

Turkey's Policy towards the Middle East and North Africa after the Arab Spring

by Mesut Özcan

This policy brief evaluates Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East and North Africa in the wake of recent revolutionary events in the region. The brief places Turkey's reaction to the Arab Spring within the broader trends in international politics as well as the regional geopolitical trends. It analyzes the manner in which Turkey approached the Arab Spring and how its policies have affected Ankara's position, both domestically and in the region. After reviewing the transformations in Turkey's relations with several of its neighbors during that process, the brief also critically examines the criticisms raised against Turkey's policy as well as the opportunities and risks in the region. The brief argues that after facing political difficulties and suffering economic losses during the transition period, Ankara is now increasingly keen to develop friendly diplomatic and economic relations with new administrations in these countries.

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Beginning at the end of 2010, the transformation of the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA) has replaced the erstwhile political structures which were remnants of the Cold War era, with more representative administrations. The process of transformation, in many respects, is similar to the developments in Eastern Europe during the early-1990s, and has forced both regional and global actors to reorganize policies. Moreover, the ongoing instability continues to impact Turkey's foreign policy in fundamental ways. In particular, the ongoing crisis in Syria has triggered a close and detailed reexamination of Turkey's MENA policy.

Global and Regional Conditions

The global economic crisis that began in 2008 was among the main triggers of the Arab Spring. Economic hardships in Europe had political and socio-economic repercussions for MENA countries in several ways: shrinking exports to European markets, negative effects on tourism, contraction of available credit facilities, and the rapid fall in remittances from Europe-based Arab expatriates. Moreover, these new conditions contributed towards Arab societies questioning the legitimacy of the authoritarian regimes ruling them for decades.

Unlike the case of Eastern Europe during the 1990s, both the US and Europe were preoccupied with domestic economic challenges that inhibited their ability to lead reconstruction efforts following the Arab Spring. At the time,

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crisis ridden countries in Eastern Europe were offered membership by the EU whereas the US offered security guarantees through the expansion of NATO. Political leaders, both in the EU and the US, took courageous decisions to overcome political and economic difficulties and prevented the spread of conflict. On this occasion, however, neither the EU nor the US appear to have the ability or desire to pursue a similar role in the Arab Spring area.

At the same time, there were global level factors maintaining the differences between the 1990s and post-2011 events. In particular, the transition of economic power from the axis of the US and Europe to Asia, Russia’s re-emergence as an important actor (mainly due to natural resource endowments) and the relative neglect of normative factors like democracy, freedoms and human rights in the foreign policies of these countries were responsible for variance in policy responses from the West. Therefore, regional players such as Turkey became pro-active in international politics. The limited political, economic and military capacities of these new actors for orchestrating transformative process have caused the prolongation of government transition in the region.

The strategies of prominent global economic and UN-system powers were developed such that they relied on regional players in their calculations. At the same time, these powers deliberately delayed some decisions at the global level, mainly to underscore and maintain their relevance in the contemporary world order. The commonly shared concerns of countries like the US, Russia, China and EU members towards an increasingly central role of the Muslim Brotherhood, which is now becoming an influential social and political actor in the region, discouraged these countries from actively supporting the transformation processes. Due to a combination of factors including domestic economic challenges, the 2012 U.S. Presidential elections, negative legacy of the Iraq invasion, and the rise of actors like Muslim Brotherhood following revolutions, the US appeared to avoid taking a leading role in the region. Instead, the US pursued a policy of supporting certain countries which in their view could potentially be cooperative allies in the future. On the other hand, Russia pursued a policy of gaining a political role congruent to its recent economic rise. In order to demonstrate its ability to be a game changer in global politics, Russia used its position in the UN system and benefitted from the conflicts in the region for its arms industry. China tried to protect its economic interests and consistently stated that humanitarian interventions to stop conflicts in different countries would violate the principle of non-intervention in the domestic affairs of countries.

Turkish Policy

In the pre Arab Spring period, Turkey pursued a policy of political, economic and cultural engagement throughout the region. Turkey itself underwent a

political and economic transformation during the last decade; therefore the political leadership and prominent segments of Turkish society viewed demands for change in their neighborhood as generally positive developments. Consequently, Turkey attempted to side with demands for change, which in some cases came at the expense of current political interests. On the other hand, there were elements in Turkey which interpreted these developments as outcomes of long-standing plans of the US and its regional ally Israel.

