

Turkey and the Middle East: Between Euphoria and Sobriety

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In many ways, Turkey's activism in the Middle East reached a peak in 2010. The Gaza flotilla affair and the aftermath of Israel's takeover of the *Mavi Marmara* boosted Turkey's ranking in Arab public opinion, and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan became the most popular leader in the region.¹ Relations between Turkey and its close neighbors – Syria, Iran, and Iraq – continued to improve. Furthermore, Turkey pursued its efforts to serve as a mediator in the region, and although it did not succeed in brokering significant changes, it was seen as an important player that should be consulted. It appears, nevertheless, that the end of 2010 marked the curbing of Turkish activism in its present form. The wave of unrest in the Arab world that began in Tunisia in December 2010 and the subsequent lack of stability in the area will make it difficult for Turkey to pursue its prior courses. The counter reaction in the West to some of the developments in Turkish foreign policy compounds this difficulty.

The Challenge of the Arab Spring

At least in the short term, the upheavals in the Arab world challenge the Turkish vision of promoting stability for the sake of economic prosperity. The uprisings and their regional impact will necessarily bring about a period of reorganization, which by its nature will be a sensitive time that includes a greater chance of violence and is also liable to be accompanied by an economic slowdown. In a rare statement addressing the difficulties and not just the achievements of Turkish foreign policy, Turkish Foreign

Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu stated in May 2011 that Turkey feels the tension in its attempt to maintain good relations with the populations in neighboring states and with the regime leaders, and from the expectations this creates: that on the one hand, Turkey will aid the regimes with which it has good relations, and on the other, that it will be attentive to the feelings of the public in those states.²

It appears, then, that the vision of “a Middle East union” – a term that the Turks have avoided using, even though they have promoted ideas of this nature – has vanished for now. In recent years Turkey has tried to advance many economic initiatives that were not far from Shimon Peres’ vision of a new Middle East, although Turkey’s vision did not include Israel.³ There was a plan, for example, to expand the bilateral free trade agreements signed in recent years by Turkey with Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon, to a comprehensive agreement on the establishment of a free trade zone among the four states. As part of the warming of relations, Turkey even signed agreements with Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon eliminating the requirement for transit visas between the countries, and there was also a plan to allow free passage at the borders for citizens of these countries, as occurs today in the European Union.

Overall, the economic dimension is a significant explanation for many developments in Turkish foreign policy in recent years, including the “rediscovery” of the Middle East. The Turkish economy, which is the seventeenth largest economy in the world, aspires to be the tenth largest economy by 2023, the one hundredth anniversary of the Turkish republic. Turkey’s size and impressive growth rate (in 2010, the growth rate in Turkey was 8.9 percent, the second highest rate among the G-20 nations after China)⁴ dictate both the increasing need for energy resources that will continue to make this growth rate possible, and the need for development and identification of new export markets.

The expansion of Turkish economic interests in the Middle East has motivated Turkey to become more politically involved in the region, and has lent Turkey greater influence. However, these interests also make it difficult for Turkey to take a position regarding some of the conflicts in the region, and in fact make it an actor that to a large extent supports continuation of the status quo.⁵ This trend was especially conspicuous in

the formulation of Turkish policy on events in Libya and Syria. Turkey has many economic interests in Libya and signed contracts with the regime of Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi. For example, Turkish construction companies had extensive contracts in the country, and some 25,000 Turkish citizens working in Libya were evacuated by Turkey early in the riots. These economic interests help explain why at the beginning of the uprising in Libya, Turkey was vehemently opposed to international involvement and why it took nearly three months for Erdoğan to call publicly for Qaddafi's ouster.

