

Turkey's Role in the Mediterranean Following the Arab Uprisings

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Med 2012

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The suicide of Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian street vendor, in December 2010, and the occupation the next month of Tahrir Square in Cairo by protesters, followed by the fall of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and of Hosni Mubarak, the Tunisian and Egyptian dictators, transformed international perceptions of their countries. The policies towards this region previously pursued by European countries, the United States, Russia, Turkey, Israel and others quickly needed recalibrating. All had been to different degrees complicit with the *anciens régimes*. Turkey was the most fleet-footed in adapting to new realities.

After examining briefly the reaction of key international actors, this paper focuses on the evolution of Turkish policy in response to changed political circumstances in North Africa and the Middle East. The Arab uprisings led to Turkey's re-emergence as an important geostrategic actor and relegated to a secondary position other sources of concern related to Turkey, for example over media freedoms, the rift with Israel or the failure of the Cyprus settlement talks. Turkey's rapprochement with the Obama administration is particularly striking, reflecting its role as a regional shock absorber, notably with regard to Syria, and its renewed commitment to NATO, through the missile defence shield.

The Turkish government has been relatively free of internal and external constraints in distancing itself from former allies in the region and reaching out to emerging political forces. The question remains whether Turkey's nascent regional leadership role can be maintained and whether it will prove a complement or an alternative to links with Europe, still its main trading partner, investor and source of technol-

ogy. Turkey's rapprochement with the United States is essentially with the administration, while voices in Congress and in the wider public are more critical of its human rights record, rift with Israel and failure to come to terms with Cyprus and Armenia.

Overall, however, Turkey has manoeuvred adroitly following the uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East, quickly adapting to changed circumstances and identifying new partners. Its main challenges now are to help restore regional stability, to prevent a spillover of sectarian tensions into Turkey, and to manage its relations with Russia, China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United States and Europe, despite marked divergences over developments in the region.

Europe's Reaction to the Arab Uprisings

With the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, relations between southern European countries and their former colonies across the Mediterranean based on economic interests and historical ties no longer appeared tenable. The days when Colonel Gaddafi was received with pomp in Rome, Paris or Brussels were over. The overlapping frameworks of the Barcelona Process, the European Neighbourhood Policy, and the "Union for the Mediterranean" required immediate re-examination.

The EU had engaged with the region's previous governments in the negotiation of "action plans," offering financial assistance, market access, and participation in EU programmes in exchange for human rights and governance reforms. In the event, these action plans remained largely dead letters. EU Member States enjoyed close links with Arab regimes, to the point that President Mubarak became co-president of the largely symbolic Union for the Mediterranean, set up on the insistence of French President Nicholas Sarkozy.

The EU took several weeks to evaluate the implications of the uprisings and then adapted its policy framework to offer “more” assistance to those North African countries that did “more” to move towards democratic forms of government. The EU’s vocabulary and approach strongly reflected its support for “transition” in Central and Eastern Europe. It was not, however, apparent that the diverse political forces unleashed by the uprisings necessarily sought to bring their countries’ political systems into line with European norms, standards and values.

The Arab uprisings reinforced awareness in Europe of Turkey’s key geopolitical role in North Africa and the Middle East. This has refocused attention from setbacks in Turkey’s EU accession negotiations and internal reform process to its geostrategic role and given greater importance to the EU’s “political dialogue” with Turkey. However, both sides need to show a higher degree of shared purpose if this dialogue is to yield concrete results.

The United States

The United States, after a bout of ill-starred democracy promotion under the banner of the Bush administration’s Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative, oscillated between diplomatic realism, symbolised by the \$1.3 billion of military aid annually granted to Egypt, and appeals for reform, notably in President Obama’s June 2009 Cairo speech, which claimed that American values were compatible with tolerant forms of Islam.

Initially the Obama administration adopted a cautious approach during demonstrations against President Mubarak in Cairo, fearing that his overthrow could affect regional stability and, especially, the peace treaty with Israel. As Mubarak’s position became untenable, the uprisings were seen as demonstrating the fallacy of the “Arab exception” and validating the administration’s commitment to the universality of human rights. At the same time, Washington was concerned about the impact of the Arab uprisings on oil prices and economic recovery, about its relations with Arab governments in a state of flux, about NATO’s role in the region, and about the significance of the rise of political Islam.

