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A “Turkish Model” in the Middle East?

Consequences of the Arab Spring for Turkey’s regional position and international partnerships

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Introduction

During this past one year and half, the Middle Eastern political context has been marked by fundamental and rapid change as a consequence of the popular revolts of the “Arab Spring”. Authoritarian regimes have been overthrown in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, while in Syria the popular uprising has been met with an increasingly cruel form of regime repression, resulting in a severe humanitarian crisis. The Arab Spring has not only affected domestic politics, but fundamentally challenged the way regional and international actors envisaged their foreign policy objectives regarding the Middle East. Turkey’s influence as a regional actor had been rising steadily over the past years as a result of the AKP’s “zero problems with neighbors” strategy establishing increased economic interdependence, cultural exchange and political cooperation with its Arab neighbors. With the advent of the Arab Spring, Turkey’s strong regional position proved central to the political future of the Middle East not only because of its extensive social and economic ties with the Arab world, but also because of the potential exemplary function of “the Turkish Model”. Moreover, the lack of moral credibility of both the US and the EU further enhanced the importance of Turkey as a strategic partner. Therefore, the Arab Spring did not only fundamentally alter the political landscape of the Middle East, but also shifted the balance of power between the international actors whose interests were at stake due to the revolutionary unpredictability of the current state of Middle Eastern politics. Specifically these had also some consequences for Turkey-EU relations as Turkey’s EU accession process is heavily influenced by strategic considerations. This paper will provide a further investigation of these phenomena by analyzing:

In what way did the events of the “Arab Spring” affect Turkey’s influence as a regional power in the Middle East and consequentially, the prospects for future Turkish-EU relations?

This paper will be structured as follows: firstly, an assessment will be made of Turkey’s position in the Middle East prior to the Arab Spring, dealing with the extent of its political, economic and cultural influence, largely as a result of the AKP’s “zero problems with neighbors” strategy. Secondly, the Turkish policy response to the popular revolts of the Arab Spring will be described. Furthermore, an explanation will be offered both of the appeal and the intrinsic difficulties of a potential implementation of “the Turkish Model” in the post-revolution Arab Spring countries. Lastly, the strategic consequences of the Arab Spring and Turkey’s consequentially altered regional position will be analyzed from an international perspective, highlighting the potential mutual increase of foreign policy credibility and effectiveness stemming from a cooperative Turkish-European framework.

Turkey’s position in the Middle East prior to the Arab Spring

Turkey’s image in the Arab world has dramatically increased during the first decade of the 21st century, due to diverse reasons. Firstly, the rise of the AKP nuanced the primarily secular and Western orientation of the previous Turkish governments, strengthening Turkey’s relations with its Muslim and Arab neighbors (Salem 2011: 1). Secondly, the success of the Turkish democratic system and its economic model of high productivity and export-led growth constituted an exceptional example within the regional context. Thirdly, its unique blend of democratic rule with religious values in a secular system provided an intriguing formula of coexistence. Furthermore, Turkey’s

popularity enhanced significantly when Foreign Affairs Minister Davutoğlu's "zero-problems" foreign policy, forging closer cooperation between Turkey and the Arab world, was reinforced by Turkey's increasingly critical stance on both Israel's and the United States' Middle East policy – exemplified by the Turkish refusal of American use of its bases in the 2003 invasion of Iraq and Turkey's uncompromising stand against Israel in the aftermath of the Gaza Flotilla incident in 2010. Lastly, the spreading of Turkish popular culture throughout the whole Middle East resulted in increased knowledge of – and demand for – Turkish products, series and – consequentially – cultural values, as it has *"the effect of creating attachment, understanding, and affection for Turkish identity, culture, and values among wide regional publics"* (Salem 2011: 6). According to a TESEV survey, conducted in August-September 2010, on "Turkey's Image in the Arab World", up to 80% of the population in Arab countries shares a positive view towards Turkey (Salem 2011: 2). Furthermore, a large proportion even perceives Turkey as a *"defender of the Palestinian cause and a voice for Muslims"* (Salem 2011: 5). This popular perception granted Turkey a vast degree of credibility and ethical leverage to perform a leading – and perhaps exemplary – role in regional politics. Defined more specifically, up to 66% of the respondents to the survey confirmed the belief that Turkey could serve as a model for the Middle Eastern countries, while presenting diverse arguments ranging from its booming economy to the unique balance found between Islam and secularism to found this position (Salem 2011: 6).

