

The Evolution of Turkish Foreign Policy in the Middle East

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TESEV
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In a recent poll conducted by University of Maryland professor Shibley Telhami, Egyptian voters on the eve of their presidential elections were asked what role Islam should play in the Egyptian political system. Respondents were given six models - Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, Tunisia, Malaysia and Morocco - to choose from. 54 percent chose Turkey followed by Saudi Arabia with 32 percent.¹

These results, along with the polling done by TESEV² in a number of Middle Eastern countries, show that the new Turkey of the Justice and Development Party, AKP, has caught the imagination of many in the region. It is not just the way the AKP and its leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's approach to Islam and attempts at marrying religion with politics that has attracted attention. Turkey's dramatic distancing from Israel, especially the harsh rhetoric employed by Ankara against Tel Aviv, and the perception of Turkish economic prosperity have also contributed to the rising popularity of Turkey.

Whereas many in the Arab world - save for the oil exporting countries - appeared stuck in an economic and political morass, Turkey under the AKP has moved ahead. It became assertive in international politics, engaged with the

Middle East, a region it had hitherto ignored, and its entrepreneurs began to show up everywhere. Gone were the images of a political system under military tutelage. Under the rubric of "zero problems with neighbours", Ankara established new sets of relationships with its neighbours, encouraging trade and tourism and much closer political cooperation. Turkey demonstrated that it could operate in both the East and West without sacrificing its national character and ambitions.

Turkish foreign policy has been an evolving one when it comes to the Middle East. First, despite the new interest in all of Turkey's neighbourhoods, Ankara's new foreign policy has been primarily about carving out a global role for itself. The AKP from the beginning set its sights on making Turkey a consequential, or in the parlance of the new leadership, a central power in global politics. As time went on and conditions changed Turkey also adjusted its policies, learning from its mistakes, abandoning policies when they no longer suited its goals or when these policies had achieved their goals.

Fundamentally, AKP foreign policy was about building on Turkey's existing alliance structures, namely NATO, the relationship with the European Union and new partners, primarily in Asia and in its neighbourhood, to construct a global role for itself. It was never about forsaking one for the other: in fact, the goal of a bigger international role could not be built without Turkey's two primary foundations

¹ Shibley Telhami, "What do Egyptians want?" *Politico*, May 21, 2012.

² Mensur Akgün and Sabiha Senyücel Gündoğar, "The Perception of Turkey in the Middle East 2011" *TESEV Foreign Policy Programme*, January 2012.

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of NATO and the EU because it is membership in one and candidacy to the other that makes it a potentially powerful and sought-after actor in the first place. Turkey's attachment to NATO and the importance it accords to this alliance was amply demonstrated during the June 2012 crisis over the downing of a Turkish fighter plane by Syria.

The "Arab Spring" was perhaps the single most important development that shook Turkish assumptions and forced it to change its calculations. However, there were other inflection points as well. A rough periodisation of Turkish foreign policy since the AKP assumed power, especially in regard to the Middle East, would reveal three distinct phases.

PHASES OF TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY

I. The Conciliator 2002-2007: Having won an overwhelming parliamentary majority with only 34 percent of the vote, the AKP was careful in its early years not to give its allies and its domestic critics cause for concern. It supported the passing of a resolution through the Turkish parliament allowing U.S. troops to pass through Turkish territory en route to Iraq (the resolution failed because of the inexperience parlayed by a party that had never been in power before) and in words and deeds gave a real push to EU accession-related reforms. In a dramatic turnabout, AKP leaders supported UN Secretary General Annan's plan for resolving the division of Cyprus. In the Middle East, Ankara used its connections to all sides of the Arab-Israeli conflict to help the peace process. The vacuum created by the Bush Administration's war in Iraq allowed the AKP to play host to Israeli-Syrian talks that proved to be moderately successful.

