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SEPTEMBER
2012

TURKEY'S MIDDLE EAST POLICY CHALLENGED BY ARAB SPRING

Francis Ghilès, Senior Research Fellow

Two years ago Turkey was a confident player on the Middle East stage. Gone were the decades during which it gave the impression of being a pliant supplicant of the United States and Europe. Despite the damage to bilateral ties the country had long enjoyed with Israel - a consequence of Turkey's harsh reaction to the badly mishandled raid by Israeli commandos on a convoy of ships bringing humanitarian assistance to Hamas-run Gaza in 2010, the country's Middle East policy was widely admired.

A booming economy added to the impression that Turkey's foreign policy, based on the principle of zero problems with neighbours, had come of age. Because it seemed to combine democracy, nationalism and a thriving economy, Turkey offered an attractive tool box for those in the Middle East and North Africa who were looking for ways to improve the quality of governance in the Arab world.

Two years later however, one of the many unforeseen consequences of the Arab Spring is that Turkey's bold Middle East policy is in crisis. Other consequences include the violence which has engulfed Libya and neighbouring Mali and the sharpening of sectarian violence across the Arab and Sahel regions. That Turkey's Middle East policy lies in trouble is not really surprising if one remembers that its cornerstone was a Turkish/Syrian commercial and political partnership which had been expanded to include, beyond the original signatories, Lebanon and Jordan in a free trade zone. Turkish visas with these countries were abolished and exports to the Arab world boomed as companies won tens of billions of dollars worth of contracts to build roads, bridges, pipelines, airports and ports. In Libya alone such contracts were estimated to be worth around \$18bn.

All these factors explain why the charismatic Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan enjoyed surprisingly wide popularity on the streets of Cairo and Damascus. He offered Turkey as a model to his Arab neighbours as he tried to address some of the most intractable problems in the region. He failed however to bring Syria and Israel to the negotiating table. His proposals, made jointly with Brazil, to bring Iran to help towards solving that country's nuclear programme were rebuffed in Washington. Hopes were high in Ankara that Turkey might reach an entente with Greece. Mr Er-

dogan also insisted he was ready to make political concessions to the Kurds in a bid to end what has been a long and bloody uprising. These setbacks have not dented his popularity, at least on the streets of Tunis where people are not really conversant with what goes on in and around Turkey.

All these apparently bold gestures have come to nigh. As a recent International Crisis Group report on *Turkey: The PKK and a Kurdish settlement* makes clear, Turkey's Kurdish conflict is becoming more violent, with more than 700 dead in fourteen months, the highest casualties in thirteen years. Prolonged clashes with militants in the South East, kidnappings and attacks on civilians suggest hardliners are gaining the upper hand in the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). In a broader sense, the democratic opening initiated by the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2005 has faltered since 2009 and more journalists are in prison in Turkey today than in China. Meanwhile the economy is hit not least by the sharp decline in exports to Middle East countries.

Turkey's relations with Iran have been badly damaged by the fact each country ended up by backing a different side in Syria's violent internal strife while its relations with Baghdad have been damaged by Ankara's decision to provide the Kurdish Regional Government with facilities to export oil directly to Turkey. Mr Erdogan lost patience and changed his mind in the Syrian conflict, providing camps for the Free Syrian Army on his country's soil as well as weapons, money and intelligence. Syria has responded by encouraging the PKK to step up its activities inside Turkey, a course of action enthusiastically endorsed by a growing number of young PKK militants.

Greece's economic collapse put paid to closer economic relations while the discovery of large offshore gas close to Israeli and the Greek speaking Republic of Cyprus has encouraged both countries to join efforts as they step up exploration for new gas fields in the Eastern Mediterranean. The Israeli discoveries are strategically important as they are set to end the country's decades-long dependence on overseas fuel. The first Israeli field Tamar, was discovered in January 2009. It was followed, in December 2010 by the discovery of the Leviathan gas field, the largest deepwater gas reserves found anywhere in the world over the past decade. The production from these two fields, along with a string of smaller discoveries will cover Israel's domestic demand for at least the next 25 years, and still leave hundreds of billions of cubic feet for export. The government take from the gas fields alone is forecast to reach at least \$140bn over the next three decades – a staggering sum for such a relatively small economy. Turkey and Turkish-speaking northern Cyprus may vent their anger, but too little avail.

Turkey appears to have weakened its capital over the past two years, capital that will be difficult to build up again. Hubris is hardly a good advisor when it comes to conducting foreign policy, especially in a region where problems are so complex and deep rooted. Two years ago, the prime minister was expressing empathy with the Kurds; today he talks of lifting the Kurdish deputies' parliamentary immunity. The stalling of political and economic reforms in Turkey over the past few years is striking. What is obvious today is that Turkey's capacity to shape events in Syria is very limited. Maybe it was unrealistic in the first place to think of Turkey as a major regional trend setter. The everlasting complexity and uncertainties of the Middle East arena are overwhelming and too big for any single player, be it an emerging power seeking to restore ancient forms of hegemony.