

New Face of Turkish Foreign Policy and Its Repercussions Following the Arab Uprisings

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Abstract

To date, and especially since the beginning of the Arab uprisings, there have been numerous discussions of Turkey's possible role in shaping the systemic transformation in the Middle Eastern countries. Many people, including various political figures, have sympathized with the idea that the Turkish experience can serve as a model, example, or point of reference. Some, pointing to deficiencies and problems in Turkey's economic, political and social systems, have argued either that Turkey cannot be considered a model at all, or it can serve as an example only in certain areas. But on the other hand, quite a few Arabs have repeatedly emphasized that they do not need a role model at all, as they are capable of establishing their own systems. Others have suggested that no one should insist on holding up an example –especially Turkey, as it is also a young country with limited democratic experience; it would be better to offer the Turkish model on a peer basis.

What put Turkey under the spotlight and brought all these discussions to the table was the convergence of Ankara's changing foreign policy course, changing international and regional contexts, and the Justice and Development Party (AKP) era. Without a doubt, Turkish foreign policy became more active, independent and self-confident during this period. These policies were largely developed by Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, and proved to be effective - especially in the Middle East and Turkey's near abroad. However, the unrest in Arab countries, followed by civil disturbance and uprisings, posed significant challenges to these policies. In this respect, this article will first of all explain the main principles of Turkish foreign policy under the AKP government. Then, the author will discuss questions of their practical application and success during the Arab Spring, and the repercussions of these policies across the Arab world.

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Over the past few years, Turkey has become an important regional actor. It has improved its relations with other countries in the region, even those with which it previously had tense relations, such as Syria and Iran. Although this regional activism was not specific to the AKP era, for the seeds were sown in previous periods, the outcome of the policies was most apparent during the AKP period, highlighted by changing regional and international dynamics.

The “New” Face of Turkish Foreign Policy in AKP Era

During the AKP era, especially with Ahmet Davutoğlu’s as foreign minister, Turkish foreign policy acquired a new and more complex political vocabulary, which made these new foreign policy principles both better structured and more compelling. With the help of the broader changes in global structure, these policies, which were presented in Davutoğlu’s well-known book *Strategic Depth*, could also be actively realized in Turkey’s neighborhood. This new foreign policy vision has made Turkey a more active, independent, assertive and respected actor in the regional and international spheres.

According to this “new” understanding, one of the main aims of the Turkish government is to change and expand its geographical perceptions in terms of its foreign policy implementation. Under this new approach, not only the West, but also the Bal-

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kans, Middle East, Africa, Central Asia, and beyond can come under the influence of Turkish foreign policy. Turkey’s regional position in terms of geography, history, culture, politics, and economic factors aspects is assumed by the Turkish government to be of vital importance in relation to the international system and world politics; therefore, the need to capitalize on this potential is immediate. In this regard, Turkey is posited by the ruling AKP party as a ‘center state’ within the context of international politics. This view seeks to redefine Turkey, moving away from the commonly used description of ‘bridge between East and West’ and towards a view of the country as an influential independent international actor. That is to say, Turkey is an order-establishing constructive state, rather than merely a connection point or a transit line between East and West.

This approach also creates a new normative consciousness for Turkey, paving the way for Ankara to pursue pro-active policies during the emergence and resolution of crises instead

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of following the traditional ‘wait and see’ policy. Regarding this normative approach, Turkey should play an active role, directly intervening from the beginning, or even before the situation erupts, as well as developing preemptive policies in its near abroad. This pro-active policy also entails remaining at an equal distance and staying neutral to the parties of the conflict, instead serving as a facilitator and mediator via diplomatic platforms.

Another much-discussed concept is ‘soft power.’ This type of engagement seeks to overcome dependence on hard power in foreign policy making through greater emphasis on a new understanding of foreign policy based on diplomacy, culture, dialogue, cooperation, economic interdependence, and historical connections, in line with changing global conditions. Persuasion rather than coercion has been the focal point of the policies, and ‘rhythmic’ proactive diplomatic efforts and economic cooperation are at the forefront. Regarding ‘proactive’ and ‘rhythmic diplomacy,’ Turkey aims to play a leading role in crisis management in

its near abroad, acting in harmony with dynamic regional and international conditions. At this point, the notion of a ‘multifunctional foreign policy’ should also be taken into consideration, as it refers to synchronic compatible relations with various international actors across multiple areas. This, in turn, should create increased interdependency as well as preventing Turkey from exclusively focusing on a single region or issue. In this regard, no particular relationship should be prioritized, and a balance should be maintained. As for the economic side of soft power, bearing in mind that Turkey does not have natural resources like oil and natural gas, it must increase its focus on developing human resources. In this sense, in order not to get stuck within its national borders, increasing production capacity, expanding the market area to continental scale, and even removing visa requirements are a must. Hence, in accordance with soft power policy, all obstacles and boundaries will be abolished with the help of diplomacy, economy and cultural exchange.