Although Turkish policymakers sided with the forces of change, arguing that this should have occurred sooner, they continued to adjust policies on a case-to-case basis. Broadly speaking however, it can be argued that Turkish political and economic relations are flourishing (or expected to flourish) with the countries that have undergone regime changes such as Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Yemen. In countries currently undergoing transition and armed conflict including Syria, however, political and economic relations are worse than pre-2010 levels. In this context, after regime changes, new political and economic opportunities arise for Turkey. Because of resistance of some actors against the change, there is a danger of widespread conflict in the region, which also poses risks to Turkey. Hence Turkish policymakers are concerned that the armed conflict in Syria signals the possibility of a dangerous scenario whereby growing sectarian conflict undermines regional stability. Such an atmosphere will negatively affect Turkish efforts of engagement with every actor in the region established in the last decade. Therefore, Turkey is working to prevent any sectarian tension in the region.

After experiencing several political and economic crises in the 1990s, especially the economic crisis of 2001, Turkey entered into a new era of political and economic environment following the general elections in 2002. During this period, Turkey developed deeper ties with the MENA countries. Besides enhancing its influence, Turkey's increasingly independent policies placed it under the spotlight of neighboring countries, often causing unfavorable assessments such as the 'shift of axis' and 'neo-Ottomanism.' It is obvious that some actors in the region are unhappy with the proactive Turkish posturing. In fact, it can be argued that there are efforts underway to counter-balance against Turkey's rising activism.

In recent months, the Syrian revolution has been at the center of the discussions on Turkish foreign policy. Sweeping change in the region brought several opportunities and challenges for Turkey, while the armed conflict in Syria (which has transformed into a civil war) created some difficulties for Turkey's regional policy. The crisis in Syria not only ended Turkey's post-2000 policy paradigm with that country but also affected its relations with other countries in the region. A new page was opened in Turkish-Syrian relations after the death of President Hafez Assad in 2000, hence from that time until the Arab Spring both countries took major steps towards rapprochement. During this period, Turkey and Syria enjoyed the

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closest relations in recent memory in the political, economic and societal realms. For this reason, the delay of the Syrian regime in responding to reform demands and resorting to force to crush opposition created serious difficulties for Turkey's policy in the region. At the beginning of the conflict, the Al-Assad regime seemed open to potential reforms. However, promised reforms never materialized and the regime resorted to violently responding to dissent. This led Turkey to change its attitude towards Syria; thus relations between the two countries became tense and peaked following the shooting down of a Turkish jet and shelling of Turkish territories in the border region. Now that clashes in Syria have escalated to the level of civil war, the situation has created tremendous security-related, political and socioeconomic difficulties for Ankara.

On the other hand, differences between Turkey and Iran in terms of their responses to the reform demands in Syria have led to a cooling of bilateral relations. Some problems have emerged between Turkey and Iran due to differences in approaches towards Syria, accompanied by other bilateral issues. Some Iranian officials, who see survival of the Syrian regime as a matter of life or death for themselves, have criticized Turkey's policy towards Syria. While Turkey supported forces of change in Syria, Iran employed every measure for the survival of the incumbent regime in Damascus. In the last two years, there have also been problems in Turkish-Iraqi relations because of differences regarding Syria, the political instability in Iraq, the Hashimi issue and the nature of relations between Turkey and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq. Although Turkey's relations with the Kurdish region continued to flourish, differences with the central government and Prime Minister Maliki negatively affected Turkish-Iraqi relations. The worsening of political relations created obstacles for Turkish companies operating in Iraq, whereas the refusal to allow Turkey's Minister of Energy to land his private jet in Erbil was another sign of further tensions.

Although Kurdish authorities are ready to cooperate with Turkey in dealing with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the continuation of terrorist activities emanating from this region have created a trust-deficit. Apart from this, the developments taking place in Syria and the activities of Syrian Kurds are also important factors that are affecting Turkey's relations with Iraqi Kurds. Turkey made it clear to Masud Barzani that Ankara is against the division of Syria and will not allow the emergence of a separate Kurdish entity within Syria with the support of the KRG or the use of parts of Syria by the PKK and its affiliates against Turkey.

The differences between the Iraqi central government and the KRG about the status of Kirkuk and disputed regions at the end of 2012 created concerns for Turkey. Despite flourishing political and economic relations between Turkey and the KRG, Ankara's sensitivity towards the Turcomans' presence in Kirkuk, the danger of repercussions of tension between the

KRG and Iraq's central government and potential regional implications of such a conflict have continued to concern Turkey.