More specifically, the rise to power of the AKP can be regarded as a fundamental factor explaining the increasingly positive image of Turkey in the Arab world. Turkish foreign policy was mostly based on close ties to the Western world and institutions since the ending of the Second World War. The ending of the Cold War impacted on Turkish foreign policy by opening of new spaces such as the post-soviet space with the aim of forging closer economic and political ties. Activism in the Middle East was hindered by the instability of the 1990's, the PKK question, and more recently by the American occupation of Iraq, one of the Southern neighbors of Turkey. The AKP leadership during the latter half of the 2000's, prioritized the establishment of closer social, economic and political relations with the Arab or Muslim countries in the region. This ambition was realized by the introduction of a policy of "zero problems with neighbors", formulated by Foreign Affairs Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu. This policy led to increased regional cooperation on issues such as tourism, health, education and transportation, including the establishment of visa-free regimes with up to 58 countries (Sandrin 2012: 34). In a way, Turkey's zero-problems strategy of renewed engagement with the Middle East was viewed as *"a corrective to its earlier isolationism with respect to the region"* (Bali 2011: 35). However, the Turkish ambition to forge closer economic and cultural ties simultaneously challenged its support for the spread of democratic values, as *"Turkey tried to forge closer ties with regional governments independent of their level of democracy and refrained from openly defending a pro-democratizing agenda"* (Sandrin 2012: 35). Democracy promotion was thus never a primary objective of the renewed Turkish foreign policy of the AKP. The focus of the government was rather on promoting economic interdependence and political relations based on a notion of cultural affinity and a shared Muslim identity. The zero-problems strategy was further constituted by an adherence to the Westphalian notion of respect for countries' national independence and the subsequent principle of non-intervention in domestic affairs (Onis 2012: 2).

The appealing combination of a productive economy, a democratic balance between secularism and Islamism and increased regional influence as a result of Minister

Davutoğlu's zero-problem policy granted Turkey considerable leverage and exemplary potential in the regional political context. However, the sudden and fundamental change brought about by the Arab Spring would force Turkey to redefine its existing foreign policy objectives as well as to reconsider the degree of multilateralism needed to effectively pursue its regional ambitions.

Turkey's response to the Arab Spring: a "Turkish Model"?

The emergence of the Arab Spring meant the spread of popular revolts of an unprecedented scale and kind throughout most of the Middle Eastern region, and can generally be explained as a combination between several structural factors, such as: authoritarianism and the lack of freedom, overall inefficiency of the government, high rates of unemployment (and underemployment), mass poverty, availability of modern means of communication and the general frustration of the well-educated young masses with the stagnant nature of their status-quo focused authoritarian regimes (Dede 2011: 23-24). For Turkey, the observation that the events of the Arab Spring were essentially the result of the people's longing for freedom, necessitated it to rethink its foreign policy stance in the region. While Turkey had become an initiating actor in the Middle Eastern political landscape during the past few years (examples include mediating negotiations with Iran on its nuclear program, engaging actively in the Arab-Israeli conflict by reconciling Hamas and Fatah and ending hostilities with Syria), the events of the Arab Spring now compelled Turkey to adopt a more responsive stance in the regional political context (Bali 2011: 24). The Turkish policy response to the events of the Arab Spring has broadly focused on four main principles: support of popular demands for political and economic freedom, condemning the regime's violent response to the protests, a preference for non-violent transitions based on negotiation and the principled rejection of external military intervention (Bali 2011: 36).

