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TURKEY AFTER THE ARAB UPRISINGS: DIFFICULTIES OF HANGING ON IN THERE

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In the early days of the Arab uprisings, Turkey was seen as the “winner.” Yet after more than two years Turkey has lost most of its lucrative economic relations with the region, begun to experience crisis in its relations with several regional countries, and more significantly so far has failed to achieve its foreign policy goals. How has this happened? Why has Turkey faced significant challenges to its foreign policy in the Middle East after the Arab uprisings?

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Turkey's New Foreign Policy in the Middle East

Prior to the so-called “Arab Spring” Turkey had become quite active in the region. In line with the foreign policy perspective that was developed by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government, which has been ruling Turkey as majoritarian governments since 2002, Turkey's Middle East policy also began to change. The AKP developed a policy of “zero problems with neighbours”, called for proactive diplomacy, emphasized the use of soft power and promoted economic interdependence in the region. In fact, in the period before the Arab uprisings this policy enjoyed considerable success. Turkey was able to turn its problematic relations, especially with its immediate neighbours, into cooperation. The evolution of Turkey-Syria relations from enmity to amity became one of the most significant examples as the AKP government, building on the previous government's normalization of relations between the two countries, turned Syria into its strategic partner in the Arab world. Similarly conflictual relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government became highly cooperative especially after 2008. As a result of that opening, Turkey began to enjoy good relations with all the main actors in Iraqi politics. With Iran, traditional competition was balanced by cooperation in energy and Turkey's efforts to mediate in the nuclear crisis. In fact, mediating regional conflicts became an important and novel aspect of Turkey's policy, from the Israeli-Syrian conflict to intra-Palestinian problems and on to domestic conflicts in Lebanon and Iraq. In the meantime, Turkey's trade and investment relations with the region intensified; Ankara engaged in efforts to build a free trade area in the Levant; and visas were lifted with Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and Libya. As a result of these policies Turkey became quite popular in the region, as is shown by different public opinion polls¹. Especially after his criticism of Israel that started with the Gaza War (2008), Turkey's Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, became the most popular leader in the Arab Street. Turkey began to be seen as a constructive actor, an economic and democratic success story².

The seeming successes of Turkey's policies were partly made possible by the regional conjuncture that emerged in the post-2003 Iraq War. The war altered the balances in the region by ultimately weakening the US, strengthening Iran, making sectarianism part of the strategic game and leading to increased polarization and fragmentation in the region. In such an environment Turkey's policies and emphasis on engagement rather than isolation made it – a country which is also a member of NATO and in

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¹ See, for instance, TESEV polls

<http://www.tesev.org.tr/en/program/foreign-policy-program>.

² M. ALTUNIŞIK, *Turkey: Arab Perspectives*, Istanbul, TESEV Yayınları, 2010,

<http://www.tesev.org.tr/en/publication/turkey-arab-perspectives>.

accession negotiations with the EU – welcomed in the region. Each actor had their own specific motives, such as ending their isolation (Syria, Iran) or balancing their adversaries (like the GCC), and yet all perceived Turkey's involvement with the region positively to a large extent, despite continuing to have ambiguities about it. Thus, the Arab uprising came at a time when Turkey was an important regional power. Furthermore it was popular with the opposition groups in the Arab countries, be they Islamist or liberal, albeit for different reasons³.

Turkey's Response to the Arab Uprisings

The Arab uprisings caught Ankara by surprise. After being largely silent in Tunisia, in Egypt the AKP government eventually called on Mubarak to “listen to the voice of people” and step down. Turkey tried for a more managed transition through reconciliation between the regimes and opposition groups, particularly in Libya and Syria where Turkey's interests especially dictated it to prevent instability. However, when these efforts failed Turkey decided to side with the opposition groups and began to adopt a robust discourse of “democratization”. Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu characterized the process of political change as inevitable and irreversible and argued that, “in this process, the place of Turkey is with the peoples of the region. Turkey will stand side by side with the peoples, their legitimate aspirations and work tirelessly for the realization of these aspirations in a stable and peaceful fashion”⁴.