Another pillar of this foreign policy approach brings a new security-freedom equation. The best way to tighten Turkey’s security is to improve freedoms at home and in the world. Therefore, security-based military policies should be substituted with freedom-based civilian, economic, soft policies; however, efforts toward improving democracy and freedoms

should not come at the expense of security concerns. In this manner, Turkey aims to support and encourage democratization in regional countries, but remains cautious due to security and national interests, as witnessed in recent examples of Libyan and Syrian uprisings.

The well-known ‘zero problems with neighbors’ concept, on the other hand, aims to abolish the defensive position whereby Turkey sees itself surrounded by enemies. Regarding this policy of concentrating primarily on neighboring countries, Turkey is using its common heritage to build bridges, in particular focusing on cultural, historical and even religious ties. This helps Turkey to pursue constructive policies towards the development of new partnerships in the Middle East, Balkans and the Caucasus. Solving problems, and normalizing and improving relations with Turkey’s immediate neighbors, creating a stable peaceful region, lie at the core of this principle. Security for all, economic integration, high level political cooperation, and tolerance are the main pillars of this policy, which is assumed to yield win-win results. Therefore, this new period hopes to bring an end to all disagreements and divergences in the near abroad.

In relation with all these basic tenets, Davutoğlu describes Turkey’s target as becoming the ‘wise country’ of the world, whose individual principles and views are respected by others.

In this context, Turkey aspires to become the voice of human conscience and stand up for its values. Thus, with its ‘wise country’ identity combining the aforementioned principles, it intends to take action in resolving regional and global crises, rather than being affected by the crisis or being a part of the crisis.

New Policies or New International Structure?

Although it has made a tremendous regional and international impression, the foreign policy activism in the AKP era should not be regarded as a unique approach in the history of Turkish foreign policy. Prime Minister Turgut Özal (1983-1989) and Foreign Minister İsmail Cem’s (1997-2002) also pursued similar activist policies. During Özal’s term, Turkey, moving away from the EU and depending more on the U.S., improved its dialogue and relations with Arab states, most of which were also part of a Green Belt designated by the U.S. as a means of containing the USSR. Therefore, the Motherland Party era witnessed an active Turkish foreign policy toward the Middle East, mostly based on developing economic relations. However, given rising tensions with Syria along with many other issues, it is also possible to say that these policies were mostly based on serving the interests of the West or the U.S. rather than pursuing an independent line. İsmail Cem’s foreign policy approach, which fo-

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cused on proactive and multidimensional policies, was directed toward Western integrations at the same time as building good neighborly relations with nearby states. As seen from these two examples, Turkish foreign policy history has already encountered concepts such as 'proactive' and 'multidimensional' policies, despite their carrying different meanings in terms of differences of the governments and policy applications, as well as prevailing global dynamics. Yet, the nature of the AKP's political identity along with many structural alterations, Turkish foreign policy, the Turkish model and its regional influence are increasingly in the spotlight.

In practical terms, foreign policy is not only determined by the state itself; factors such as international structures, external pressures, regional stability and mutual perceptions provide the necessary grounds for certain policies. Therefore, not just the key actors and internal developments, but also the changing global dynamics and regional and international perceptions have enabled Turkey to diversify its foreign policy options.

In the international arena, the global financial crisis weakened Western powers and the U.S. by damaging their appeal, at least in the short term. Turkey, on the other hand, managed to ride out the crisis relatively unscathed. As a result, Turkish self-confidence increased, while trust in Turkey and Turkey's image was also boosted. This also showed the necessity of economic diversification and accelerated the search for new markets other than the West. All of this helped Turkey to engage in the Middle Eastern markets, increase its economic relations and in turn political relations, through emerging interdependency. As a result of the spill-over effect of its improving economic relations, especially with its Middle Eastern neighbors, Turkey expanded its influence and policies throughout the region and became a more credible and trusted actor.

