

### Turkey and the Arab Spring

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Over the past decade, the Arab world has become the focus of intense political activity in Turkey and the cornerstone of its new geo-strategic outlook. With a new elite coming to power in Turkey, the connection has acquired a religious-ideological character and the region has also become a major target for economic expansion. However, the flowering relationship now faces a serious challenge as a result of the current instability in the Arab world. This article examines the possible effects of the Arab Spring on Turkey's regional game plan. In order to accurately assess those challenges, we should begin by identifying the structural, non-political elements sustaining Turkish-Arab relations.

#### Strategy, Economy, and Faith in Motion

Turkey's attempt to attain a new and improved strategic balance embraces all its neighbors, from the Balkans and the Black Sea region to central Asia and even to the Far East and sub-Saharan Africa. Turkey's reengagement with the Middle East, however, seems to be the linchpin of its by-now well-known policy of "strategic depth" as designed by current Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu.

This new policy stems primarily from an attempt to redefine Turkey's strategic role in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Bloc and to counter Europe's reluctance to admit it to the European Union. It sees a new role for Turkey as a world power, connecting Europe and Asia, sitting astride some of the world's major thoroughfares, and successfully merging Islam with European culture.

In addition to the strategic importance of the Arab world, economic pressures have been a major factor in the new policy. Turkey's burgeoning service industries and reinvigorated manufacturing capability were in desperate need of new markets. Europe offered limited possibilities for growth; the Balkans, recently released from Russia's yoke, were embraced by their neighbors to the West; Central Asia and the Caucasus were already saturated to some extent. The Arab neighbors to the south were a major accessible market.

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As data recently prepared by Professor Nader Habibi and Dr. Joshua W. Walker show clearly, Turkey's trade with the Arab world has grown almost tenfold since 2000.<sup>2</sup> This growing market seems to have offset a slow, long-term decline in exports to Europe. The UAE is currently the main Arab importer of Turkish goods and services by far, but trade with Syria and northern Iraq is growing rapidly. Imports into Turkey, most importantly of Iranian oil and followed by Iraqi and Algerian oil, also grew, but at a much slower pace.

## **A Pan-Islam for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

But where the Arab Middle East is concerned, there were other factors at play. Turkey's new leaders have intimate ties with the Arab world that go back several decades. The current president, Abdullah Gül, worked for many years as an employee of the Saudi Islamic Development Bank; Foreign Minister Davutoğlu lectured at universities in the Arab world, and many senior politicians, including Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, were part of the Islamic youth movements of the 1970s that were guided by the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. After their long struggle to take over the state, these leaders were eager to develop closer ties with their erstwhile acquaintances.

Turkey's relations with Syria are a case in point. From enmity bordering on war with Assad the father in 1998, Turkey has moved to make Assad the son a close ally upon his succession in 2000. In short order the countries solved their water disputes, opened their borders, and established a virtual economic free-trade zone. Tellingly, in a recent move to create a regional visa union between Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey, Prime Minister Erdoğan suggested calling the visa "Shamgen," a play on the European Schengen visa and on "Shām," the common name for Greater Syria in the Ottoman and earlier eras.

Such snippets offer a glimpse into the way Prime Minister Erdoğan and members of his political circle think. The visa program is a perfect illustration of the ruling Justice and Development Party's (AKP) ambitions. The party has replaced the old idea, harking back to Sultan Abdülhamid II, of unifying the Muslim world under the aegis of a sultan with an updated and improved pan-Islamic vision, a union of independent Islamic states in which Turkey plays a leading political and economic role, similar to that of Germany in Western Europe.

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<sup>2</sup> Nader Habibi and Joshua W. Walker, "What is Driving Turkey's Reengagement with the Arab World," *Middle East Brief* 49, (Crown Center, Brandeis University, April 2011).

### **Israel: From Asset to Liability**

As Turkish-Arab relations improved in the mid-2000s, it became increasingly clear that Israel, once a coveted ally in a hostile environment, was becoming a liability. For many years Turkey's friendly relationship with Israel, which focused on military and intelligence cooperation, stood in the way of improved relations with the Arab world. However, a series of interconnected events has more recently made this cooperation redundant and has given Turkey the opportunity to distance itself from its former ally.

First, Turkey's perception of military threats has changed dramatically. The collapse of the USSR and its satellite republics in the Caucasus and Central Asia has made Turkey the major viable military force in the region. Second, having convinced Syria to deport Abdullah Öcalan, the leader the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), in 1999 and to drop its historical claim to the Antakya (Hatay) region, Turkey removed a major military threat on its southern border. Finally, the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 obliterated the well-equipped Iraqi army, allowing the Turks to scale down their military deployment in eastern Anatolia. Under these new conditions, the special relationship with Israel was no longer seen as essential.