The United States was content for the Arab League and Europe to take the lead in orchestrating the international response to the uprisings in North Africa. In the case of Libya, the United States found a pru-

dent balance between diplomatic and military support for implementing “the right to protect” and encouraging European states to play the principal role. Overall, the Arab uprisings have strengthened relations between Washington and Ankara, especially as Turkey has absorbed much of the international fallout from the armed uprising in Syria and its violent repression by the Assad regime.

Russia

Russia views uprisings in the Arab world both in terms of possible spillover to the North Caucasus and Central Asia and in geopolitical terms. In practice, spillover to these contrasting regions has proved minimal and Russia quickly accommodated itself to new regimes in Tunisia and Egypt. More generally, however, Russia views uprisings in the Arab world with misgiving. It is sceptical about the establishment of democracy, dislikes the rise to power of governments imbued with Islam, and fears that the overall effect will be a tilt in the region away from Syria and Iran, which it views as allies, towards Saudi Arabia, which propagates Sunni Islam abroad and is close to the United States.

The armed conflict in Libya, which led to the adoption of Security Council Resolution 1973, NATO’s subsequent intervention and the fall of the Gaddafi regime, posed a major challenge to Russia. After much negotiation, it abstained in the Security Council, thus facilitating NATO’s intervention. But as the NATO operation wore on and was perceived as aiming at regime change, Moscow became increasingly critical. This experience set the scene for Russia’s much sharper reaction to events in Syria.

A collapse of the Assad regime would deprive Russia of an ally and, possibly, of its naval base at the Syrian port of Tartus. It would weaken Iran and further destabilise Lebanon and probably Jordan. Russia has continued to ship arms to Syria and is wary of any move towards Western military intervention. Russian representatives have explicitly ruled out any repetition of “the Libyan model” in Syria and advocate “peaceful resolution” through the plan put forward by Kofi Annan on behalf of the Arab League and the UN. After difficult negotiations, Russia voted in favour of the UN Security Council Resolution establishing the UN Supervision Mission in Syria in April 2012.

Turkey’s critical stance towards the Assad regime and position as a front-line state has led to divergences

with Russia. If the violence and outpouring of refugees continue, however, Moscow will come under pressure to reassess its position. There may well be a growing understanding in Moscow for Turkey's position and at least a partial convergence of views.

The Israeli Position

Israel and Turkey, for different reasons, have long pursued pragmatic policies towards the countries of the region. Israel's peace treaties with Jordan and Egypt provide the regional pillars of its security strategy. Peace with Egypt, however cold, has allowed Israel to concentrate on other issues. Security cooperation with Jordan is close. Israel seeks to preserve its political and economic ties with Morocco, which have come under strain since the two Palestinian intifadas and the Arab uprisings.

Alarm in Israel at the possible loss of one of these pillars, with Mubarak's overthrow, somewhat abated when it appeared that the Muslim Brotherhood, which won the 2011/2012 parliamentary elections, would not, in the short term at least, press for abrogation of the peace treaty with Israel. Nonetheless, Israel was concerned about the breakdown of law and order, especially in the Sinai Peninsula, which led to frequent terrorist attacks on the gas pipeline to Israel and Jordan, and the inept firing of Grad-type katyusha rockets at Israel's Red Sea port of Eilat. In April 2012, Egypt's partly state-owned Natural Gas Holding Company cut off gas supplies to Israel in a decision that seems to have been based on both commercial and political considerations.

Since the rift in Israel's relations with Turkey, following Operation Cast Lead in Gaza in the winter of 2008/2009 and the flotilla incident in May 2010, Israel has reinforced its links with Cyprus and Greece, which may become a new political alignment in the Mediterranean region with far-reaching implications. However this need not be a zero-sum game as Israel would be one of the major beneficiaries if Turkey's efforts to restore stability to Syria succeed. Turkey's role in Syria has distanced Ankara from Teheran and contributed to its rapprochement with Washington. More broadly, Israel would benefit if Turkey manages to play a moderating role in the region and effectively counters Iranian and Saudi influence. A reconciliation between Israel and Turkey in the short run seems unlikely, but developments in the region may well in time lead Ankara and Jerusalem to reappraise their relations.

Turkey's Pragmatic Neighbourhood Policy

The Turkish governments headed by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, since 2002, have made a virtue of pragmatism in policy towards neighbouring countries, in contrast with the schoolmasterly approach taken by the EU. In the years before the Arab uprisings, Turkey pursued a policy in the Middle East and North Africa that promoted trade and investment, as well as Turkey's own role as a mediator and facilitator, eschewing political conditionality. The slogan "zero problems with neighbours" expressed the aspiration behind this policy.