Turkey's relations with Russia are also affected by the developments after the Arab Spring because of diverging views between the two sides. The difference in attitudes towards the Syrian case led to the emergence of schism in regional and global politics. Although the developments in the region were products of the internal dynamics of several countries which Turkey has no part in, the instability and tension in the region created difficulties for Turkey in its Middle East policy. As a result, Ankara is facing criticism precisely due to these difficulties.

From Turkey's perspective, the unfolding regional events following the Arab Spring are the materialization of change in a rapid manner. Turkey in fact aimed to contribute towards such a change in a gradual manner during the last decade. One of the main pillars of Turkey's recent engagement with the Middle East was to gradually transform the region through close political, economic and cultural relations. Therefore, the developments during the last two years, i.e. the fall of the erstwhile political structures, can be interpreted as positive developments from Turkey's perspective. However, the instability and loss of lives during the transformation process emerge as the negative aspects of these developments. Similarly, damages to political and economic investments, as in the case of Syria, are other negative outcomes of these revolutions.

Arab Spring: Benefits and Losses for Turkey

Let us now evaluate the impact of recent changes in the MENA region from the perspective of Turkish policymakers. First, it is often said that this process marks the normalization of history. At the same time, since the demands of the people are seen as genuine and organic, it would be unthinkable for Turkey not to support these demands. Although responding positively to these demands has created problems for Turkey's current political and economic interests, the government has maintained its position due to ethical considerations as well as keeping in view the long-term returns. Minister of Foreign Affairs Davutoğlu argued that the transformation in the MENA region is similar to the transformation in Eastern Europe after the end of the Cold War. It follows that in order to enable smooth transition processes support of regional actors and other players is a must.

Besides employing its own capacity, Turkey has also tried to activate regional and international organizations in managing the transition processes in the region. Securing participation of regional and international actors is in line with the traditional pillars of Turkish foreign policy, but this also helps to provide Turkey with alternatives to address challenges beyond its capacity. It is unthinkable to expect one actor to shape all of the transfor-

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mation processes that are engulfing the entire region, especially since they contain significant political and economic implications. Since the effects of change in the region have ramifications for other regions as well, we see that several actors are trying to shape the direction of the transformation in the Middle East.

As has been previously pointed out, Turkey's relations have flourished with countries that experienced successful changes of regimes. After siding with forces of change, Turkish policymakers began sharing their experiences and capacities in the functioning of democratic processes. Turkey aimed to contribute to the rehabilitation and restructuring of state institutions, hence its support was not limited to financial assistance, but included technical assistance as well as educational support and sharing of experience. Turkey also provided cheap credit to Tunisia and Egypt to enable these countries to meet their pressing economic challenges. Likewise, Turkey's financial support to Libya during the process of transition was later much appreciated by the Libyan leadership.

We can thus argue that Turkey secured close political and economic relations with the new regimes in these countries, thereby securing beneficial economic relationships. Another contribution of Turkey was its efforts aimed at reconciliation between different groups in these countries. Moreover, the formation of High Level Strategic Cooperation Council meetings with Egypt, reciprocal high level visits between Turkey and Tunisia, and visits to Yemen are examples of political contacts with the new administrations. Turkish officials' earlier acquaintances with some of the new political figures in these countries made the process of establishing political contacts with them in the new era easier.

Points of Criticism against Turkey's Arab Spring Policy

The following are key criticisms levied against Turkey's Arab Spring policy: first, the relations that Turkey had developed over previous years were damaged; second, although Turkey aimed to support democratic demands, it maintained friendly ties with undemocratic countries in other cases; third, it was overly active in the case of Syria in support of change because policymakers could not foresee the transition process lasting beyond two years. Similarly, Turkey's policy of siding with the people demanding change affected its relations with some regional actors like Iran, which perceive the regional change against its national interests. Developments in the Middle East led to an increase in sectarian tensions in the region, which had strong repercussions, posing further policy challenges to Turkey.

When we analyze these criticisms, we see that there were limited criticisms in the examples of Tunisia and Egypt since transition processes were relatively smooth. In the cases of Libya, Yemen and Syria transition

has been difficult and violent, with greater Turkish political and economic interests being put at stake. In each of these cases, Turkey aimed to mediate to enable smoother transitions while trying to protect the security of its citizens and economic interests in the country. These efforts delayed some critical decision making within the Turkish government and as a result of these delays, some segments within Turkish society criticized the government for being too slow to break with former regimes. Conversely, some people argued that Turkey had lost political and economic investments in a very short time, investments which had taken years to build.

