

# *Colloquy*

*Turkey's foreign policy:  
a dramatic success*

**Anthony  
Shadid**

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*\* Anthony Shadid is a foreign correspondent for the New York Times based in Beirut, Lebanon. He won the Pulitzer Prize in 2004 and again in 2010 for his dispatches from Iraq.*

Many of Shadid's readers were worried when news broke of his detention in Libya earlier this year, during which, it later emerged, he was subjected to mock execution rituals and constant beatings.

Known for his articulate and compelling writing for The New York Times, Shadid is without doubt one of the best journalists of our time, and deserves much credit for his coverage of events from both the perspective of his office in the heart of the Middle East, and his travels around the area.

The Pulitzer Prize winning journalist was arrested by the Libyan army earlier this year, along with three of his colleagues. He and his colleagues were repeatedly beaten with fists and rifle butts, and forced to undergo mock executions. "One of the soldiers pointed a gun at my head. And another one ordered him to shoot," says Shadid, re-living his four-day captivity.

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They were eventually freed, thanks to Turkey's efforts, and were deported from Libya to Tunisia following the release.

He is very fond of Turkey and its

foreign policy in the face of sweeping protests in the Middle East and North Africa that have overthrown three regimes so far and pose challenges to the rest. He acknowledges that like other Western nations, Turkey was caught off-guard by the Arab Spring; but, he argues, Turkey is the only country that has been thinking systematically about the region.

According to Shadid, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan takes personal relationships with leaders of other countries very seriously, and this "kind of colors policy."

Shadid says Turkish foreign policy is "amazing" and deems the state visits to Tunisia, Egypt and Libya "a dramatic success."

Erdoğan, along with nearly 200 businessmen and couple of his ministers, paid a historic visit to Egypt, Tunisia and Libya in September to re-set ties with the post-revolution Arab countries, which are currently negotiating a chaotic transition to democracy.

Turkey initially balked at the idea of intervening in Libya, where more than 30,000 Turkish nationals were working with a \$15 billion contract, but Erdoğan's government later shifted its position and demanded that Libya's former leader Muammar Gaddafi step down. Turkey has become a frontrunner in recognizing Libya's National Transitional Council, and has pledged \$300 million to Libya's governing body for infrastructure and humanitarian assistance.

“You can argue that in another way, that Turkey got it wrong in the beginning,” Shadid reflects, adding that Turkey turned that initial policy error into a success. “A 180 degree turn in six months... Remarkable.”

Shadid believes that Turkish foreign policy demonstrates the current unsettled nature of the Middle East – and that Turkey is the only state that is taking real steps in trying to make sense of it.

“Turkey is turning around what was a disaster at the beginning, I mean Libya, to the success right now. Images of Erdoğan in Green Square in Tripoli; it was remarkable. [British Prime Minister David] Cameron and [French President Nicolas] Sarkozy could never do that. Joining the prayers in the Green square- that’s a very vivid, very dramatic moment,” Shadid underlined.

When Erdoğan was in Tunisia, one day before his scheduled visit to Libya, Cameron and Sarkozy unveiled their plan to be the first heads of state to visit post-Gaddafi Libya. Only hours before Erdoğan’s visit, Sarkozy and Cameron visited Tripoli but received scant coverage in the Western media. Erdoğan, on the other hand, received a hero’s welcome in the three Arab nations and performed his Friday prayer with leaders of Libya’s provisional government and people in Green Square, or as rebels call it, Martyrs’ Square.

Despite Shadid’s praise for Turkish

foreign policy, there have been harsh criticisms levelled against Turkey’s response to the recent developments in areas with which it claims historical and cultural affinity. Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, Erdoğan’s foreign policy advisor for years, pursued a controversial foreign policy of zero problems and maximum cooperation with neighbors. Critics argue that Davutoğlu’s policy is falling apart, given that ties with neighbors have deteriorated since he became foreign minister.

Despite efforts to reconcile with neighbors, sometimes successfully, Turkey’s relations with Syria and Israel remain poor due to what Davutoğlu says their irresponsible actions.

“It is true that in some ways ‘zero problems’ is more an aesthetic than a concrete policy,” Shadid says. “Relations with Iran are troubled right now; there are no diplomatic relations with Israel; there is a potential crisis in Cyprus; Syria is incredibly dangerous.”

“When you look at Turkey’s foreign policy successes,” Shadid argues, “they are not many, but nonetheless we must face the fact that Turkey’s profile in the region is unprecedented.”

“In Cairo, Erdoğan was walking around like a hero, and that matters. That is almost a desire for Turkey to play a big role in the region, due to the power vacuum there. There is a

dynamic whereby Turkey can play a more assertive role, at a time when the region is so unstable. Clearly Turkey is the only country that is thinking systematically about the region. The Americans and Europeans are not. The Israelis are isolated, and the Iranians are defensive,” says Shadid.

Turkey’s foreign policy makers repeatedly claim that their policy is a principled one: moving away from those who abandon basic moral principles like respect for human rights and democracy.

Shadid says he disagrees with the notion that Turkish foreign policy was principled in the beginning.

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“I am not saying whether this is good or bad, but the Turkish Prime Minister got it right early on, [Egypt’s former President Hosni] Mubarak has to go. There was a reluctance to give up on Gaddafi, deep reluctance to give up on [Syrian President] Bashar [al-Assad]. Egypt was easy. What is remarkable is that they despite that ambiguity, contradiction and even failure early on, they have managed to regain their footing and cast themselves as principled at this point.