It led to a considerable expansion of trade with Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria and other states in the Middle East. Visa obligations for travellers from neighbouring states were abolished and free trade agreements concluded, leading to a flourishing cross-border trade. Turkey's pragmatic relations with neighbouring countries brought considerable benefits to Turkish business, especially the rising class of Anatolian entrepreneurs close to the AK party. On the fall of the Gaddafi regime there were \$15-\$17 billion in Libyan contracts outstanding with Turkish companies and some 25,000 Turkish citizens present in the country. With the outbreak of civil strife, Turkey undertook a major operation to evacuate its citizens.

Trade with Muslim countries rose from 12 to 20% of Turkey's total trade during the past decade. Thus Turkey's own "neighbourhood policy" seemed at first to have paid off in business terms. However it put Turkish companies and citizens in a vulnerable position when Ankara's political partners in the region were overthrown and violent conflict broke out in Libya and Syria.

Close Relations with the *Anciens Régimes*

Before the Arab uprisings, Ankara showed little squeamishness about the regimes with which it developed close political and commercial ties. As recently as December 2011, Prime Minister Erdogan accepted the Gaddafi International Prize for Human Rights in a ceremony in Libya. Early in 2011, Mr Erdogan addressed President Bashar Hafez al-Assad in Damascus as "my brother." In February 2011, Turkish President Abdullah Gül visited Teheran during the violent repression of protest rallies in which one person was killed and dozens wounded. In re-

marks during the visit, he made only the most elliptical references to these events.

This “good neighbour” policy brought concrete economic benefits and earned plaudits from the international community for its contribution to regional stability. Turkey intervened with Iran on several occasions to obtain the release of imprisoned American, French and British citizens. It brokered talks between Syria and Israel, until the rift with Israel following “Operation Cast Lead” in the winter of 2008/2009 and the flotilla incident in May 2010. Ankara has also sought to mediate on the Iranian nuclear question. However, Turkey’s complicity with the *anciens régimes* rankled with sections of Arab opinion following the uprisings.

Turkey’s Response to the Uprisings in North Africa

The overthrow of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia, and later President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, coupled with military intervention in Libya under a NATO umbrella and the uprising and repression in Syria posed a major challenge to Turkey. Turkey’s initial reaction to the events leading up to these momentous changes was cautious. Tunisia was outside the usual focus of Turkish attention, and at first the government viewed the protest movement with prudence. After initial hesitation, Turkey welcomed Ben Ali’s ouster and engaged in particular with Rached Ghannouchi, leader of the Ennahda party, which won the October 2011 elections.

The protests leading to Mubarak’s resignation in February 2011 raised more fundamental issues for Turkey. Despite rivalry with Cairo, the spectacle of a long-standing leader of a major Muslim country being challenged by popular demonstrations was scarcely attractive to a Prime Minister who himself increasingly bridled at domestic dissent. Mr Erdogan was the first international leader to call on Mubarak to heed the will of the people and to give way to a democratic form of government. This earned him credibility with the demonstrators and increased Turkey’s popularity in North Africa.

The outbreak of civil war in Libya, Gaddafi’s threats against the people of Benghazi, the Arab League’s call for a no-fly zone, the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973 in March, and NATO’s subsequent decision to engage in military

measures to enforce the resolution caught Ankara off guard. These events occurred just four months after Mr Erdogan accepted the Gaddafi human rights prize and while 25,000 Turkish citizens were working in Libya under multi-billion-dollar contracts that Turkish companies had concluded with the regime. Nonetheless, Mr Erdogan came round to the NATO operation, and Turkey sent naval vessels to Libyan waters and engaged in a large-scale operation to evacuate Turkish workers. Turkey’s conversion to the NATO operation did not prevent demonstrators from burning the Turkish flag in Benghazi. By May, Mr Erdogan called for Gaddafi to leave office and put forward proposals on bringing the civil war to an end.

The Turkish Prime Minister and Foreign Minister were visibly gratified by the praise that was heaped on Turkey by Rached Ghannouchi, leader of Tunisia’s Ennahda party, and other proponents of change. There was no mistaking a certain triumphant tone in official Turkish pronouncements. Turkish self-confidence and popularity in the Arab world were boosted by Ankara’s demand for an apology from Israel over the Gaza flotilla incident and the downgrading of Turkish diplomatic relations with Israel. Buoyed by these developments, Mr Erdogan set out for a visit to Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, in September 2011, accompanied by 200 businesspeople. He was met by public adulation but by a more measured response from military leaders in Cairo. They ruled out his proposed visit to Gaza and did not echo his heightened rhetoric over the establishment of a Palestinian state.