From a more regional perspective, power distribution in the Middle East changed with the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. The credibility of the U.S. rapidly decreased and a power vacuum for new regional actors and powers emerged. This change in the regional balance of power coincided with a period where Turkey enhanced capabilities and increased its assertiveness. In this period, Turkey tried not to deviate from the democratic efforts and rhetoric favoring people's demands for freedom, justice, and prosperity in its relations with the regional countries. On the road to

changing the region, with the help of cultural and historical ties, Turkey did not face great difficulties in establishing commercial, economic, political, and cultural cooperation, and easily gained popular acceptance in most of these countries. In this climate, efforts to improve relations with neighboring countries, mostly the Middle Eastern ones, was a natural and pragmatic inclination. As a result of this policy, Turkey successfully improved its relations with both governments and peoples, which probably made Turkey the only country capable of promoting relations at those two lev-

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els in the Arab world. What is more, the AKP with its Islamist roots and increasing popularity in the Muslim world, and sympathy towards Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan made it easier to gain positive reactions in the Islamic world.

Added to these international and regional developments, Turkey's bumpy road toward EU integration gave rise to disappointments and tiredness. Turkey's shifting identity perceptions, naysaying by Germany and France, blocked or frozen chapters along with the unresolved Cyprus issue, all served to complicate Turkey's relations with EU. Consequently, Turkey augmented its foreign policy focuses with a particular emphasis on the Middle East, although it did not change its foreign policy stance towards the West, nor its commitment to EU membership, and the integration process continues with the ongoing domestic reform and democratization.

Moreover, increasing awareness that traditional national security-based and one-way (West) policies are not productive or sustainable have led Turkey to utilize the structural opportunities and to start following a new multidimensional foreign policy agenda. The internal improvements in economic, cultural, political spheres have also smoothed the way for Turkey to expand regional and international influence through its internal and external efforts.

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could embrace an efficient proactive foreign policy path, and focus on the Middle East and North Africa with more active and multidimensional policies.

Turkish Stance towards the Arab Uprisings

Thanks to the developments summarized above, most Arab countries began to sympathize with Turkey. Yet since early 2011, the incidents and instability in the region seem to have the potential to undermine these efforts, as most of those countries had reached the brink of change, which blurred their future prospects. The politically advantageous atmosphere and diplomatic and economic investments generated by the new policy approach have been put at risk by the uprisings in the Middle Eastern and North African region.

Furthermore, criticisms arose due to Turkey's different responses to each case during the upheavals. As the incidents in Tunisia culminated so quickly, Ben Ali was toppled before anyone could react. Thus, Turkey could

easily welcome the newly emerging Tunisian regime. Then scene became a little bit more complicated with the Egyptian uprisings. Mubarak did not surrender as quickly as Ben Ali, creating a dilemma: whether to side with the Egyptian activists calling on him to resign, or to recommend that Mubarak initiate reforms to meet the demands of the public. In this case, if Turkey called for Mubarak to go, but he remained in power, negative repercussions would follow. After a while, when it became apparent that Mubarak was clearly doomed, the Turkish Prime Minister announced that Mubarak's time was over, even before the U.S. President said so.

In contrast to the Turkish administration's approach to these two initial instances, Turkey took a different stance toward Libya –especially at the onset of the conflict– and Syria has been highly criticized. It was expected that Turkey would immediately condemn Qaddafi and Assad as it did in the Egyptian and Tunisian cases. At the beginning of the uprisings in Libya and then Syria, Turkey was not very willing to be a part of an external operation, and nor was it supportive of the idea. Rather Turkey took a passive stance and preferred to look for ways for reconciliation and negotiation with the existing governments via reforms. Actually, this different approach was reasonable, considering Turkey's more extensive relations with both countries. At that moment, the number of Turkish

workers in Libya was around 25,000 and economic relations were at an important level; Turkey did not want to endanger the Turkish citizens residing in Libya, or the improving economic relations as also seen in the case of Syria. This risk, coupled with Turkey's tendency to act independently from Western powers, particularly in terms of regional and international conflicts, and the new-style foreign policy activism, prevented Turkey from immediately approving any kind of international intervention despite the strong emphasis on

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Turkey's role in conflict resolution. Therefore, in these latter two cases Turkey faced a dilemma of national interests vs. ethical concerns, which forced it to take a cautious stance towards the issues, one of which ended up with a NATO intervention (Libya) while the other (Syria) remains uncertain.