In fact, Turkey began to support the countries that started to experience political transition. The electoral successes of Muslim Brotherhood parties in these countries were perceived as an opportunity by the AKP government. Having itself grown out of Turkey's Islamist movement, the AKP leadership historically had ties with Muslim Brotherhood movements. More importantly, however, the AKP with its own transformation to a “conservative democratic” party, presented itself as a model for the transformation of the Muslim Brotherhood parties to work within a democratic system. From their part, the Muslim Brotherhood parties also found making references to the AKP experience useful, to pass the message to the West and to domestic groups concerned about their democratic credentials. The Ennahda leader, Rached Ghannouchi, on several occasions likened his party to the AKP and referred to his excellent relationship with Prime Minister Erdoğan⁵. Similarly, especially

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³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Speech Delivered by FM Ahmet Davutoğlu at Africa-Turkey Partnership Ministerial Review Conference, http://www.mfa.gov.tr/speech-delivered-by-h_e_-ahmet-davutoglu_minister-of-foreign-affairs-of-the-republic-of-turkey-at-africa-turkey-partnership.en.mfa.

⁵ See, for instance, *Ghannouchi: 'Our party is close to Turkey's AKP'*; tunisialive, 29

the younger members of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt frequently referred to the AKP, and especially to its electoral successes and economic achievements as a source of inspiration⁶.

The AKP government's support for "Arab Spring" countries took several forms. In Egypt the AKP provided election advice to the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), the party of the Muslim Brotherhood especially during the presidential elections, mainly "to correct the image that the Muslim Brotherhood aims to monopolize political activity"⁷. Once Mohammed Morsi came to power, Turkey committed to provide Egypt with \$US 2 billion, both to finance infrastructure projects and to contribute to foreign currency reserves⁸. Turkey also started to push for a new strategic partnership with post-Mubarak Egypt. This clearly has been a new element that emerged in response to the changing regional political order in the Middle East with the post-Arab uprisings. Davutoğlu stated that, "For the regional balance of power, we want to have a strong, very strong Egypt. Some people may think Egypt and Turkey are competing. No. This is our strategic decision. We want a strong Egypt now"⁹.

After the toppling of Ben Ali, Turkey's relations with Tunisia have expanded as well and Ankara began to become involved in Tunisia's political change after the elections. Turkey's aid to Tunisia focused on the administrative and civil infrastructure in 2012, whereas it emphasized the social and educational infrastructure, productive sectors, police and security capacity building, and technical cooperation in 2013. In the meantime trade and investment relations between the two countries began to flourish. Finally, in December 2012 Turkey and Tunisia decided to establish a high level strategic cooperation council¹⁰.

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August 2011, <http://www.tunisia-live.net/2011/08/29/ghannouchi-our-party-is-close-to-turkeys-akp/>.

⁶ Conversations with two younger members of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.

⁷ *Freedom and Justice Party seeks election advice from Turkey's ruling party*, «Egypt Independent», 18 November 2011, <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/freedom-and-justice-party-seeks-election-advice-turkeys-ruling-party>.

⁸ *Turkey to provide Egypt \$2 billion in aid*, «The Wall Street Journal», 15 September 2012, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10000872396390444517304577653852418813354.html>.

⁹ A. SHADID, *Turkey Predicts Alliance with Egypt as Regional Anchors*, «The New York Times», 18 September 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/19/world/middleeast/turkey-predicts-partnership-with-egypt-as-regional-anchors.html?pagewanted=all>.

¹⁰ *Turkey, Tunisia to establish high level cooperation council*, «Anadolu Agency», 25 December 2012, <http://www.aa.com.tr/en/news/115269--turkey-tunisia-to-establish-high-level-cooperation-council>. High Level Strategic Councils, that comprise of regular bilateral meetings of Prime Ministers and relevant ministers of the countries

In Yemen and Libya as well, Turkey provided humanitarian and institutional aid to help to build stability and institutions. Libya, however, presented particular challenges for Turkey's foreign policy. Despite frequent crises with the Qaddafi regime, Turkey's businesses had established lucrative economic relations with this country, especially in the construction sector. Thus, after the toppling of Qaddafi, Turkey aimed to protect its previous position but is now inevitably faced with competition from several other states.

Thus, as regards the countries where the previous leaders were toppled, Turkey eventually developed a policy of either building new ties (such as with Egypt and Tunisia) or protecting already established relations (Libya and Yemen). Overall, Turkey adopted a pro-change position everywhere. The AKP government invested in its relations with Muslim Brotherhood parties, the seeming winners of the ongoing transformations in all of the "Arab Spring" countries. Finally, Turkey became involved in the transformation of these countries by providing technical assistance, political advice and economic help.