The essence of the Arab Spring was that it constituted a "*conclusive repudiation by Arab publics of the legitimacy of their authoritarian political systems*" (Bali 2011: 26). This repudiation therefore placed political demands ahead of any other priorities – which presented a direct challenge for the Turkish approach of zero-problems. Essentially, the zero-problems strategy had prioritized economic cooperation and integration as a potential step towards eventual political reform, deriving from Minister Davutoğlu's conviction that economic integration would eventually create exactly these conditions necessary for peace and stability that would inevitably lead to political reform in the long run (Bali 2011: 38). However, the primarily political nature of the demands forced the Turkish government to inverse this logic and stress the necessity of political reform as a requirement for the establishment of a fair and prosperous economic order. Therefore, Turkey's initial stance towards the popular uprising of the Arab Spring was hesitant. The recent reestablishment of cooperative relations with the Arab regimes now being contested by unprecedented popular uprisings led Turkey to be cautious about supporting the protesters' demand for the regimes to step down despite its recognition of the legitimacy of their pleas for freedom and democracy. Moreover, Turkey has known a history of principled opposition to foreign military intervention in the region, due to fear of its destabilizing consequences and the conviction that military force is highly unlikely to serve humanitarian ends (Bali 2011: 37).

The Turkish strategy of "zero problems with neighbors" being compromised by the essentially political nature of the Arab Spring meant that Turkish policymakers were

confronted with complex dilemmas. While ideologically supporting the bottom-up demands of the protesters for freedom and democracy, they faced major trade-offs between the need to secure Turkey's economic interests and supporting the popular uprisings. As Minister Davutoğlu's zero-problems strategy had contributed exactly to the interdependence of economic interests between Turkey and its Arab neighbors that was now threatened by the growing opposition to the authoritarian regimes the initial *rapprochement* had concerned, Turkey was increasingly faced with an "*ethics versus self-interest dilemma*" (Onis 2012: 5). This dilemma led to accusations of Turkey pursuing mere *realpolitik* as its readiness to show support for the popular uprisings in Tunisia – with whom Ankara had few relations – and Egypt – a long-time rival for regional competition – stood in sharp contrast with its hesitant stance regarding the revolt in Libya. Though Turkey emphasized its principled opposition to foreign intervention in domestic affairs, its democratic credibility there was challenged by rising public attention for the vast Turkish economic interests at stake, whose safeguarding was directly dependent on the survival of Qaddafi's regime. Consequentially, Turkey initially opposed a NATO intervention in Libya until it decided that isolation from the Western/Arab coalition might prove costly both in international and in regional terms. This policy shifting combined with the *realpolitik*-accusation led to the risk for the Turkish government to be confronted with the contrast between its image as "*a principled champion of peoples' human and democratic rights in the region, versus its image as a government interested in lucrative business deals despite its human costs*" (Salem 2011: 3). Importantly, this dilemma was all but unique to Turkey – as most Western powers too faced a trade-off between ideological consistency and protection of their own extensive and far-reaching economic interests (Onis 2012: 2). An attempt at solving this dilemma could be seen as a reinterpretation of the zero-problems strategy, so that the aim was not to exclusively build alliances with the regime, but primarily seeking good relations with the population of the neighboring Arab countries (Bali 2011: 36). Prime Minister Erdoğan's shift regarding the uprising in Syria might be explained as such, coupled with the increasingly brutal nature of Assad's response to the uprising in Syria. Initially Turkey had sought to influence the Assad regime by diplomatic means, building on the political capital constructed as a result of the zero-problems strategy (Onis 2012: 8). However, Prime Minister Erdogan became an active supporter of the opposition after Assad continuously ignored Turkish calls for reform and the regime-violence escalated dramatically, resulting in massive refugee flows across the Syrian-Turkish border (Tocci 2012: 2). Moreover, a pro-regime stance would undermine Turkey's international standing, especially in contrast with the sanctions and other restrictive measures – travel-bans, for example – already imposed by the EU.

