

## Turkey's Foreign Policy: Shifting Back to the West after a Drift to the East?<sup>1</sup>

by Jean Marcou

In this brief, the author discusses how the AKP's rise to power in Turkey brought about a significant shift in foreign policy, but this shift has most likely been wrongly appraised. Now, as Ankara wrestles with the Syrian crisis, sets greater store by its NATO membership and finds itself generally aligned with its Western allies, the question of whether Turkey has not returned to the Western fold is being assessed. However, time and the "Arab Spring" have not blotted out the fundamental changes in Turkish foreign policy; they have merely demonstrated that these changes were not what they were initially taken for.

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There is almost universal acknowledgement that Turkey's foreign policy has undergone profound change over the last decade, so much so that it has become customary to speak of a "new Turkish foreign policy". It is worth noting that the country's diplomatic choices have been unfailingly constant since the end of World War II. The pursuit of a virtually exclusive alliance with the West, coupled with weak or even conflictive relations with its regional neighbors, were the consequence of political arrangements under which the army regarded the country's foreign policy as falling outside the government's powers.

In these conditions, the AKP's rise to power and the resultant changes brought about a significant shift in foreign policy, but this shift has most likely been wrongly appraised. One of the recurring themes at expert international conferences on Turkey in 2010 could be summed up in a now famous question: "Isn't Turkish foreign policy changing direction and looking east?"<sup>2</sup> Now, as Ankara wrestles with the Syrian crisis, sets greater store by its NATO membership and finds itself generally aligned with its Western allies, the same kind of forums have turned to the question of whether Turkey has not returned to the Western fold. However, time and the "Arab Spring" have not blotted out the fundamental changes in Turkish foreign policy; they have merely demonstrated that these changes were not what we initially took them to be.

### The “new Turkish foreign policy” and the theory of “axis shift”

On the eve of the “Arab Spring”, Turkey’s foreign policy appeared to have entered a cycle of profound change. This phenomenon did not become truly clear until the AKP’s second term in government (2007-11) and more specifically from 2009 onward, when Ahmet Davutoğlu, principal political adviser to Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, became Foreign Minister.<sup>3</sup> During its previous term (2002-7), although Abdullah Gül had already begun to transform the ministry’s organization and personnel during his unbroken tenure as head of the Turkish foreign service, the AKP government was eager to avoid any stand-off with the political and military establishment, which retained considerable political influence and claimed a say in how foreign policy was conducted.

When the AKP was returned to power in 2007, there were a series of noticeable and major diplomatic reorientations. There was a change in the Turkish government’s relations with the Kurdish authorities in northern Iraq, with Ankara agreeing to direct and official dialogue with President Massoud Barzani. This move also had an impact on Turkey’s relationship with the Arab world. The years 2009 and 2010 revealed the scale of the ongoing changes.<sup>4</sup> Turkey’s unequivocal condemnation of the Israeli army’s intervention in Gaza and the famous “One Minute” speech in Davos<sup>5</sup> in early 2009 were the first signs of a challenge to longstanding Turkish/Israeli agreement about Middle Eastern policy, and these became steadily more pronounced over the months leading up to the boarding of the *Mavi Marmara*<sup>6</sup> in May 2010. This serious clash between the two countries reduced their relationship virtually to a state of mutual ignorance, but it immediately bolstered Turkey’s standing in the Arab world, which had been growing ever since it had begun to pay more attention to its close neighbors.

Parallel to this, the Turkish foreign office was pulling out all the stops in other key areas. Ankara was notably involved in attempts to resolve the nuclear dispute with Iran. Simultaneously, Turkey signed two agreements with the aim of normalizing relations with Armenia following President Gül’s visit to Yerevan. Having taken a relatively moderate stance during the Georgian crisis of August 2008 despite being a NATO member, Turkey nurtured ties with Russia, its huge northern neighbor. Lastly, the years 2009 and 2010 also saw an unprecedented expansion of Turkey’s political, economic and cultural relations with the Arab world. The leaders in Damascus and Ankara met many times and even signed a strategic partnership agreement in 2009. Yet Turkey was also developing ties with other countries in the Mashriq and the Maghreb, organizing rounds of meetings, abolishing the need for visas and declaring its ambition to create a huge free trade zone stretching from Damascus to Casablanca, which the Turkish Prime Minister is said to have ironically baptized *amgen* ( *am* being Turkish for Damascus).