Turkey, in effect, tried to play the mediator or conciliator in many other disputes as well, including the Balkans and the Caucasus. Foreign policy became an instrument by which the AKP introduced itself to many in the world, especially in the West, that was suspicious of its roots - after all the AKP leadership had all been the students of the virulently anti-Western and anti-Semitic Islamic leader Necmettin Erbakan - to prove that it was a responsible actor. In turn, external sources of support were important to the AKP's ability to construct defences against the secular civilian-military establishment at home which saw in the party a formidable foe intent on transforming Turkey's secular order. Journalist İsmet Berkan has even argued that the acceptance of the Annan plan for Cyprus was, in part, instigated by AKP's fear of an impending military coup and the desire to prevent it by building a cooperative reputation for itself in the West.³

It is also during this phase that Turkey began to demonstrate its economic prowess. The Turkish economy began to take off and its exports, driven by a major restructuring of the economy from the early 1980s onwards, started to break all records. More importantly, the export drive as well as economic prosperity was no longer the product of one or two regions in Turkey but rather the result of a more national and inclusive effort. Provinces, which were on the Anatolian periphery, began to participate and even take the lead in new ventures in Africa and other parts of the world. The so-called "Anatolian tigers," medium-sized enterprises, founded by pious and conservative businessmen, would eventually become the backbone of the AKP coalition.

Turkish leaders explained their foreign policy objectives and successes as the amalgamation

3 İsmet Berkan, "Asker Bize İktidarı Verir Mi?" İstanbul: Everest Yayınları, 2011.

of a soft-power policy designed to win friends and influence by maximizing on Turkey's strategic position, its historical connections to its many diverse neighbourhoods, cultural links and economic wellbeing.

II. The Balancer 2007-2011: This second period is characterized by Turkey's gradual attempt at becoming a more forceful player in its immediate region and beyond. Its first and foremost attempt was to unilaterally balance Israel's power in the region. It provided critical support for Syria when that country came under severe pressure from the international community. Turkey also tried to act as a balancer among the different Iraqi factions. Weakened by two wars and a slew of economic problems, the United States retreated from its dominant position in the Middle East. Even if Americans did not believe it, the regional actors, at the very least, perceived the United States as a diminished superpower.

However, the critical impetus in the change in foreign policy did not come from abroad, although one can certainly argue that Israeli blunders contributed to the groundwork for this evolution. In fact, it was a turning point in domestic politics, specifically a clash between civilian and military authorities that proved decisive. The military establishment's overreach backfired and culminated in the AKP's astounding electoral victory in the 2007 elections. Faced with the prospect of the ascension of the AKP founder and then foreign minister Abdullah Gül to the presidency, the military brass panicked. It ineptly tried to warn first and then prevent Gül's selection. It issued a midnight memorandum on its internet site that provided Erdoğan and his lieutenants the opportunity to call the military's bluff. The government dissolved parliament and went for early elections where the contest was defined by the presidential selection question. The resounding AKP victory, the party dramatically

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increased its share of the vote to 47 percent, was a defeat for the civilian-military establishment. It was a major defining moment in civil-military relations in Turkey. From that point on, the AKP no longer feared the possibility of tanks rolling down the hill to assume power; the civilians had won and the long drawn out process of the soldiers returning to their barracks had started.

With the soldiers defeated, the AKP government felt stronger and its power consolidated both at home and internationally. It could initiate policies that had eluded it before. The most immediate of these was the rapprochement with the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq. The military and the previous president Necdet Sezer had effectively blocked any overtures to Iraqi Kurds fearing the contagion effect from northern Iraq unto Turkey's Kurds. AKP's rapprochement with Iraqi Kurds was intended, in turn, to enable a possible opening on its own domestic Kurdish population.

The military's defeat also meant that the AKP no longer had to worry about a possible collusion between the United States and Turkish officers to undermine its rule. Whether or not this was ever on the cards - it never was - the fact of the matter is that in Turkey the power and intentions of the United States have always been exaggerated. Hence, the fear of and uncertainty over the United States have always figured in the calculations of politicians.