Despite some initial policy inconsistency deriving from the Turkish reorientation of its zero problems-strategy, the Arab publics pressing for reform generally retained a positive view of Turkey. Even more, Prime Minister Erdogan has been said to be the most popular political figure throughout the whole Middle East during the uprisings – deriving from a combination between his eventual ardent support for the revolts and the potentially exemplary function of the Turkish political model for the protesting masses. Support for "The Turkish Model" has become widespread both in the region and within the international context, due to a variety of reasons. Generally, Davutoglu's zero-problem policy that led to the extensive *rapprochement* between Turkey and several Arab spring countries contributed fundamentally to the regional perception of "the Turkish Model" a potential example, as historical animosities were replaced by a situation of mutually beneficial economic, social and cultural interdependence. More

specifically, *“the capacity of the Turkish political system to conduct democratic elections with the participation of a moderately Islamist political party has occasioned (...) interest in the country as a potentially viable local model for democratization”* (Bali 2011: 25). Moreover, Turkey’s relative economic success due to its economic model with high productivity and export-led growth constitutes an exceptional example in the regional context – resulting in the popular view of Turkey having the most economic influence within the region. Although Turkey is currently surpassed in economic strength by countries like Saudi Arabia and Iran because of their vast oil revenues, Turkey’s comparative economic advantage comes from the fact that its economic growth is built on economic interaction (Salem 2011: 4). The explicit ambition of Minister Davutoglu’s zero-problems policy was to integrate Turkish economic growth into its neighboring economies, so as to use its *soft power* to establish deep regional economic engagement consolidated by mutual gain. This kind of economic strategy pursuing economic growth through productive investment and within a framework of cooperative interaction heightens the Turkish model’s appeal considerably, since economic inefficiency, social injustice and vast unemployment were among the main factors causing the large-scale popular uprisings constituting the Arab Spring. Due to the centrality of these economic issues, the success of any reformist policies – whether based on the Turkish model or not – will eventually be dependent on their ability to pursue durable and inclusive growth strategies resulting in sufficient productive jobs for the exceptionally young Arab population. As the vast unemployment rate, the absence of economic justice and the lack of ameliorated prospects due to productive investment were among the main causes of the Arab revolts, the new regimes’ economic performance will be determining for their popular legitimacy: *“imaginative and bold development strategies will be needed, including growth strategies that are job-centred, inclusive and responsive to the aspirations of the youth, who have been the driving force behind recent uprisings”* (Hakimian 2011: 2).

Interestingly, support for the “Turkish Model” is found throughout a wide range of different local and international actors. Whether economic, political or (non-)religious factors are deemed most important, the “Turkish model” seems to exert a potential appeal to many different, and even opposing groups. An interesting example is found in the religious realm, as both secularists and Islamists seem to find a certain representation of their interests in the Turkish system. Whereas secularists admire the republican framework separating religious and political affairs, Islamists feel strengthened by the prominent position of the Islamic AKP within the Turkish Republican system. Therefore, in short it might be stated that: *“Turkey’s credentials are based on it being a democratic (secular) Muslim country with a successful liberal economy. Turkey provides an attractive political and economic model for both secularists and Islamists in the region”* (Dinc 2011: 68). Moreover, the “Turkish Model” also seems to contain a certain appeal for Western observers, mostly due to its democratic credentials and its outstanding economic performance. However, from a Western or from an EU perspective, the application of “the Turkish Model” might likewise serve logic of containment, by inherently limiting the extent of Islamist participation due to their functioning within a secular, republican framework. Since the exclusion of parties like the Muslim Brotherhood from the political system altogether – as was the case in Mubarak’s Egypt – is no longer tolerable, application of the Turkish model might serve as an alternative safeguard against a democratic Islamist rise to power (Bali 2011: 28). However, the overwhelmingly secular nature of the Arab revolts challenges the legitimacy of this logic as the demands for freedom, accountability and economic justice

were never substantiated by a claim for religious authority. Nevertheless, the possibility of Western interests being endangered by a potentially less Western-oriented, religiously inspired leadership can be taken to explain the Western inclination to regard Turkey as a model that might serve the *“continuation of earlier disingenuous attempts to offset popular preferences in the Arab world deemed adverse to Western interests”* (Bali 2011: 29). Nevertheless most likely the emergence of moderate Muslim democratic parties – somewhat parallel to the Christian democratic parties that exist in many European countries – will have the effect of marginalizing the more radical Islamist elements following the logic of the moderating effect of democratic participation in line with the *“inclusion-moderation hypothesis”* (Schwedler 2011: 351).