From Turkey's point of view, the events in Syria are even more challenging. In many ways, Syria was the most prominent example of the "zero problem" policy that Turkey has tried to promote vis-à-vis its neighbors. The warming of relations between the two was striking. Syria and Turkey were on the verge of war in 1998; by 2009 the two countries agreed on military cooperation, and in early 2011 Turkey even expressed willingness to train Syrian military forces.⁶ Turkey is also Syria's largest trade partner. When the riots erupted in Syria, Turkey called upon Bashar al-Asad to implement reforms, and emphasized that it had pressured the Syrian President to institute reforms long before the outbreak of the Arab spring. Erdoğan noted that in lengthy conversations with Asad he emphasized the need to annul the emergency laws in Syria, release political prisoners, change the system of government, and present a multi-party political system.⁷ Yet just as Turkish policy toward Libya has changed, so too has Turkey's approach to events in Syria. Since the beginning of the riots, when Erdoğan phoned Asad every day, there has been a significant change for the worse in relations, and Erdoğan has even called the Syrian army's actions "barbaric."⁸ Following the violent suppression in late July of the riots in Hama, in which dozens of people were killed, Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoğlu did not rule out Turkish military intervention in Syria and said, "One cannot remain indifferent when more than a hundred people are killed in one day."⁹

The existence of a joint border of more than 800 kilometers, as well as the Turkish fear that the wave of refugees from Syria will grow, has led to a cautious – though at times challenging – Turkish policy vis-à-vis Asad's regime. The cultivation of relations between Turkey and Syria in

recent years occurred, from Turkey's point of view, for strategic reasons, and therefore it was not necessarily dependent on the particular regime in Damascus. Nevertheless, problems that were seemingly resolved during the Turkish-Syrian honeymoon, such as the issue of control of Hatay province (Alexandretta),¹⁰ the issue of water allocation, and the actions of Kurdish separatists in the border region between the countries, are liable to reemerge if Bashar al-Asad falls. The fact that Syrian opposition figures were allowed to hold public conferences on Turkish territory indicates that there is a great deal of thought in Turkey about various scenarios concerning the future of Syria.

In general, Turkish foreign policy in recent years has been somewhat ambivalent on whether Turkey should work to promote liberalization and advance processes of democratization in other countries. On the one hand, for example, Turkey has stressed that the 2006 elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council, in which Hamas won a majority, were democratic elections whose results should be honored. On the other hand, Turkey has improved its relations with Iran and with Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir, in spite of widespread violations of human rights in these states. Turkey's hope, or at least the hope of the Turkish Foreign Minister, was that it could "instruct" other countries in slow and gradual processes of democratization.

The Arab spring does not conform to this model, since the protesters in the various Arab countries were not willing to accept gradual changes, instead demanding significant immediate reforms. Therefore, Turkey was required to take unequivocal stands for or against a particular government. In the case of Egypt, this was less problematic because relations under Husni Mubarak were already tense between Ankara and Cairo, but in the case of Libya, Syria, and Iran, it became clear that for Turkey the situation was more complicated. Turkey was uncomfortable with the fact that during the visit by Turkish President Abdullah Gül in Tehran in February 2010, demonstrations by regime opponents in Iran were suppressed. In the course of a joint press conference with Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Gül could only speak generally and say that the regime should be attentive to the desires of the people.¹¹

It appears that Ankara's ambivalence on the Arab spring may taint Turkey's image in Arab public opinion. This negative tendency exists, although there is discussion in many places on whether the "Turkish model," which combines democracy and Islam, could be implemented in other states in the region – which theoretically could enhance Turkey's image significantly.

Domestic Political Developments

Turkey's ambivalence on promoting processes of liberalization in other countries in part stems from the ambivalence of the Justice and Development Party toward processes of liberalization within Turkey. There have been many liberal reforms in Turkey since the party rose to power, but there is growing criticism regarding limitations on freedom of speech in Turkey. The arrest of nine journalists and writers in March 2011 on suspicion of their being connected to Ergenekon, a right wing nationalist secret organization that allegedly planned assassinations and terrorist attacks in Turkey in order to cause instability and induce the overthrow of the Justice and Development Party, aroused much resentment. The existence of such a plot against the government is itself doubtful, and the arrest of journalists and writers was considered an extreme step. Similarly, the liberal reforms initiated and promoted by the Justice and Development Party were seen by many of the party's critics as merely a tool to promote the party's religious agenda. Erdoğan, in spite of the many reforms that he has encouraged, is even seen as a person with a tendency toward authoritarianism.