The first casualty of the new self-confidence was Israel. After the Gaza operation, the Israelis found themselves at the receiving end of rising hostile rhetoric from Turkey. Erdoğan

confronted Israeli president Shimon Peres at Davos and walked off the stage in a move that captured the imagination of both Turks and the Arab street. The Davos incident reversed policy on Israel, a policy that in the earlier years of the AKP government had served as a litmus test of the new Turkish government's Western bona fides.

Israel's Gaza intervention had come on the heels of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert visit to Ankara. That Olmert would start major military operations against Gaza upon return both surprised and humiliated the AKP government. Relations with Israel would completely come off the handle with the 2010 Mavi Marmara incident when Israeli commandos raided a Turkish ship trying to break the Gaza blockade. While the whole endeavour was perceived to be a deliberate provocation by the Turks, the Israelis blundered when their raiding party was surprised and they used deadly force leading to the death of nine Turks. This solidified the Turkish position in the region as a countervailing force against Israel, a supporter of Arab causes and a rival. If the main beneficiaries were the Syrians and Lebanese, the Turkish stand undermined Mubarak and to a lesser extent the Palestinian Authority under Mahmoud Abbas who had developed a modus vivendi with Israel against Hamas. Hence Hamas was too a beneficiary. The defence of Hamas against both Israel and the West was one of the factors that catapulted Erdoğan to being the most admired statesman in the proverbial Arab street.

The confrontation with Israel also changed the U.S.-Turkish dynamic. Americans had taken great comfort from the close relationship its two most important regional allies had carved out from themselves. In American domestic politics, the American Jewish community had served as an important supporter of all things

Turkish. Successive Turkish governments had deliberately courted it to improve Ankara's clout in Washington as well as a counterweight to Greek and Armenian lobbies in Washington. While this had been a successful policy, Erdoğan and the AKP were never really comfortable with the perception that Turkey's importance in Washington was simply a function of its close relations with Israel and thus its dependence on the goodwill of the American Jewish community. In fact, the new leaders in Ankara perceived themselves as a far more critical ally in the region given Turkey's size, its alliance with the United States through NATO and economic and political and weight in its many neighbouring regions. The Israeli-Turkish rift allowed Turkey to rebalance its relations with Washington and eventually forced the Obama administration to effectively compartmentalize its relationships with both allies.

With both its rhetoric and actions, including with the eventual downgrading of relations with Israel, Turkey was projecting an image Arabs had not seen before: a state standing up to Israel. Moreover, Turkey was doing this from the vantage point of being a member of NATO. It is not just with Israel alone that Turkey tried to play the balancer: Turkey's defence of Iran's controversial nuclear programme was aimed at balancing off the United States and the West. In May 2010, Turkey together with Brazil fashioned a deal in Tehran that the United States perceived as undermining some of the gains it had achieved against Iran at the UN Security Council. While this caused a temporary and serious rift in U.S.-Turkish relations, Turkey's vote at the UN Security Council against its ally did not go unnoticed in the region.

III. The Would-be Regional Hegemon 2011: Turkey displayed some hesitation and uncertainty in the wake of the Arab Spring.

However, it would soon formulate a policy - or at least a wish for - designed to repackage and push itself as the region's new undisputed leader. Confident of its achievements at home and abroad, the AKP increasingly saw its own experience as representing an inspirational path for the region's new and struggling "democracies." It is its acknowledged critical and leadership role in Syria that provided Ankara with the self-assurance that culminated in Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's speech in the Turkish parliament when he affirmed that "Turkey would henceforth lead the movement for change in the Middle East. We will continue to be the leader of this wave. . . There is a new Middle East and we will be its owner, leader and servant. . . Irrespective what others say, the new order's leader and spokesperson will be Turkey."⁴

