

## **Turkey and the Arab Spring**

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### **Introduction**

**T**urkey's geostrategic location as a land bridge to the Middle East from Europe and Russia, along with its Islamic and Secular identity enables it to play a pivotal role in the region. Since the inception of the Republic of Turkey, Ankara, at best remained a marginal player in the Middle East, but recent years have witnessed the assumption of a more proactive regional foreign policy, aimed at optimizing relations with neighbours, playing a mediatory role and reconciling with estranged neighbours. Although Turkey has even in the past made efforts to optimize its policy options with neighbouring countries on the one hand, and with great power players on the other, its recent involvement in the Middle East is noteworthy as it shows that Turkey is well on its way to becoming an important medium power of the world. The Turkish government under the leadership of the Justice and Development Party (AKP, from its Turkish name: Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi) defines its foreign policy as one of having "zero problems with neighbours". Turkey's primary stakes in the region can be categorized as economic, diplomatic and geopolitical. Turkey's cordial relations with countries of the Middle East, which are often locked in disputes with each other, make it the ideal country to become a mediator between rivals in the region. Apart from its economic and geostrategic imperatives in the region, Turkish foreign policy in the region is driven by the Kurdish issue. Therefore, Turkey's interest in containing Kurdish nationalism draws it closer to countries in the region which share the same concerns.<sup>1</sup>

Turkey can play a very constructive role in the region because it has gained the confidence of the regional players on issues of great importance and, more specifically, because of its role as a mediator on contentious issues between rival countries. However, this is not enough to explain Turkey's future role and importance in the region, specifically in the backdrop of the Arab Spring in Turkey's turbulent backyard. There are a number of factors and choices for Turkey, which need to be taken into account before outlining the opportunities and stakes in the region for Ankara. As the Arab Spring unfolds in Turkey's neighbourhood, it

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presents many challenges and opportunities for Ankara and also questions Turkey's responses to the pro democracy movements across the Middle East. Turkey has undoubtedly been viewed as a role model in the region, because of its foreign policy successes, economic growth and the ability to successfully integrate Islam and democracy. Just as the Arab Spring is in the process of transforming Middle East's political landscape, Turkey, an important regional power faces numerous challenges as it shares borders with trouble ridden neighbours. Until the start of the Arab Spring, Turkey was in the process of building bridges with its Muslim neighbours as part of its "zero problems" with neighbours. The thinking was that Ankara was establishing good ties with its Arab neighbours, thus building soft power, and then rising as a regional actor, which it has partially been successful in doing, by acting as a mediator between rivals and, also mending fences with estranged neighbours. Unrest in the region has increased Ankara's threat perceptions, as among others, states like Syria and Libya face increasing violence with each passing day.

*Turkish response to the Arab spring: challenges and opportunities*

The popular uprisings across the Middle East are still an ongoing phenomenon and it is too early to predict the outcome and implications of these pro democracy movements for Turkey. However, on a systemic level, it can be said that these movements are capable of giving life to a new political and economic reality in the region, as well as transform the regional balance of power. Therefore, a great deal of uncertainty exists for Turkey and all the regional actors, as well as the international actors. The challenges are numerous and the Arab Spring also draws Turkey closer to the West in some ways and has resultantly led to closer cooperation with the United States. There have also been differences

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in the way the situation has been viewed by Ankara and the West at large, and particularly the United States. Just as the Arab Spring began, Ankara's initial response to the crises was rather muted, which showed, to an extent, the uncertainty in Turkish perceptions about the shape of things to come. After the unrest in Egypt gained momentum leading to Hosni Mubarak's

ouster Ankara began to put pressure on Cairo, calling on Mubarak to step down in the best interests of the country. It may be seen that it was easier for Turkey to call for Mubarak's departure because Turkey and Egypt had been at odds with each other over a number of issues.<sup>2</sup> The Egyptian government had been uneasy with the Turkish Prime Minister's popularity on the Arab Street and Turkey's increased involvement in Gaza along with its efforts towards reconciliation between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, was viewed by Cairo as an intrusion in its sphere of influence.<sup>3</sup>