The recent developments in the region have showed that Turkey tries to maintain a balance between promoting democracy and idealism, and

national interests and realism while applying its proactive foreign policy in the region, especially in times of crisis. The pragmatism of the Turkish position is based on the realism of Turkish foreign policy that seeks, as Western powers and others would do, to balance the potential gains and losses affecting its national interests before producing an interventionist policy solely based on hard power. This has revealed that it may not be so easy for Turkey to get involved in each and every conflict resolution effort at the expense of national interests.

Repercussions of Turkish Policies during and after the Upheavals

In fact, as a result of Turkey's increasing role in the region, many segments of Arab society have been talking about a 'Turkish model' as something they would like their own state systems to adopt. Turkey's improving democracy and growing economy, along with its soft power and proactive foreign policy, are behind the Arab world's growing appreciation. The increasing gap between Arab people and their governments has made the Turkish example even more compelling. What is more, following the overthrow of Ben Ali and Mubarak, the opposition parties of the two countries came to regard AKP as an example and source of inspiration. Even while the new Egyptian constitution was being debated, taking the Turkish constitution as an example was discussed, and it was translated into Arabic for this purpose.

At this point, taking a look at the perception towards Turkey and its policies in the Arab world may provide an insight into the repercussions of Turkish policies during and after the uprisings. In first place, looking at public perceptions can be enlightening. Considering the latest polls conducted at the beginning of 2012, it is possible to say that Turkey still has a positive image in the eyes of the Arab people.

Looking at the data of Pew Research Center's Public Opinion Poll of July 2012, participants from Egypt (78 percent), Tunisia (74 percent) and Jordan (70 percent) believe Turkey favors democracy in the Middle East while this percentage is relatively lower in Lebanon (49 percent favors, 43 percent opposes). The same poll also shows that Turkey (Egypt 68 percent, Tunisia 78 percent, Jordan 72 percent, and Lebanon 59 percent) and PM Erdoğan (Egypt 71 percent, Tunisia 74 percent, Jordan 76 percent, and Lebanon 58 percent) have a favorable image in regard to Turkey's regional efforts and policies. When asked whether Turkey or Saudi Arabia is a better model for the role of religion in Tunisian government, 63 percent named Turkey as the ideal whereas 15 percent survey participants answered that neither model is appropriate.

Another opinion poll conducted by YouGov in February 2012 indicates that 3 in 4 respondents across the Arab world think the Turkish politi-

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cal system would be a good model for the Arab states on the verge of transformation. Many believe that the Turkish model could be most successfully applied in Egypt and Tunisia, and is much better suited for the new Arab states than the Saudi or American models. Participants favoring the Turkish model agree on three main issues 1) Turkey is very close to the Arab world in terms of culture, religion and traditions, 2) the Turkish model has allowed Turkey to become a well-respected country in the eyes of the world, 3) the Turkish model involves Islam in politics, which fits into the needs of the Arab world. On the other side, those who do not believe Turkey could be a good model argue that 1) the Turkish model is irrelevant to the Arab world, 2) each country needs to have its own individual model, 3) Turkey is being closer to Europe than to the Arab world, and 4) the Turkish regime is different from most regimes in the Arab world.

The poll also shows that most respondents, regardless of whether they supported the Turkish model, believe the new Arab states should ultimately develop their own suc-

successful models rather than borrowing from other countries. Despite most participants generally favoring the Turkish model, 45 percent of them were concerned that Islamists in the Arab world may be willing to adopt the Turkish model to be able to introduce certain beliefs into government under the banner of religion.

Other than the general public perception, it is valuable to take a look at various attitudes towards Turkey from different political circles. There are divergent opinions of Turkey across political spheres. Although almost all segments of the society were united against the old regimes before they were overthrown, each had their own expectations and aims, which became more apparent after the ousting of the leaders, as they started to argue. The same fragmentation is also reflected in the support for or opposition to Turkish model. During the course of the revolutions and at the initial stages of the reestablishment, secular groups were considering the AKP model as leverage against Islamists based on the assumption that a secular Turkish example will lead to moderation of the Islamists. Islamists, on the other hand, sympathized with AKP due to its Islamic roots. Despite their divergent rationales, the Turkish model won support from the majority of both secularists and Islamists at the beginning of the transformation process. Yet, following the inaugurations of Islamist factions, especially in Tunisia and Egypt,

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the AKP's support for the ones who came to power has been perceived as a threat by the other political sides. This created a fear that after coming to power, Islamists could utilize the AKP example as a means to implant certain beliefs into the administration under the name of religion. With the recent developments in these countries, the ideological polarization and anti-Islamist stance has been accelerated and any support for Islamists in power is seen as a threat. As a result, almost all anti-Islamists started to take an anti-AKP or anti-Turkish attitude.