In the parliamentary elections of June 2011, the Justice and Development Party scored an impressive victory, which allowed it once again to form a government without coalition partners. In comparison to the previous elections, the percentage of voters for the Justice and Development Party grew slightly (from nearly 47 percent in the 2007 elections, to almost 50 percent in the 2011 elections), the percentage of voters for the main opposition party, the Republican People's Party, also grew (from almost 21 percent to 26 percent), and the percentage of voters for the second largest opposition party, the Nationalist Movement Party, declined slightly (from some 14 percent to 13 percent), but it succeeded in passing Turkey's high election threshold (10 percent). The independent candidates (the Kurdish

representatives) were also able to increase their power (from some 5 percent to almost 7 percent).¹²

In spite of the increase in the percentage of votes for the Justice and Development Party, the number of seats it won in the parliament decreased (from 331 seats out of 550 in the 2007 elections, to 326 seats¹³ in the current elections), due to Turkey's electoral system. The reduction in the number of Justice and Development Party seats may make it difficult for Erdoğan to realize his intention to pass a new constitution in parliament, and in particular, may adversely affect his goal of turning the parliamentary regime in Turkey into a presidential regime. This change is needed given Erdoğan's promise not to run again in parliamentary elections, and the fact that there is no figure in his party who comes close to his level of popularity.

The course charted by Erdoğan in recent years gained additional weight with the announcement on July 29, 2011 by the leading commanders of the Turkish military (the Chief of Staff and the top commanders of the land forces, navy, and air force) of their early retirement. In effect, this development sealed the neutralization of the Turkish military, long considered the protector of secularism in Turkey, as a significant political actor, which lies at the heart of the silent revolution underway in Turkey since the rise to power of the Justice and Development Party in late 2002. Its success at the polls and the arrests of scores of officers in recent years on charges of anti-government activity have eroded the status of the military.

It is still difficult to assess whether the vote of confidence recorded in the June 2011 elections, and the further weakening of the status of the Turkish military as a domestic political actor, will encourage the Justice and Development Party to adopt an uncompromising policy, or whether it will actually lead it to promote significant reforms that Turkey requires such as, for example, those related to the Kurdish minority. Nevertheless, Erdoğan's return in April 2011 to the traditional Turkish rhetoric, which says that there is no Kurdish problem, but only problems of specific Kurdish citizens, does not bode well.¹⁴ True, this statement can be seen as electioneering and as part of an unsuccessful attempt to prevent the Nationalist Movement Party from passing the election threshold, but the use of such rhetoric does not prepare people for the compromises required

to solve this problem. Furthermore, for some time the problems with the Kurdish minority have not been limited to the areas in southeast Turkey. As a result of internal migration in Turkey, Istanbul is today the city with the largest concentration of Kurds in the world. Thus, if there is a renewed outbreak of Kurdish violence on a wide scale, it will have a greater impact throughout Turkey than in the past. In this respect, a remark in May 2011 by one of the senior Kurdish representatives – that she expects bad tidings – was considered worrisome.¹⁵ Furthermore, a renewed outbreak of violence on a wide scale is liable to spill over into neighboring states, which also have a Kurdish minority, and may even complicate US intentions to withdraw from Iraq in 2011.