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Meanwhile, Turkey's negotiations to join the European Union had come to a standstill. In 2006 the issue of Cyprus had frozen eight chapters of the EU's *acquis communautaire*, Nicolas Sarkozy's election to the French presidency in 2007 having dealt a severe blow to negotiations after he had openly declared his opposition to Turkey's membership. At the very moment when Turkey's EU candidacy seemed to be in jeopardy, the new regional markets that were opening up as a result of Turkish foreign policy and its "zero problems with neighbors" strategy struck many observers as a possible alternative to becoming a full and integrated EU member.<sup>7</sup> The tripartite agreement between Brazil, Iran and Turkey, combined with Ankara's refusal to back the third set of U.S. sanctions against the Islamic republic of Iran at the UN Security Council poisoned relations between Ankara and Washington and seemed to confirm the axis shift in Turkish foreign policy.

On the eve of the Arab Spring, many commentators declared that Turkey was distancing itself from its Western allies, or at the very least that it meant to create some wiggle room for itself, as General de Gaulle had done in the 1960s when he withdrew France from NATO's integrated military command, criticized the American campaign in Vietnam, and condemned Israel's starting the Six Day War. People began to characterize Turkey's policies – without doubt incorrectly – as "neo-third-worldist". Others looked to history as they sought to explain Turkey's new diplomatic path, interpreting Turkey's neighborly approach in the Middle East and the Balkans as an expression of a neo-Ottomanism underpinning its aspiration to become a regional power.

### The hour of truth for the "Arab Spring"

Like its Western allies, Turkey failed to see the "Arab Spring" coming, and the AKP government was slow to react to initial events in Tunisia and Egypt. It is to be expected that these unexpected uprisings will jeopardize the political and, above all, economic strategy that Turkey has developed with the region's incumbent Arab governments in recent years.

On February 1, 2011, however, the Turkish government broke its silence. As Egypt found itself in the eye of the storm of Arab revolutions, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan told Hosni Mubarak to listen to the people's demands. His appeal coincided with a similar message from the United States, and this was therefore not a terribly hard call for the Turkish foreign service; the Turkish government's relations with Hosni Mubarak were far less warm than its ties with Bashir al-Assad. As Hosni Mubarak's almost thirty-year-old regime entered its death throes, Turkey began to realize that it could capitalize on its growing economic and strategic influence – and its newfound regional prestige. And thus discussion about the "Turkish model" began.

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This became a subject of debate in the Middle East, and several publications seemed to confirm its relevance as an issue. The Turkish think tank TESEV published a survey showing a significant upturn in people’s perception of Turkey over the preceding decade.<sup>8</sup> Its findings were widely publicized by the Turkish press as proof of the “Turkish model’s” pertinence, as they were flattering about a country that people saw as a successful example of combining Islam and democracy; they wished for Turkey to play an expanded role in the Middle East.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, Turkey’s leaders remained cautious about this apparent success. In February 2011, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan commented that his country’s experience was “a source of inspiration” to an Arab world in the throes of revolt, rather than a “model” for it to copy.<sup>10</sup>

The second wave of Arab uprisings, especially the Libyan and Syrian crises, was to prove a far more formidable challenge for Turkey to negotiate than the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions.