Although Turkey eventually developed a response to the Arab uprisings, the case of Syria presented the most complex challenge. Syria was the cornerstone of Turkey's new Middle East policy. Turkey was able to turn its historically very problematic relationship with this country into a very cooperative one after the Adana agreement of 1998. Thus the uprising in Syria put Turkey in a very difficult position. Initially Turkish policy was to try to convince Bashar al-Assad to initiate the necessary reforms¹¹. Yet as the regime continued to brutally suppress the uprising, Turkey's policy gradually shifted to the support of the opposition. However, Turkey has been facing a dilemma in Syria as the regime continues to hold on to power. Syria is a different case from the other Arab countries where the leaders were toppled. Domestically the Syrian regime has a larger support base in the country, mainly coming from the minorities, business groups and from the middle class that is concerned about instability in post-Bashar Syria. More significantly, unlike in Tunisia and Egypt, the Syrian army is largely loyal to the regime. Internationally, unlike in Libya there are limitations to what international actors can and will do to support the opposition forces. Again unlike the isolation of the Libyan regime, the Syrian regime has important supporters, namely Russia and Iran.

When it became clear that Turkey did not have any leverage over the Syrian regime after all, the AKP government drastically changed its

involved, have been an important tool of AKP government's foreign policy. Several such councils have been constituted between Turkey and its regional neighbors.

¹¹ *Esad-Davutoğlu baş başa 3 saat görüştüler. (Asad and Davutoğlu met privately for three hours)*, 9 August 2011, *NTVMSNBC*, <http://www.ntvmsnbc.com/id/25239896/>.

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policy and openly began to call for a regime change in Syria. Turkey started to support the opposition movement in Syria and allowed it to organize in its own territory under an umbrella called the Syrian National Council (SNC). However, the Syrian opposition continued to be divided and failed to come up with a common agenda which was inclusive of all groups. Turkey especially was accused of supporting the disproportionate representation of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in the Council. This perception prevented other actors from participating in this framework. On the other hand, Turkey also began to host and support the so-called Free Syrian Army (FSA), a militarized group fighting with the Assad regime. These policies made Turkey a party to the Syrian conflict.

In the meantime, Turkey tried to act in cooperation with the Arab League members, an effort that effectively meant cooperating with Saudi Arabia and Qatar, as the other members had more ambiguous positions on the Syrian crisis. Also with France, Turkey was influential in the establishment of an ad hoc group called Friends of Syria, including the US, several EU countries and the GCC countries. Overall Turkey played the role of advocate of the Syrian opposition's cause in the international forums and yet increasingly became frustrated with what it perceived as the inaction of the international community and felt isolated.

The AKP government miscalculated the resilience of the Bashar regime. Looking at the examples in Tunisia and Egypt as well as Libya, they seemed to think that the regime in Syria would be toppled in a short time either by the people of Syria or through external intervention, and thus wanted to take a clear, strong stance from the beginning to be able to play an active role in the process later as well. In fact, throughout 2011 both Erdoğan and Davutoğlu declared several times that Assad's days were numbered and predicted the fall of the regime in a few months.

Challenges to Turkey's Policy

By the end of 2013, Turkey's policies towards the Middle East continued to face significant challenges. As explained above, the Syrian crisis turned into a stalemate that had several negative effects on the country. These effects can be summarized as follows:

- 1) The impact of the Syrian crisis on the Kurdish issue in Turkey became evident in the early days of the conflict when the Assad regime re-started its support of the PKK in response to Turkey's backing the Syrian opposition. This led the PKK to strengthen its position and thus embark on a wave of attacks in Turkey against both civilian and military targets. At the same time, the PKK became the most prominent force among the Syrian Kurds through the establishment of the Democratic Union Party (PYD)

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in Syria. Initially Turkey tried to counter this development by cooperating with Masoud Barzani and using his influence among the Kurds in Syria. Eventually the AKP government started a peace process with the PKK in Turkey with the objective of solving the Kurdish problem. Recently, the government also decided to talk to the PYD as well. However, the uncertainty of developments in Syria as well as in Kurdish regions weakens the hand of the government in this bargain and continues to complicate the process.