In 2011, the Arab Spring uprisings caught everyone by surprise. For Turkey, the Arab Spring initially represented a reversal of fortunes. The famed "zero problems with neighbours" had in fact been nothing more than "zero problems with the regimes." It had established cozy relationships with almost all the regional autocrats - save perhaps for Mubarak. Turkey, interested in maximizing commercial opportunities for its booming industrial economy, had understandably little choice but to cultivate the dictators. After all, to do business in these countries, one had to work with the regimes that directly or indirectly controlled access to local markets and business opportunities. The Turks had, therefore, become wedded to the existing power structure of the region. This did not mean that Ankara was popular among all elites: Saudi and Egyptian governing elites saw in Ankara an interloper.

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The collapse of the regime in Tunisia happened much too quickly for anyone to react; in Egypt, Erdoğan was quite content to see Mubarak depart. Egypt had not been supportive of Turkish attempts in Gaza. Erdoğan in fact was among the early ones to voice his wish that Mubarak abandon his power. It is when the troubles started in Libya that Ankara found itself at difficulty. Turkey had some 20-25,000 workers and \$15 billion in investments there. Libyan strongman Gaddafi and Erdoğan had established close relations. The collapse of the Libyan regime would have been a severe blow to Ankara and therefore it initially objected to NATO involvement in the Libyan civil war. Whereas in Egypt, Erdoğan had been at the forefront, in Libya, Turkey vacillated. This vacillation was not going to be without its costs. Libyans in Benghazi demonstrated against Turkey. Finally, with the writing on the wall that Gaddafi had lost all support at home with the great majority of the Libyan public having positioned itself against the regime, Ankara pivoted and supported regime change.

If Libya proved to be a challenge, Syria would turn out to be a nightmare. Libya was a lucrative market with large petrodollars to spend, but Syria had been the showcase of the "zero problems with neighbours policy." Relations with Syria had gone from enmity to a close embrace. Assad and Erdoğan had become family friends. Turkey and Syria had signed a number of agreements, including on free trade and abolishing visa requirements. Consultations between the two governments had become so extensive that the Turks spoke of "two peoples one government."

⁴ "Mecliste Gergin Suriye Oturumu," *Radikal*, April 26, 2012.

By the time the Syrian street exploded, however, the Turks had digested the lessons of Libya. The Arab Spring had unstoppable momentum; the yearning for change was stronger than any regime could withstand. Turkey gave up on Assad rather quickly but not without first trying to convince the Ba'ath dictator of the need to introduce meaningful reforms. With so much invested in the bilateral relationship, Erdoğan would have much rather see Assad institute reforms and maintain his power. He made numerous entreaties with Assad but was shocked and vexed that the Syrian would refuse to heed his advice.

The Turks clearly made two calculations: the regime was doomed and that it too would be rapidly relegated to the dustbin of history. Moreover, Ankara anticipated that given its close links to the regime in Damascus, its withdrawal of support would even hasten its demise. While the regime has proven more brutal and resilient and therefore has lasted longer than anticipated, no one outside of Syria and perhaps a few of its close allies expect the Ba'ath dictatorship has the wherewithal to survive much longer.

Turkey's early stand against Assad, its long border with Syria and the continuous flow of refugees into its territory, including defecting members of the Syrian army, have turned Turkey into the pivotal country for the rest of the world, but especially the West, struggling to bring an end to the carnage. For the United States, Turkey became an indispensable ally in Syria providing a setting for frequent discussions between President Obama and Erdoğan. Of all of Syria's neighbours, Turkey is the only one which has the capability to play a decisive role in Syria, whether it is by welcoming large numbers of refugees or by becoming the staging ground for any kind of humanitarian (or even as unlikely as this may seem military) intervention. Moreover, given

his support for the Syrian regime in the past, Erdoğan's break with Assad remains to date the most potent psychological blow delivered to Damascus.