Its relations with Libya were largely economic. Turkey had invested heavily in the North African country and as a result had over 20,000 expatriate citizens there. When the Libyan civil war broke out in the second half of February, Ankara found itself having to evacuate its nationals, and its future economic ties to the country appeared to be in severe jeopardy.<sup>11</sup> The Syria uprisings were to have even worse consequences. The close relations Turkey had established with its Arab neighbor were not just economic (the signature of a free trade agreement in 2004) but also political, cultural and even military. The Turkish prime minister was initially led to believe that he could persuade the Syrian leader to initiate a process of democratic transition, given their previous cooperation. In the face of increasingly bloody repression, however, Ankara was forced to distance itself from its former ally. Relations between the two countries went completely sour in the autumn of 2011, and there were a number of diplomatic incidents. At the end of 2012 Turkey convinced NATO to deploy Patriot missile launchers on its territory as protection against its unpredictable neighbor and other potential regional threats. After a decade on the up, Turkish-Syrian relations appeared to have reverted to the state of simmering conflict typical of the late 1990s.<sup>12</sup>

### Realities and illusions of the so-called “return to the West”

While it seems that Turkey will have to get used to a drawn-out civil war on its borders, the “Arab Spring” put changes in Turkish foreign policy into perspective. Turkey’s dilemmas about its position on the international intervention in Libya following the UN Security Council’s adoption of Resolution 1973 in mid April 2011 contradicted observers who saw Turkey drifting away from its Western allies. The Turkish government was initially

utterly hostile to an initiative that smacked of imperialism, but gradually rallied behind it, despite firmly refusing to take part in any military operations. As for the Syrian crisis, it brutally exposed the limits of Turkey's "zero problems with neighbors" strategy.

The Arab uprisings undermined the strategic foundations on which Turkey had based its new foreign policy up to 2010. The political changes triggered by the Arab Spring won the support of President Obama, who undoubtedly leaned on Hosni Mubarak to speed up his departure from power and whose White House speech on May 19, 2011 was an assertion that henceforth democracy was a value the Arab world could aspire to. Yet the political upheaval of the Arab Spring also provoked mistrust and even downright hostility from other powers such as Iran and Russia, which were anxious to curb what the international intervention in Libya had convinced them was a Western ploy to tighten its grip on the Mediterranean and the Middle East. Faced with this unprecedented strategic equation, Turkey clearly had to choose between continuing its recent foreign policy (2009-10), which had seen it strike out on a different path to the great Western powers, or else give its backing, as a pluralist and democratic country, to popular uprisings against regional dictatorships. By opting for the latter, Ankara returned to its traditional alliances (NATO, its relationship with the United States). New threats, such as the developing civil war in Syria and doubts about Iran's nuclear intentions, further backed up this reorientation, and Turkey even confirmed its participation in the American missile defense system, about which it had initially voiced some skepticism.

So what is left of Ahmet Davutoğlu's new foreign policy? After a drift to the east, has Turkish diplomacy shifted back west? Actually, although these events have reminded Turkey of the value of NATO membership, it has not suddenly reverted to its former diplomatic positions.

First, it is noticeable that the Arab Spring and the alleged shift to the West that ensued have had no impact on relations between Ankara and Tel Aviv; there is the same stalemate now as after the *Mavi Marmara* tragedy. There's an explanation for this. If it were to soften its position toward Israel, Turkey would probably forfeit some of its recent prestige in the Arab world – just as it is busy forging closer ties with countries where uprisings have toppled dictatorships. In September 2011, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan made a widely publicized tour of Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, where he was given a warm welcome. In October 2012 Deputy Prime Minister Ali Babacan announced substantial loans to Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Yemen. There is unquestionably a growing convergence between Turkey, the Gulf monarchies and the new Muslim (or even Islamist) governments born of the post-Arab Spring political transitions.

One also observes that the Turkish government is pursuing its multi-dimensional strategy as an emerging country, scaling up its economic and

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diplomatic presence on other continents (Africa, Latin America), continuing its mediation strategy wherever possible (in the Balkans in particular), and maintaining its critical stance toward the international system and the main international organizations (UN, IMF, etc.).

### “Return to the West”, but not to Europe?

One must admit that the strategic changes brought about by the “Arab Spring” have not done much to improve relations between Turkey and the EU. The 15th Progress Report on Turkey’s preparations for EU membership published by the European Commission in October 2012<sup>13</sup> was particularly critical, pointing to a number of serious failings in terms of securing fundamental rights. Yet delays in carrying out political reform do not appear to be the only reason Turkey’s candidacy has become bogged down: this is also due to differences of opinion between EU member states about the wisdom of accepting a new member. Turkey’s accession not only poses the question of where Europe’s borders are but also a wider issue of the cohesion of the European project, given that the EU has not yet completely digested the waves of enlargement in the 2000s and is also reeling from the sovereign debt crisis. Moreover, there are worrying signs of fatigue in Turkey’s relations with the Franco-German axis at the heart of Europe.