Relations with the West and with the United States

Beyond the ramifications of the Arab spring for Turkish foreign policy, the West's counter response to what was seen as a change in Turkey's orientation has had an impact. Repeated claims by senior Turkish officials that no such change has taken place have been met by the West with much skepticism.¹⁶ Several steps taken by Turkey in the first half of 2011 indicate that it is making attempts to backtrack from its image of a country "moving to the east." The fact that in spite of its initial objections Turkey did not ultimately block NATO's intentions to take command of the international intervention force in Libya in March 2011, and that Turkey itself is taking part in this intervention demonstrate Turkey's continued loyalty to NATO. The increased cooperation between the United States and Turkey against the background of the upheaval in the Arab world, which is manifested, *inter alia*, in frequent telephone contact between senior government officials in Turkey and the United States, also demonstrates that Turkey is far from turning its back on the West. In addition, it was reported that the head of the CIA visited Turkey secretly to discuss regional developments, and in particular, events in Syria.¹⁷ The forced landing on Turkish territory in March 2011 of two Iranian cargo planes on their way to Syria, and the confiscation of the cargo of one of them, was also seen in the West as a favorable development.¹⁸

Moreover, Turkey responded positively to the killing of al-Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden by the Americans. President Gül hailed the death of

Bin Laden, stating that “the most dangerous and sophisticated terrorist organization leader in the world being caught in this way should be a lesson to everyone.”¹⁹ As such, Turkey reiterated its commitment to the war on terror and restated that its own challenge of terrorist activities on its territory is no different from the worldwide struggle against terrorism. This rhetoric is also in tune with Turkish policies from the period preceding the Justice and Development Party’s rise to power, when this was one of the strong bases for cooperation between Turkey and the West. In addition, the end of Turkey’s term as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council has already reduced some of the tensions between Turkey and the West, which surfaced after several of Turkey’s controversial votes in the Security Council.

The changes in the Arab world and the improvement in Turkey’s relations with the West are not isolated developments. In spite of the shifts in Turkey’s foreign policy in recent years, in the wake of the uprisings in the Arab world Turkey today is the country the Americans depend on in the region. This does not necessarily mean that the current disputes between Turkey and the United States are less serious than they were in recent years, rather that the other allies of the United States in the Middle East have been significantly weakened and have undergone processes that have turned them into less reliable allies from the American point of view. Thus, in light of the present American weakness and the weakness in the “moderate” Arab world, an “independent” partner like Turkey is in fact the best option for the United States.

Relations with Israel

The improvement in Turkey’s relations with the West, and in particular with the United States, may also contribute to improved relations between Turkey and Israel, but it cannot serve as a catalyst in and of itself. Relations between Israel and Turkey remain at a low point. Although contrary to fears to this effect Turkey did not break off diplomatic relations with Israel, today there is no Turkish ambassador in Israel, and it has been claimed that Israel is concerned that Turkey will not approve a replacement for Gabi Levy, Israel’s ambassador to Turkey, once he completes his term.²⁰

There is still a large question mark over the future of relations in the wake of the May 2010 flotilla episode and the difficulty in reaching a compromise on this issue. Although there were a number of attempts to hold reconciliation talks, in which Israel expressed its willingness to offer a limited apology that focused on operational failures and to compensate the families of those killed through a fund set up for this purpose, the many delays in the publication of the report of the commission of inquiry appointed by the UN Secretary General and headed by New Zealand's former Prime Minister Geoffrey Palmer also show the difficulty in reaching a compromise. Demonstrations to mark the anniversary of the event will continue to cast a shadow over relations between the states in the future as well. Still, the announcement by the Turkish aid organization IHH that the *Mavi Marmara* would not sail in the June 2011 flotilla because of "technical constraints," and that they would not send another boat as planned, was a significant contribution to the failure of the second flotilla.²¹ The Turkish government has claimed that it does not have the ability to get involved in stopping the flotilla to Gaza because it is a non-governmental initiative. However, the Turkish Foreign Minister stated in early June that it is worth waiting to see how the opening of the Rafah border crossing and the establishment of a unity government with Fatah and Hamas affects the situation in Gaza before another flotilla departs.²²