It may not be ignored that Turkey is pursuing a very vibrant economic policy in the Middle East, aimed at enhancing trade and investment with countries in the region, leading to an increase in exports of its products. This, and also the setting up of visa regimes in order to ease movement of Turkish businessmen across the borders, into neighbouring Middle Eastern countries is a part of its economic policy. However, the overthrow of Tunisia's Zein Al-Abidine Ben Ali and Egypt's Hosni Mubarak was somewhat, viewed with great unease by the United States, but was welcomed by Turkey. This also shows Turkey's assertiveness and its response as one of being independent of its NATO allies.<sup>4</sup> Turkey is an important NATO member and is in a key position to influence the West's continued plans for the region.<sup>5</sup> As Ankara pursues a proactive and independent foreign policy under the AKP, starting with the refusal to allow the US invasion of Iraq and continuing with its opposition to Israel's domination of Palestine; this thrusts Turkey into a position of increased prominence.

As the Arab Spring unfolds in different countries, it elicits different responses from Turkey, and this is best seen in how Ankara responded to the ongoing crises in Libya. The pro democracy protests in Libya, marked by calls to Moammar Gaddafi to step down resulted in heavy use of force by the Libyan dictator and thus, ended in condemnation from the international community. Interestingly, Ankara's response to the Libyan crises was muted, in stark contrast to its calls to the Egyptian strongman Hosni Mubarak to step down, although the heavy-handedness of the Gaddafi regime made headlines all over the world. When the fighting began in Libya, there were around 25,000 Turkish workers in Libya and billions of dollars' worth of contracts, mostly in the construction sector.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, Turkish investment was the sole reason for Ankara's muted response and the prospects of a sudden regime change could result in problems for Ankara. The volume of Turkish investments in Egypt was quite small as compared to the ones in Libya. Turkish stakes in Libya were instrumental in forcing Ankara to object to a no-fly zone and any kind of military intervention to support the Libyan rebels. Ankara's objections to

the no-fly zone were met with strong criticism in the Libyan street and demonstrators in Libya's major cities burned the Turkish flag and chanted slogans. However, Turkey had to back track from its initial position and it eventually signed onto NATO taking over command and control of the no-fly zone. It also sent ships to Libyan shores and evacuated wounded Libyans from the besieged city of Misrata. However, Turkey has not fully cooperated with UN mandated efforts at freezing Gaddafi's assets.<sup>7</sup>

Libya certainly represented a major challenge to Turkey's foreign policy in the Middle East, more than Tunisia and Egypt. Just as the Arab Spring had started to gain momentum, Ankara had time and again called on the governments in the troubled states to undergo reforms and vehemently opposed any kind of international intervention.<sup>8</sup> However, Turkey has been a strong proponent of the principle that long term stability in the region cannot be materialized at the expense of freedom and democracy.

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The main causes behind the unrest lie in the authoritarian and unrepresentative nature of the current regimes.<sup>9</sup> As a result, Ankara initially welcomed the pro democracy movements, starting in Tunisia and later, moving on to the rest of the region and stated, such movements are a welcome change and uprisings in the name of real democracy should be encouraged.<sup>10</sup> As an important regional power, Turkey tends to have adopted a critical stance on the implementation of the long cherished idea of 'responsibility to protect'.<sup>11</sup> Turkish sensitivities about its sovereignty compel it to believe that the western model of democracy and representative government cannot be applied everywhere as a standard model for change. Any attempt by a foreign power, just as the US invasion of Iraq, is bound to fail. Therefore, Ankara believes that reforms must come from within states hit by turmoil. Turkey has also been actively involved in efforts aimed at brokering a ceasefire between Gaddafi's government and representatives from the opposition. However, the crisis in Libya has placed Turkey in the throes of a regional and international dilemma. As mentioned before, Ankara's initial response was muted and was unable to make up its mind over how to deal with the Libyan crises. Later, Turkish position changed to one of being in line with the UN resolutions.<sup>12</sup> Although, the Turkish Prime Minister expressed his full support for prohibiting Qaddafi's use of airpower, at the same time