Angela Merkel has made no secret of her opposition to Turkey’s becoming a member of the EU in recent years, and relations between Turkey and Germany have suffered continuous flare-ups over issues such as the status of Turkish immigrants in Germany at a time when migration flows have reversed and large numbers of Turks are returning to Turkey to take advantage of the country’s economic development. Meanwhile, Nicolas Sarkozy’s last year in office saw a further deterioration of Franco-Turkish relations. In late 2011, the French parliament passed a law making genocide denial an offence, and this raised tensions between the two countries to unprecedented levels.

Turkey read François Hollande’s election in May 2012 a little overconfidently as the dawning of a new era that would break the deadlock regarding its accession. In the immediate aftermath of his election, the new president stated that he would no longer oppose Turkey’s candidacy and no longer wished to exploit the issue for domestic political gains. However, France has not yet been able to dispel the attitude of mistrust and often hostility that prevailed during Nicolas Sarkozy’s presidency. We would suggest that there are two main reasons for this.

The first is the new government’s position regarding the law criminalizing genocide denial. We should not forget that François Hollande had always supported the passing of this law, and when, having been passed by the French parliament in January 2012, the act was subsequently thrown

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out by the Constitutional Council<sup>14</sup>, he (like Nicolas Sarkozy) announced his intention to bring another bill before parliament. The President's announcement of his intention on July 7, 2012, two months after he was elected, took people by surprise and sparked off a controversy, because the new Minister of Foreign Affairs, Laurent Fabius<sup>15</sup>, had several times previously argued for the restoration of good relations with Turkey. At a joint press conference with his Turkish counterpart, Ahmet Davutoğlu, in Paris on July 5, 2012, the French Foreign Minister even went so far as to claim that the Constitutional Council's decision had rendered any re-tableting of the genocide denial law impossible.

The second reason for France's unease about reviving negotiations on Turkey's EU candidacy stems from the new government's own tricky position on this issue. Most members of François Hollande's government (a coalition of Socialists and Greens) are in favor of Turkey's joining the EU, but many of them offer their approval only with considerable strings attached (in particular with regard to improving the country's human rights situation). Furthermore, the recently elected French president is struggling with low approval ratings in the current recession-hit climate, and the idea of reviving Turkey's application with the aim of pushing accession through is not without its risks. French public opinion is overwhelmingly against Turkey's joining the EU and it is a subject that is likely to split France and Germany at precisely when they need to show unity to beat the recession. France under François Hollande has therefore largely adopted a wait-and-see policy toward Turkey's accession. This does involve calling time on the constant stigmatization of Ankara that characterized Nicolas Sarkozy's presidency, although there are no eye-catching initiatives to revive accession negotiations with Turkey.

## Outlook and recommendations

This article has picked out the most recent trends in Turkish foreign policy and has illustrated how hard it is to change its course by highlighting the strategic constraints influencing any diplomatic activity. The "Arab Spring" confirmed that Turkey is in no position to completely reassess an alliance with the West that is the legacy of previous necessities. Yet the Arab Spring did demonstrate nonetheless that the country can now manage this alliance differently by playing its trump cards of economic growth and regional standing.

Accordingly, Ankara will probably have to move beyond the "neo-third-worldist" commitments of 2009-10, which struck a different chord than its allies but posed a dilemma later when Turkey had to choose sides. There is no question that Turkey had to emerge from its previous regional isolation and establish relations with all its neighbors, but it was not obliged to associate itself so closely to regimes with which it was always going

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to have trouble getting on (Syria, Iran, Russia). This observation should encourage the Turkish foreign ministry to be wary of how it manages its closer ties with countries involved in the “Arab Spring” (Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Qatar and the Gulf states). It should also make sure that its special relationship with the Kurdish government in northern Iraq does not irreparably sour its relations with the Iraqi federal government and push the latter into the lap of Tehran.

