, with the accession debate today having very little effect on internal transformation processes. This situation presents the most serious risk to *foreign policy cooperation with the European Union "unless there is a boost to accession negotiations, or at the very least, EU movement toward visa liberalization with Turkey"* (Soler i Lecha 2011: 29).

More broadly, Turkey itself should seek to avoid repeating the mistakes of the European Union's previous Middle East and North Africa policies, which were torn between upholding Europe's values and its interests, and ultimately failed to deliver the promised "money, markets and mobility." As noted by Charles Grant, "many EU leaders perceived an inevitable contradiction between Europe's values and its interests, and chose to prioritize the latter" (Grant 2011:1). Turkey should avoid falling into this trap, and avoid behaving as a regional superpower seeking to dominate others. Any such behavior has the potential to remind neighbors of the negative legacy of Turkey's imperial past (Verheugen 2012: 3). Rather, it can play an important role by serving as a source of inspiration that offers assistance, shares best practices and gives guidance.

## Looking ahead

As the Arab world's transformation evolves in the direction of creating economically prosperous and democratic countries, it is increasingly obvious that this process can best be helped through transnational cooperation (Bishara 2011: 19). Given the complicated and uncertain nature of the transformation in the Middle East and North Africa, as well as the scope of the opportunities at stake, both Turkey and the European Union feel a responsibility to help restore respect for human rights, support a sustainable democratization process and contribute to economic growth in the region. A successful regional policy partnership between the EU and Turkey would strengthen both parties' positions. However, the significant potential underlying any such partnership can be realized only if dialogue between the parties is institutionalized. If this fails to take place, each party will be "torn between being a relevant actor in the region and a simple spectator that continues to be overwhelmed by local and regional political developments" (Schumacher 2011: 108).

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