Davutoğlu's somewhat bombastic exposition of Turkey's role is unlikely to be welcomed by the region's other nations and much less so by other neighbouring powers, be they Iran or Russia. Still it was an expression of where the Turkish leadership sees its own position both at home and abroad. At home other than the Kurdish problem it has few worries: the military has been subdued and the opposition is weak and rudderless. Erdoğan dominates the political space. Abroad, the Euro crisis has allowed the AKP to point to its own economic stability and continued growth as a countervailing example to the woes of the EU. There is no one in the Arab world, much less a sense of unity in it, to guide it through these turbulent times.

It is also due to the realisation that for the United States and the Europe, Turkey is the bulwark and the forward deployment of the Western alliance in confronting Middle Eastern instability. The Syrian crisis cannot be brought under control and a relatively peaceful or orderly transition to a post-Assad era assured without Turkey's collaboration. This awareness has empowered Turkish leaders into thinking that they can throw their weight around. Relations with Baghdad have suffered. Ankara has played host to the fugitive Iraqi vice President Tariq al-Hashemi and Erdoğan has not hidden his displeasure at Iraqi premier Maliki's increasingly sectarian-looking policies.

But is Turkey right in its interpretation of its current position?

A stable Middle East is essential for Turkey's overall interests. Instability and conflict in that region in the form of civil strife, inter-ethnic or inter-sectarian conflict, have the potential of

destabilising Turkey as well. Turkish economic progress requires a Middle East that is prosperous and open to its merchandise exports. Syrian troubles have caused much disruption in overland trade to Gulf countries. As argued earlier, much of the previous Turkish policy of cozying up to the regimes of the region had this commercial imperative as a starting point.

Hence, one could interpret Davutoğlu's comments to mean that Ankara needs to be forwardly engaged for defensive reasons. It must ensure that stability returns to the region as soon as possible. Its quick abandonment of Assad was an opportunistic move dictated by the realisation that by remaining in power he would be dragging his country through a civil war that risked devastating Syria and inflame regional ethnic and sectarian tensions. Recent history has proven Davutoğlu right so far.

Turkey's self-confidence notwithstanding, regional developments contain serious dangers. Ankara has had to play a careful balancing game with Iran (as has Iran with Turkey). On the one hand, the two countries are at odds with each other over Syria and directly compete in Iraq. On the other hand, the Iranians are keenly aware that for them the AKP government is the best possible alternative in Ankara and they cannot afford to alienate Turkey, which has proven quite helpful on Iran's nuclear confrontation with the West. Nonetheless, the collapse of the Assad regime and, more importantly, the downward spiral in Iraqi inter-sectarian and inter-ethnic relations are both capable of unleashing waves of uncontrollable violence and instability throughout the region. Lebanon too would not remain untouched. In turn, in the eyes of global business elites, this would undermine confidence in Turkey leading to declines in foreign investment and tourism. As much as Turkey has tried to sell itself as a European

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nation, the fact of the matter is that it borders three of the Middle East's most volatile and problematic states.

The dissolution of Iraq, the possible emergence of an Iraqi Sunni federal region, Baghdad's increasingly tense relations with the KRG, which is looking to Ankara for an alliance despite the complex problematic of Turkey's own Kurdish problem, are all complications with no immediate remedies and pregnant to unforeseen consequences. Any attempt by Turkey to establish any kind of hegemony over the region is likely to complicate matters further without resolving the essential problems.

It seems therefore that somehow Pandora's Box has been opened. Time, may be lots of time, will be needed to settle the region. It is unlikely that any outside or even regional intervention can speed up the pace of change. In the meantime, Turkey has many domestic challenges that also render it vulnerable to potential instability from the regional gale-like winds. It is better off resolving these mostly institutional challenges, which include the replacement of the 1982 military constitution, revamping its judicial system and bringing peace to its troubled Kurdish provinces. This does not preclude an activist foreign policy but it does mean that without a meaningful domestic reformist agenda, Turkish credibility and ability in the region and beyond would not amount to much.



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