While the regional balance of power should be seen as the main driving force behind the ebb and flow of relations with Israel, it was a succession of specific events that precipitated their breakdown. These are well known and need only be mentioned here in passing. They include the Turkish sense of betrayal when Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert failed to inform his Turkish counterpart of his plans to invade Gaza in the midst of Turkish-mediated negotiations with Syria; the invasion of Gaza itself during Operation Cast Led and particularly the intensely hostile coverage it received in the Turkish media; and finally, the Mavi Marmara flotilla affair, which the Turkish government seems to have abetted and in which nine Turkish citizens were killed and dozens wounded, brought relations to an all-time low.

Coupled with critical geopolitical factors—the reduction of military threats and the growing economic and political ties with the Arab world—this series of events could not but lead to a breakdown in relations. Furthermore, even if Israel and Turkey find a way to overcome the immediate political crisis, the structural elements delineated above will still hamper any chance of restoring relations to their former level.

### **Flies in the Ointment**

It may be in Turkey's interest to maintain strong relations with its Arab neighbors for the foreseeable future. It would be safe to assume that these economic and political ties will be maintained and deepened even if the AKP is ousted and a more secular government elected in its stead. Still, the Middle East is a complex political arena, and several problems loom on the horizon for Turkey. In the short run, the region will be increasingly unstable. Close allies such as Syria, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, and Libya face a long period of civil strife, unstable governments, and serious economic woes. Some of the countries in the region already feel the brunt of this economic crisis as oil production falters and shipments are delayed. Turkey may face an economic downturn as a result of its considerable investments in these volatile countries.

But even if the situation stabilizes and the economy picks up, Turkey will still have to cope with serious challenges. One major stumbling block is its relationship with Iran. As the Islamic Republic inches closer to nuclear capability, the pressure mounts in countries such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia to find a way to deal with a nuclear Iran. When the Saudi and Gulf regimes had a taste of the Arab Spring, they became increasingly worried about a powerful Iran meddling in their affairs. Recently, Ankara has taken several steps that place it squarely in the Sunni camp and alienate it from Iran: It has denounced Iran's main ally, the Assad regime in Syria, deployed the NATO X-band radar in Eastern Anatolia to detect Iranian missiles, and closed its air-space for military transport between Iran and Syria. Ankara's way of dealing with this tension will have an impact on the other deep cleavages splitting the Middle East, mainly on that dividing Iran and its allies from countries aligned with the United States.

Turkey's most recent interactions with the Arab world—including improved relations with Mahmud Abbas and the Palestinian Authority and Prime Minister Erdoğan's recent visits to Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya—indicate that the Turkish government has moved away from its one-sided support of Hamas and is attempting to position Turkey less on the side of the radical axis and more on the side of the "moderates." This may be a welcome step from the American and Israeli points of view, but it clearly narrows Turkey's room for maneuver in the region.

Four years ago, Turkey was still perceived by all sides as an honest broker between Syria and Israel. Today, Israel clearly does not have faith in Turkey's integrity in this matter. The same holds true for negotiations between Fatah and Hamas, and even between rival parties in Lebanon. The Turkish government seems aware that this may eventually lead to a loss of prestige

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and relevance as a regional actor, although at the time of writing its Prime Minister was still being buoyed by the fleeting cheers of the Arab crowds.

The struggle for leadership in the Middle East is bound to intensify. In recent years under President Mubarak, Egypt was left to stagnate and decline, and its influence in the region waned as a result. States such as Syria and Saudi Arabia attempted, with partial success, to fill the political vacuum. Recently, Turkey joined in, championing Islam and the Arab cause and leading the struggle against Israeli occupation. Now that Mubarak has been ousted, Egypt's younger generation is determined to restore its country to a position of leadership. It may take time, but in the process Turkey will be perceived more as a rival than as a benevolent friend. Both countries will vie for the role of main power broker in the Arab world.

## Conclusion

In the last decade, Turkey has fundamentally changed its relations with its Arab neighbors. From a source of conflict and enmity, it has become a model for Islamic democracy and a vital economic partner. The deterioration of relations with Israel was part and parcel of this process, albeit one accelerated by the current bungling leaderships in both countries. The new relationship with the Arab world is critically important for Turkey, and will remain so. Any Turkish government in the foreseeable future will be expected to maintain and improve its ties with the Arab world in order to reinforce Turkey's new regional strategic role and promote its burgeoning industries.

Yet, now that the heady days of an unconditional honeymoon with the Arab world are over, current and future governments in Turkey will have to take into consideration the challenges that the new Middle East presents. Turkey's support in the region is expected to shrink considerably as its stance on some critical questions is revealed: Will it side with the new and disappointing regimes or with the people? Will it place itself squarely in the Sunni camp? And will its special blend of religion and secularism be embraced by the suspicious Islamists? They will also have to contend with economic setback, at least in the short and medium-term. These tensions, already raising doubts about Turkey's aims in the region, will intensify in the near future as it is forced to take sides in the Palestinian-Israeli peace negotiations and as it considers an armed invasion of the Kurdish areas in northern Iraq following the rapid increase in PKK attacks in eastern Anatolia.

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