Other than the secular-Islamist discrepancy, Shia and Christian minorities' stances have also been in flux. Some Shia and Christian factions—in alliance with Shia minorities—are mostly influenced and shaped by the nature of Turkish-Iranian relations. If the course of the relations between these two countries is positive then these factions take a positive attitude towards Turkey. However, when the bilateral relations are frozen or de-

teriorating, accusations of neo-Ottomanism and Turkey as a Western tool are brought to the table. In this manner, considering the recent collapse of Turkish-Iranian relations due to the Syrian crisis, Turkey and Turkish policies are not favored by these circles.

Dilemmas and Future Prospects for Turkish Policies in the Arab World

Turkey, with its new proactive multi-dimensional foreign policy approach, has started to have a say in the international arena, and is still widely admired in the region. Despite temporary ups and downs in terms of perceptions as mentioned above, there remains a generally positive approach towards Turkey. In this sense, domestic, regional and international expectations of Turkey are rapidly rising. However, with the dilemmas and uncertainties as a result of the current regional developments, together with its political, economic and structural limitations, Turkey will inevitably need to make more efforts to sustain its credibility and effectiveness in the Middle Eastern transition process. Otherwise, without any means of putting them into action, Turkish rhetoric will seem empty in the eyes of the Arabs. Yet, this is easier said than done - not only for Turkey but also for any power in such an unpredictable, unstable atmosphere.

Recent experiences have showed that Turkey strictly adheres to the understanding that there should be no for-

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eign intervention, as the faith of these countries should be determined by the people of these countries themselves. Within the framework of this understanding, diplomatic means should be exhausted between the regimes and the people; and even when it gets brutal, as Davutoğlu asserts, Turkey will still try to use diplomatic means in line with the non-interventionist approach. However, this understanding unfortunately created the misperception that Turkey is indifferent to the massacre of the Syrian people by the Assad regime.

Turkey also emphasizes its careful approach that resists drawing lines of diversion and improving relations with all Middle Eastern countries. Yet resolving issues with a country or party may cause relations with another to deteriorate. Putting all the countries of the region (e.g., Israel, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Islamists, secularists, Shias, Sunnis) in one category may be problematic, idealistic and unrealistic.

Apart from this, when democracy promotion comes to table and Turkey somehow refers to the West or cooperation with the West in the region, this could also backfire if Turkey is seen to be a tool of the U.S. and Eu-

rope by some segments of the Arab society. The Arab bias that “Turks are Western-minded whether they are liberals, Islamists or conservatives” also strengthens this misperception.

Additionally, it has been observed that Arab stances and ideas are subject to rapid change. Hence, Turkey has no option of sitting back; there is a strong need for constant improvement and efforts to stabilize the region in line with expectations. Turkey should continue its attempts to strengthen its democracy and domestic harmony. Major domestic restructuring should be preserved in the same way. This will boost Turkey’s self-confidence, credibility and persuasiveness in regional and international realm so that the negative shift in Arab perceptions and attitudes will be minimized.

All of this clearly shows that some policies seem ideal on paper but may not provide the desired outcomes, or may not be put into realized correctly due to national interests. Al-

many serious dilemmas, notably during the uprisings: interests vs. ethical concerns; cooperating with the West –being seen as a tool of the West from time to time– vs. trying to act alone –with limited power and capacity–; its actual capacity vs. capacity needed to achieve its goals.

Turkey has quietly arrived at a historic crossroad. There is no doubt that Turkey can make an impact and play a key role in the region; however, its ability to be an influential regional power and become a source of inspiration remains under question considering all the obstacles, deficiencies and dilemmas Turkey is encountering. Turkey must analyze and work on these weaknesses as well as on its regional and international perceptions if it seriously aims to play a credible regional role as well as fulfilling domestic, regional and international expectations.

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though the new Turkish foreign policy framework seems ideal on paper and as rhetoric, it may bring different understandings and perceptions in practice, as discussed throughout the article. That is why Turkey has faced