The developments in Syria created difficult choices for the Turkish government. Besides the political and economic burdens of hosting a huge number of refugees from Syria, political and economic investments in Syria made in previous years were lost. The delays in the transition and instability in the neighborhood provided ground for criticisms against the Turkish government. The criticisms in particular concentrated on issues such as: not foreseeing the ability of the regime to remain in power, pursuing overly ambitious strategic ambitions and finally, intervening to trigger regime change. These criticisms were also fuelled by the militant activities against Turkey which were enabled due to a lack of authority and stability in Syria.

In response to the criticisms that Turkey's foreign policy principle of 'zero problems with neighbors' had come to an end, Turkish government officials stressed that this principle does not categorically mean that Turkey will have 'zero problems' with its neighbors irrespective of what is happening at the time in these countries. Moreover, Turkish leaders emphasize that they are striving to achieve 'zero problems' with the people in these countries, not necessarily with their rulers. The logic behind this principle is to transform the misconceptions that Turkey's problems with its neighbors are impossible to overcome. The achievements in economic and political terms with several neighbors prove that Turkey is reaching its overall objectives. In order to live with its neighbors Turkey must currently prioritize security issues in its foreign policy. However, at the same time, the 'zero problems' principle is not the sole driver of Turkish foreign policy, but rather is one principle set among others such as for example the principle of 'balance between freedoms and security'.

It would be unthinkable for Turkey to remain a silent spectator when decades' old political structures in its neighborhood are crumbling. Foreign policy challenges in the transition period after the Arab Spring are not easy to overcome. Despite the difficulties in the short run, positive outcomes of Turkey's current policy can be seen in the relationship of Turkey with the new regimes and its involvement in regional issues such as Palestine. Now, after the changes in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, Turkey has established better relations with these countries and trade levels with each one have reached pre-revolution figures.

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The Future of the Region

The future of Syria will not only impact Turkey, but many other countries around the world. It is obvious that the polarizing nature of the Syrian crisis negatively affected Turkey's role in the region. Nonetheless it must be acknowledged that the recent unforeseen chain of events which has precipitated drastic changes in the region is primarily responsible for spurring Turkey to overhaul its long standing relationships with regional actors. Turkey's response has not been the result of a deliberate shift of policy priorities. We can anticipate that there will be further changes in the region and that the ongoing transition will be long, requiring huge expenditures of effort and money. Alliances in the region are shifting along with the reshaping of long standing political structures. The search for balance in this environment may produce new equilibriums along the way.

Besides the regional transformation, one should also keep in mind the global transformations in the assessments of the future of the region. Although the US continues its dominant role in global affairs, it is in a slow decline in political, economic and military terms. The difficulty for European countries to devise policies against economic crisis weakens the role of the old continent on a global stage. Although Asian economies are on the rise, these countries neither pay attention to the ethical issues like human rights in their foreign policy, nor have the ability to shape political trends in global terms.

The violence in Syria could spill over into neighboring countries and its reverberations could set off a region-wide conflict. Such a conflict could emerge through deliberate action provoked by the regime in Syria or otherwise as a result of ethnic and sectarian differences in the country. As events demonstrated in the final months of 2012, an issue which is largely independent of Syria, the ongoing Palestinian crisis, could potentially escalate again and set off a different region wide conflict. On top of this, separately, regional and international actors could create *fait accomplis* in the region dependent on their own preferred outcomes regarding transition in the region.

In addition to the developments in Palestine, another risk area that may drag the region into serious conflict is Iran's nuclear program. Iranian policymakers had anticipated that following the Arab Spring and the removal of leaders like Mubarak, Gaddafi and Bin Ali, it would have greater maneuvering ability in terms of establishing renewed ties with regional countries. However from Tehran's perspective, there remain several challenges before such objectives can be achieved. The tightening of sanctions against Iran by the U.S. and the EU, coupled with recent developments in Syria, created serious difficulties for Tehran in its regional policies. This may lead to further tensions not only in the central part of the Middle East but also in the Gulf.

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Under these conditions, Turkey must maintain its relations with every actor to the extent possible. Turkey must reactivate regional and international platforms for finding solutions to regional problems and continue to support participation of other regional actors like Egypt in resolving these issues. Employing every possible resource in solving regional conflict, maintaining a conciliatory dialogue and cooperating with non-regional actors that are behaving constructively should be the guiding principles for Turkish foreign policy.

Recommended Reading

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