One must admit that the unqualified and slightly sectarian positions occasionally adopted by Turkish leaders have increased their country’s popularity in the Middle East, but they have also often undermined its ability to play the role of regional linchpin or mediator. There is no need for Turkey to underwrite the radical positions of an Israeli government that is isolated whatever happens, but the Turkish government would be well advised to keep the lines of communication open to Tel Aviv so as to have some say in attempts to resolve the Middle East conflict. Similarly, it should be wary of any attempt to organize the new regional balance of power along sectarian lines, playing off a “Sunni bloc” against a largely imaginary “Shiite arc”. In the Balkans, Turkey has managed to ward off nationalist and religious sirens, stick to its position of arbiter, and play an important role in safeguarding the peninsula’s fragile stability. It would be well advised to keep this experience in mind.

Last but not least, regarding its candidacy for EU membership, the Turkish government must ensure that its domestic policies serve its foreign policy interests. Reviving measures aimed at improving democracy, strengthening the rule of law, resolving the Kurdish question, and breaking the remaining taboos in the country’s official history might not be enough to see accession through to its desired outcome because that outcome also depends on the EU’s member states, but it can only be good for the country and its people. ♦

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1. A longer, academic version of this paper will be published in the *Revista Lusitana* (University of Lisbon, Portugal), Series 1, N° 8, 2013.

2. On this issue cf. “Turkey: What Axis Shift?”, *Le Monde diplomatique*, July 2010 (<http://mondediplo.com/blogs/turkey-what-axis-shift>); Süleyman Özeren, “Axis and Turkey, what should change?” *USAK*, June 17, 2010 (<http://www.usak.org.tr/EN/makale.asp?id=1537>).

3. This former Professor of International Relations was the Prime Minister’s foreign policy adviser.

4. On changes in Turkish foreign policy during this peri-

od cf. Jean Marcou, “2010: le bilan 2010 de la politique étrangère turque”, *Blog de l’OVIPOT*, 28 February 2011 (online at <http://ovipot.hypotheses.org/14>).

5. “One minute!” is the name given to Recept Tayyip Erdoğan’s fierce retort at the Israeli president Shimon Peres at the Davos World Economic Forum.

6. On 31 May 2010 Israeli marine commandos inspected the *Mavi Marmara*, a ship that had been chartered by the Turkish Islamic aid agency IHH and was heading for the Gaza Strip. The operation cost nine Turkish lives.

7. On this subject cf. Barisch Katinka: *Can Turkey combine*



*EU accession and regional leadership?* Centre for European Reform, UK, 2010.

8. Mensur Akgün, Sabiha Senyücel Gündoğar, Jonathan Levack, Gökçe Perçinoğlu, *The Perception of Turkey in the Middle East 2010*, Istanbul, TESEV Foreign Policy Program, February 2, 2011.

9. On the debate about the “Turkish model” cf. Jean Marcou: “Le modèle turc controversé de l’AKP” in *Moyen-Orient*, N° 13, January-March 2012, pp. 38-43.

10. Cf. AFP news wire by Michel Sailhan: “Turkey can be ‘inspiration’ for Arabs: Erdoğan”, February 24, 2011.

11. Marc Semo, “L’affaire libyenne ou les contradictions de la diplomatie turque” in Dorothee Schmid,

*La Turquie au Moyen-Orient: le retour d’une puissance régionale*, Paris, IFRI-CNRS Editions, 2011.

12. Cf. Jean Marcou, “Les relations turco-syriennes: de l’embellie à la descente aux enfers”, *Les Cahiers de l’Orient*, Autumn 2012, N° 107.

13. European Commission, *Turkey 2012 Progress Report*

14. Constitutional Council decision 2012-647-DC, February 28, 2012.

15. During the primaries in the lead-up to the 2007 French presidential election, Laurent Fabius had nonetheless been the only one of the three Socialist candidates to express his opposition to Turkey’s joining the EU.

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