However, the general applicability of *“the Turkish model”* to the countries of the Arab Spring might be problematic due to the specific historical context in which the current Turkish system emerged. Firstly, the current Turkish system is the result of decades of political reform and its transition was much more gradual than the sudden change invoked by the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, or: *“Turkey’s transformation under the AKP has not been the kind of radical social overhaul being sought in the Arab world”* (Bali 2011: 33). Another important difference is the influence of the prospective EU membership has had on reshaping Turkish domestic politics over the past years: *“the reforms, required by the EU membership process, have consolidated democracy further and brought (...) a gradual ‘normalization’ of civilian-military relations”* (Dinc 2011: 63). The external pressure inciting these domestic reforms is lacking in the Arab world, enlarging possibilities of a prolonged military domination of civilian rule (Egypt) or further absence of democratic rights and freedoms due to a severely fragmented and unstable political landscape (Libya).

Future prospects: unilateral activism or a cooperative Turkish-European framework?

Although the direct applicability of the Turkish model to the countries of Arab spring might be questioned, Turkey’s role as a regional player of unparalleled significance is evident. Consequentially, Turkey might be more influential by the policy it adopts than by the potential exemplary function of its political system (Bali 2011: 35). The overwhelmingly positive evaluation of Turkey in the TESEV-survey implies that the Arab public would mostly hold a favorable view of *“a broader Turkish role (...) helping the societies of the region move more steadily toward democratic change and economic development”* (Salem 2011: 7). Turkey would be the actor most likely to take the lead in establishing such a cooperative order in the Middle East, as it has the most mediating potential due to its positive image among both the Arab population as well as their newly installed governments (Salem 2011: 2). However, a thin line exists between constructive influence and destructive over-activism. Since an overtly unilateralist and over-assertive approach might raise fears of the emergence of an era of ‘Neo-Ottomanism’, Turkey has to be well aware of the inherent limitations to its regional influence – compelling it to construct its regional policies in a framework of multilateral cooperation. Thus, paradoxically, *“the more Turkey is engaged actively in the region...the less likely will be its ability to play a constructive stabilizing and reformist role”* (Onis 2012: 11). This implies that Turkey should be wary of taking an active stance in local – especially sectarian – conflicts, but should rather inspire the role of an inspirational mediator without any overtly expressed ethnic or sectarian loyalties. A controversial example is the recently deteriorated relations between Turkey and Israel. The

deterioration and Turkey's strong stance against Israel is very understandable as a consequence of the shift in Turkey's foreign policy orientation, the war in Gaza and the dramatic Mavi Marmara-incident in May 2010. However, this confrontational attitude *"puts Turkey in a similar position to many other countries in the region, and removes one of its comparative advantages"* (Salem 2011: 5). Especially since Turkey might have the unique capability to serve as an inspirational mediator in regional politics, a more negotiation-based approach could render Turkey a much more effective and influential actor both in the regional and international context.

In general, the Arab spring has increased the political independence of those countries whose leaders used to be loyal allies of the West – and the U.S. specifically. The shift towards a more locally-supported, i.e. home-grown, political approach directly translates into a reduced capability of these external powers to shape events in the MENA region (Freeman 2011: 29). This loss of direct influence further increases Turkey's comparative advantage as a regional power of significant influence with both popular credibility and political-economic influence – increasing Turkey's importance to the Western powers considerably. The relevance of this logic increases since the U.S. – and to a lesser extent the EU – seem to have lost credibility for the "Arab street" due to its involvement in Iraq, Afghanistan and most recently because of its inconsistent response to the Arab protests that demanded exactly those values the West had been paying lip-service to for a long time – while simultaneously engaging the authoritarian regimes that actively prevented their implementation. Even when Western – and specifically: American – support for the revolutions became unequivocal, the *"belated demands that longstanding protégés of the United States take leave of power has convinced the region (...) that Washington is undependable"* (Freeman 2011: 35). Turkey's moral credibility might therefore be the comparative advantage of Turkey over both the U.S. and the EU, increasing the stakes for a shared foreign policy-framework regarding the Middle East.