In spite of the deterioration in relations, trade between the states has almost returned to its 2008 level, and the decline that occurred in 2009 is mainly attributed to the world economic crisis.²³ In the first quarter of 2011, Turkey was Israel's third largest export market (in contrast to the first quarter of 2010, when it was the ninth largest export market).²⁴ Among the few other encouraging signs are the aid the Turks provided to Israel during the fire in the Carmel in December 2010, and the Turkish Foreign Ministry's condemnation of the terrorist attack in Itamar and the device that caused an explosion on a bus in Jerusalem in March 2011. After the Turkish elections in June 2011, Prime Minister Netanyahu commented on relations with Turkey: "We do not want a tense relationship. We want to improve those relations."²⁵

As was the case during most previous periods, an improvement in relations between Israel and Turkey is also dependent on Israel's relations

with the Palestinians and with neighboring countries. In an op-ed article in the *New York Times*, President Gül claimed that achieving a breakthrough in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process is critical in determining whether the current wave of unrest in the Arab world will lead to more democracy and peace or to the establishment of tyrannical regimes and conflict.²⁶ If this is the case, progress in the peace process would lead to a certain thawing in Turkish-Israeli relations, while a continued stalemate and an outbreak of violence would elicit Turkish sentiments against Israel. Turkey has also announced that it will vote for recognition of a Palestinian state in the UN General Assembly in September 2011.

Turkey greeted the Hamas and Fatah reconciliation agreement in April 2011 with much enthusiasm, and the Turkish Foreign Minister was among those present at the signing ceremony in Cairo. To the Turks, the reconciliation agreement constitutes proof that it is not possible to ignore Hamas in the diplomatic process, as Israel is demanding. The Turkish Foreign Minister claimed that in light of Israel's past statements to the effect that as long as the Palestinians are divided it has no one with whom to conduct negotiations, everyone should welcome the reconciliation agreement between Hamas and Fatah.²⁷ However, Turkey is clearly aware that in spite of Egypt's current weakness, it is Cairo that brokered the agreement, thereby damaging the image Turkey has tried to establish as the main mediator in the region.

Conclusion

If the revolutionary momentum in the Arab world continues, the dramatic changes taking place in the region will make it difficult for Turkey to progress in the direction it hoped to pursue in the past. Therefore, a period in which Turkey reassesses its policy toward the Middle East is likely. In spite of the fact that an active foreign policy has characterized the Justice and Development Party's tenure, Turkey will likely step back, at least partially, from its high level of involvement in the Middle East. Although on the face of it the Arab spring does not make Turkey's mediation efforts superfluous, in the long run, if Egypt is able to recover, the competition for the role of influential player in the Arab world will be tougher, and this too may be an obstacle to continued Turkish involvement.

Furthermore, the problems that the Turks have already encountered in their previous mediation attempts will recur: the lack of resources necessary for the large number of mediation initiatives the Foreign Minister wishes to promote; the fact that the Turks' heavy involvement arouses suspicion among some in the Middle East, as if this were a return of the Ottoman Empire; and also, Turkey's unresolved problems, which not only complicate its own situation but also raise doubts over Turkey's ability to mediate. Moreover, the Turkish leadership has in the past thrown its weight behind some of the mediation attempts, and therefore, mediation failures were sometimes perceived as especially painful. From these points of view, and in light of the difficulties Turkey has faced in the past and the challenges it currently faces, it appears that for now, Turkey will approach its Middle East policy with greater caution.

Notes

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- 10 Although it appears that this issue was resolved in the course of the signing of the free trade agreement between Syria and Turkey in 2004, which included recognition of the existing border between them and de facto, Turkish control of Alexandretta (Hatay), the fact that this recognition was done only implicitly in the framework of the agreement is liable to lead to a Syrian grievance in the future. Yoav Stern, "The Small Difference between Hatay and the Golan," *Haaretz*, January 9, 2005, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/hasite/objects/pages/PrintArticle.jhtml?itemNo=524665>.
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