- 2) The refugee issue has been another consequence of the escalation of the Syrian crisis. At the beginning of the crisis Turkey announced that it would welcome anyone who was escaping the brutality of the Assad regime. By September 2013 Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that the number of Syrian refugees in Turkey has exceeded 500 thousand. About half of these are living in 20 camps that were built mainly in border towns. In addition to its economic costs, the refugee issue has already disturbed the social and political balances in these areas and at times has led to tensions between different communities.
- 3) The overall economic impact of the crisis has also been important. As was discussed above, economic relations were intense in terms of both trade and investment between the two countries. After the crisis, both the insecurity of routes and sanctions on Syria effectively brought economic relations to a halt. This had a particularly negative impact on neighbouring Turkish cities such as Gaziantep and Hatay that were greatly benefiting from cross border trade and tourism. Syria was also an opening door for Turkish trade with the rest of the Arab world. Thus, the crisis has hampered the transit trade.
- 4) The regional and international implications of the crisis have also posed important challenges for Turkey. The Syrian crisis has deepened polarization in the region. Tensions and competition have emerged in Turkey-Iran relations due to clashing interests in Syria. Turkey has increasingly begun to cooperate with Saudi Arabia and Qatar in this process, leading many to question Turkey's role in an emerging sectarian division in the region. Turkey's engagement in the Syrian crisis, as an active supporter of the opposition, has brought Turkey into a crisis with international actors such as Russia. For instance, the interception and forceful landing of a Syrian plane travelling from Moscow to Damascus on 11 October 2012 led to a crisis between Russia and Turkey, in which the Turkish action was criticized by the Assad regime as

well as Moscow.

- 5) Finally, Turkey's policy towards Syria and in the meantime the escalation of fighting in Syria have led to the possibility of Turkey being dragged into the conflict with Syria. A major incident in this regard was the downing of a Turkish F-4 jet plane by Syria in June 2012.¹² On 11 May 2013, two car bombs exploded in Reyhanlı, Hatay where more than 50 people were killed. Turkey detained the attackers, who were Turkish citizens with alleged links to Syrian intelligence. This event created an uproar in the country and once again demonstrated the challenges the Syrian crisis was posing to Turkey.

As if the Syrian crisis was not providing Turkey with enough challenges, the developments in Egypt in the summer of 2013 which led to the overthrow of President Morsi by the military further undermined Turkey's position in the Middle East. From the beginning, Turkey criticized the coup and called for the reinstatement of Morsi. This position not only led to Turkey's isolation regionally and internationally, but also caused a crisis in Turkey-Egypt relations. Cairo recalled its ambassador, detained some Turkish citizens on espionage charges, and some satellite channels even boycotted Turkish soap operas that used to be very popular in Egypt. As a result of the problems between the two countries, Turkey's trade with Egypt and the rest of the Arab world, which was recently rerouted via Egypt due to the Syrian crisis, has been negatively affected. Thus, from talk of a strategic partnership the bilateral relationship has turned into a crisis.

Overall, as a result of the developments in Syria and Egypt, Turkey has suffered significant economic losses, its popularity and appeal in the region have declined, and it has so far failed to achieve its foreign policy objectives. With its inability to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances and its failure to act proactively, Turkey became internationally isolated as regards its positions vis-à-vis the Syrian crisis by continuing to actively push for regime change through the use of force, and in Egypt by refusing to accept Morsi's toppling by the military. The government continues to support these positions by arguing that they are the ethical positions and thus they will stick to them. However, although ethics are part of international relations, no government, including the AKP government itself as regards its foreign policy, operates only on ethical principles. Furthermore, by adopting an inflexible approach, the government may have lost its valuable position of being able to reach compromise solutions which may not only have prevented more bloodshed (ethics) but also may

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¹² *Suriye Türk Jetini Vurdu (Syria Shot Down a Turkish Jet)*, «Sabah», 23 June 2012. <http://www.sabah.com.tr/Gundem/2012/06/23/suriye-turk-jetini-vurdu#>

have helped it to achieve its foreign policy objectives (interests).

Towards the end of 2013, Turkey's foreign policy in the Middle East entered what might be called a "period of repair". This new phase has been marked by three significant shifts in Turkey's foreign policy. The most important change occurred in the relations between Ankara and the Iraqi central government, which became apparent with Davutoglu's visit to Baghdad in November, when he claimed "a flash start" in their bilateral relations. As for the Syrian conflict, Turkey became more supportive of the diplomatic process, particularly Geneva II, and took a more careful attitude, distancing itself from the radical groups in Syria.

Finally, the AKP government also began to further develop its relations with Iran, taking advantage of the coming to power of Rouhani. The failure of its previous policies, a newly acquired awareness of its own limitations as well as the changes in the regional strategic context all impelled the government to undertake the repair period. Furthermore, the need to focus on domestic politics in view of the three elections scheduled in the next two years could also be regarded as one of the reasons underlying this new course. Today, Turkey's foreign policy seems to be focused mainly on its immediate neighborhood, its strategic and economic – especially energy – interest in the region. This new foreign policy course appears less ambitious, while it also aims to develop better relations with the US and the EU. Whether the new policy will actually help Ankara to pursue its objectives or if Turkey might play more limited role in the Middle East still remains to be seen.