Representatives of the Egyptian Freedom and Justice Party, an emanation of the Muslim Brotherhood, which subsequently won the parliamentary election, expressed respect for Turkey but rejected the idea that an outside power should lay down principles on which Egypt’s future constitutional order should be based. Clearly they did not appreciate Mr Erdogan’s emphasis on secularism in remarks before his arrival in Egypt. The Turkish delegation made some progress in resurrecting Turkey’s \$15-17 billion projects in Libya and in securing new commercial arrangements.

There is considerable scope for Turkey to develop its political and economic relations with North Africa. Turkey can share its experience in finding a balance between democracy with an Islamist tinge and secular institutions. Trade, tourism and investment could provide a focus for deeper relations. Overall, Turkey

is well placed to exercise a certain stabilising influence in North Africa, though its immediate preoccupation is with the situation in Syria.

Syria

While Turkey's ambition to play a regional leadership role has, on balance, been comforted by developments in North Africa, the brutal repression of uprisings in Syria has posed a far greater challenge. Following decades of conflict over territory, water, and Syrian support for the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), Mr Erdogan engineered a major rapprochement with the Assad regime. Turkey developed close links with Syria, bringing major economic benefits especially to the border province of Gaziantep, which became a major centre for cross-border business with Syria.

The uprising against the Assad regime led to a sharp decline in this flourishing business across Turkey's 877-kilometre border with Syria. As the violence in Syria spread, Turkey imposed trade sanctions, which had a severe impact on the economic situation in border regions. Turkey faced an increasing flow of refugees. In April 2012, shots fired across the border killed two refugees and injured many others, including a Turkish policeman. Ankara demanded an end to the violence and gave its support to the January 2012 Arab League plan for political transition in Syria and to the subsequent United Nations cease-fire observer mission.

However, these international initiatives failed to stem the violence. Speculation grew about the establishment of a humanitarian corridor into Turkey, a buffer zone within Syria and arming the Syrian opposition. Turkey rejected such moves, which could draw it into confrontation with the Syrian army. By April 2012 some 25,000 Syrian citizens had taken refuge in Turkey, leading Ankara to demand an end to the violence and international support in coping with the refugee flow.

Turkey's role in absorbing the fallout from Syria's civil strife and in pressuring Mr Assad to cease military operations earned it appreciation from the United States and Europe. But the situation remains extremely fragile and the outcome uncertain. The risk of fragmentation of the Syrian state and continued instability there is a major preoccupation in Ankara.

Turkey's Re-Emergence as a Geostrategic Actor

The Turkish government has been remarkably successful in turning its "neighbourhood" policy around, following the Arab uprisings, without paying any price in terms of domestic or international opinion. At home, this owes much to the low salience of foreign policy among the Turkish public and the weakness of the opposition. Even under new leadership, the Republican People's Party (CHP), the country's main centre-left opposition party, has been unable to mount an effective challenge to the government. As a party that became increasingly nationalist under its previous leader, the CHP has been unable or unwilling to take political advantage of the effective failure of the government's previous "zero problems with neighbours" policy.

By swiftly switching its commitment to the new forces emerging in the region, Turkey has become, potentially, an exporter of stability, reducing the burden on the United States and Europe. This chimes well with an administration in Washington preoccupied with domestic politics and seeking to avoid overreach around the world. It chimes well, too, in Europe, with governments seeking to contain the Syrian imbroglio in the midst of the sovereign debt crisis. By contrast, Turkey's stance sharpened rivalry with Iran and Saudi Arabia and led to divergences with Russia.

Government leaders in Ankara have rebuffed talk of the Turkish model guiding the uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East. And indeed, Turkey's Ottoman past, its long period of imposed secularism and political domination by the "deep state," the ethnic composition of its population and Sunnite pre-eminence mean that its "model" is not directly applicable elsewhere. The Turkish model evolved over more than a century, beginning with reforms under the country's Ottoman rulers and continuing for the past ninety years following the Kemalist revolution. Nonetheless, Turkey's image as a relatively wealthy, open, Western-oriented state with a predominantly Muslim population appeals to many proponents of political change in the Arab countries. Overall, recent developments in the Arab world have sealed Turkey's re-emergence as a geostrategic actor with a key role in bolstering regional stability.