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Erdoğan was very successful in that.”

Shadid also thinks that Turkish-American relations are in their best shape yet, and undamaged by Turkey’s poor relations with Israel. It is claimed by many observers that Israel is capable of cutting Ankara’s connection with Washington, but the growing Turkish-American partnership has proved otherwise.

Shadid quotes American officials, saying that one can hear their anxiety over Turkey’s relationship with Israel. “I don’t see that,” he says, adding that this is a strong moment in American-Turkish relations -- there is a personal warmth between Erdoğan and [U.S President Barack] Obama.

“I think they like each other.” Erdoğan is topping the list of foreign leaders with whom Obama has spoken on the phone since the start of this year: ten conversations. Cameron follows Erdoğan with nine phone conversations as of October.

According to Shadid, NATO’s missile defense shield was key in maintaining strong Turkish-American relations. He claims that Turkish and American strategic interests have lined up, and most notably over missile defense. “Without missile defense, there would be a problem,” he says.

Turkey agreed to host NATO's early warning radar system in southern Turkey, close to Iran, Iraq and Syria. NATO has said that the warning system will be operational by the end of 2011. Shadid believes that the missile shield was a key objective for American officials.

### **Syria: a difficult case for Turkey**

For Turkey, Syria has been one of the most successful reconciliation stories of late, and an exemplary case of how two states, on the brink of war just ten years ago, have been able to bury hostilities. It was also a litmus test for Davutoğlu, who claimed that his zero problems foreign policy is working successfully in the case of Syria.

“Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu went to Syria 60 times and to his hometown Konya 20 times. It is remarkable. That discrepancy is amazing to me. That is a success story. That was the success of Turkish for-

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ign policy,” Shadid says. “But now that is falling apart.”

Both the foreign minister and prime minister of Turkey have become

Assad's harshest critics. Assad, according to UN estimates, has caused the death of at least 3,000 Syrians since the uprising started in March this year. But some also argue that Turkey changed its foreign policy regarding Syria not because the Syrian regime became more brutal, but because both Davutoğlu and Erdoğan felt personally betrayed and insulted. Both officials said repeatedly – and publicly - that Assad had lied to them by telling them he was determined to make sweeping reforms.

“I think both the foreign minister and prime minister took that relationship personally,” Shadid asserts, “I mean, there was a friendship between Bashar and Erdoğan. Neither Erdoğan nor Davutoğlu expected Bashar not lie to them and apparently he did. It was personal at some level. Turkey definitely has given up on him by this point.”

According to Shadid, Syria is going to be incredibly difficult. He thinks Turkey is exercising a great deal of influence in Syria, everywhere from the business community in Aleppo, to trade and potential effective sanctions.

He says that Turkey is going to play a very crucial role in where Syria goes from now, mainly because Syria is “so explosive.”

“If it comes to a civil war there, and you can see that playing out, you can see Turkish intervention, Iranian intervention, Iraqi, Lebanese, Saudi, I

mean everything. Very dangerous. Potentially a very dangerous conflict,” he stresses.

Turkish officials, including Turkish President Abdullah Gül, have warned against looming civil war in Syria. There are increasingly troublesome reports coming out of the country (which remains largely closed to international media) saying that thousands of soldiers have defected from the Syrian army and have launched an armed resistance against national security forces.

Shadid notes that Turkish officials are very frightened of the prospect of civil war in Syria, but he disagrees that defections in Syria pose a threat, adding that there is integrity among Syrians right now.

“What I mostly see now is that 10,000 soldiers defected from what it is a big army. I think that this is more of a morale issue than a threat to the regime. I think it was remarkable that the regime stayed so cohesive as it has throughout the crisis. There haven’t been any defections within the leadership. Stalemates occur when protesters can’t overthrow the government, and the government can’t put down the uprising,” Shadid argues.

Syria accused foreign powers of instigating instability in the country, and the Syrian leadership primarily based its legitimacy on its resistance to Israel. Being anti-Israel granted a kind of legitimacy to Arab leaders who remained antagonistic to Israel.

Shadid claims that the idea that Syria is representing resistance against Israel, along with the whole notion of resistance, is changing with the Arab revolutions.

He said that for Turkey, Syria is clearly more important than the Syrian government. “I think they have started looking to the future,” Shadid says, referring to the post-Assad period, for which Turkish government has already begun to make prepara-

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tions. But there are concerns that the opposition in Syria is not up to the task and that is the real question: what happens to the Syrian opposition? Both the Americans and Turks are thinking about that.”

Shadid said that in terms of Iran and Lebanon’s Hezbollah, there are signs that Hezbollah is toning down its rhetoric regarding Syria because they know that it hurts them to be so pro-Bashar, pro-Syrian government, making them look very sectarian.

“What Turkish officials tell me,” Shadid says, “is that Iranians changed their stance toward Syria after talking to Iranian officials.”

In a surprising move, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad also condemned the violence in Syria in September, and called on Assad to make sweeping reforms.

Shadid says he is unsure whether the change in Iran's position on Syria is related to negotiations with Turkey. He emphasizes the alarming nature of the situation in Syria, to which even Iran could not remain indifferent.

“So you can see people looking tentatively to the day after the fall of the Syrian government. One Turkish official told me this could be anywhere from six months to two years – this is a long process, and I do believe that it is impossible for the Turkish government to go back to the status quo we had before, but how this government changes, falls, or shares powers is very unclear.”

“I have no idea,” concludes Shadid.

*Colloquy conducted by Mahir Zeynalov, Managing Editor of CI.*