From a Turkish perspective, a cooperative Turkish-EU framework regarding the Middle East might also prove to be beneficial. If Turkey would succeed in establishing a regional framework stimulating economic cooperation and political stability, its importance as a regional actor might furthermore increase Turkey's bargaining power in its accession negotiations with the EU. Since Turkey would have exactly the credibility and – consequentially – influence the EU is currently lacking in the Middle Eastern context, Turkish membership might help the EU enhance its strategic position as a global political power (Yilmaz 2012: 359). Moreover, the Arab Spring also testified to the limitations regarding Turkey's ability to decide as a politically independent actor. The Libyan example revealed both that effective implementation of foreign policy is often dependent on its multilateral character and that a country's independence in the foreign policy-realm is directly related to its own international standing – leading Turkey to eventually support the NATO mission despite its initial hesitation. Unilateral action tends to be less effective and influential in a political context marked by the kind of uncertainty and volatility resulting from the Arab Spring. Therefore, *"Ankara's support for the democratic aspirations of its neighbors is careful, cautious, [but] above all conditional upon multilateral cooperation with its partners, be it the EU and the US, or the Arab League"* (Tocci 2012: 3). In conclusion, the recognition of the importance of multilateralism for effectiveness therefore implies that *"Turkey could make a bigger and more constructive impact in the region by trying to take a more detached stand and through controlled activism which will act in coalitions (...) with the United States and the*

European countries” (Onis 2012: 15). Specifically with regard to Turkish-EU relations, Turkey and the EU both have the potential to increase the credibility and effectiveness of their respective foreign policies: *“Turkey could benefit from the EU’s financial and institutional capacity and the EU could benefit from Turkey’s credibility, influence and network of relationships with the region”* (Sandrin 2012: 37).

Conclusion

The events of the Arab Spring meant a fundamental change for the Middle Eastern political context and all local, regional and international actors involved. Turkey has enjoyed a specifically important and influential position in the Arab world, partly as a consequence of the AKP-strategy of “zero-problems with neighbors”. This policy has led to extensive regional cooperation on various issues and a general increase in economic interdependence between Turkey and its Arab neighbors. Moreover, the general view of Turkey in the Arab world has been increasingly positive over the past years, as a result of the unique Turkish democratic blend of secularism and Islam, Turkey’s outstanding economic performance and the spread of its popular culture – simultaneously enhancing support for Turkish cultural values.

However, the emergence of popular revolts of unprecedented size and impact in several Arab countries would challenge Turkish foreign policy fundamentally. The zero-problems strategy proved no longer effective, as the demonstrating masses clearly prioritized immediate political reform over the strengthening of economic and social ties as a potential starting-point for eventual gradual political adjustments. Turkey responded accordingly and developed into an ardent – and widely appreciated – supporter of the Arab uprisings. Despite some policy inconsistencies, Turkey’s popularity rose spectacularly, leading to a debate over the applicability of the “Turkish Model” to the countries where the popular protests resulted in an overthrow of their former authoritarian regimes. The secular framework – while enabling Islamic democratic participation – of the Turkish Republic, just like its export-oriented productive growth-model exerted considerable appeal over a variety of domestic and international actors. However, direct application of the Turkish model is inherently complicated by the specificity of Turkey’s historical experience as well as of its current international position.

Nevertheless, the importance of Turkey as an influential regional actor possessing an unparalleled degree of moral credibility and direct economic and political influence in the region is uncontested. As the Arab Spring countries are more likely than ever to develop a political course independent from their former Western allies, cooperation with Turkey might prove to be essential for both the US and the European Union. Simultaneously, Turkey is confronted with a trade-off between activist unilateral action and moderated multilateral cooperation – with an increased change of political effectiveness due to shared objectives and institutional support. Therefore, enhanced cooperation between Turkey and the Western powers – the EU specifically – provides both sides with important possibilities for increased credibility and effectiveness of their foreign policy objectives.

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