rejected the “foreign intervention in friend and brother Libya.”<sup>13</sup> Similarly, when the NATO airstrikes weeded out loyalist air defenses, Ankara’s response was discreet toward Qaddafi’s use of force against his own people. Turkey also rejected the use of force to protect rebel fighters, arguing for a Turkish-brokered ceasefire after which Qaddafi could begin the much needed process of political reform.<sup>14</sup>

The Libyan civil war has been a serious crisis for Turkey, in the sense that Turkey has had to make difficult choices and also backtrack from its initial position. Despite opting to cooperate with the international community, Turkey has not fully cooperated with UN-mandated efforts aimed at freezing Gaddafi’s assets.<sup>15</sup> With the situation spinning out of control, Turkey had to ultimately come up with a three point plan for Libya, including the establishment of a humanitarian corridor to allow assistance to enter, a ceasefire in cities surrounded by the regimes military forces and negotiations for a democratic transition.<sup>16</sup> Turkey also made a call for Gaddafi to leave power in the best interests of the country and the Turkish Prime Minister made several efforts to persuade Gaddafi, but has been unsuccessful.

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Although the uprisings in Turkey’s neighbourhood remain a cause of concern for Ankara, however, the uprising in Syria is a serious cause of concern for Ankara. Syria was previously a hostile neighbour, with whom Turkey has had a water dispute over the downstream flow of the Euphrates River and also Syrian support for the terrorists of the Kurdistan Workers Party has also been a major reason behind the hostility between the two countries. The AKP’s tenure was marked by a significant improvement in relations between the two countries, which also led to an easing of the visa regime and also enhanced trade between the two. Presently, Turkey is Syria’s largest trading partner.<sup>17</sup> Turkey has a lot to worry about when it comes to Syria and Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu warned that “internationalization” of the unrest in Syria could lead to “undesired outcomes”.<sup>18</sup> The downfall of President Bashar al-Assad and his regime, in the absence of any stable transition could lead to serious repercussions for Turkey. A destabilized Syria, and particularly a restive Kurdish region; to Turkey’s south can be a cause of grave concern.<sup>19</sup> Just when the Syrian government resorted to the use of force,

Ankara started calling for reforms and an end to the use of force against helpless civilians. At the initial stages, Ankara drew a three step reform plan for Syrian President Bashar al Assad to stop spreading unrest in the country. Turkey's proposals included the initiation of measures to increase the effectiveness of public services and, among others a more transparent economy. These proposals were put forward by a Turkish delegation headed by Turkey's National Intelligence Agency.<sup>20</sup>

As mentioned before, unrest in Syria could spill onto Turkish soil and a greater influx of refugees could draw Turkish troops into border operations, close to the Syrian forces. Gradually, there has been intensification in Ankara's criticism of the Assad regime, to stop his crackdown on civilian populace.<sup>21</sup> Syria is an Iranian ally, is at the center of numerous conflicts in the Middle East. Therefore, an unstable Syria could have numerous implications for Turkey, which also borders Iran and Iraq. Although, Turkey is non Arab, it shares similarities with Syria, as both countries have a Sunni majority with Kurdish and Alawite minorities. Peace in Syria is extremely important for the fragile stability of the Middle East. The interesting outcome of this crisis is that it has pushed Ankara and Washington into closer cooperation although the two have serious divergences over Iran. Turkey inherently opposes the imposition of sanction on any country and holds similar views when it comes to Syria, despite a very strong vote in support of sanctions from the United States and the European Union. The Turkish Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoglu visited Syria in a desperate bid to convince Assad to put an end to violence. Ankara's apprehensions are based on none other, than the humanitarian crises, in the shape of refugees crowding on the Turkish border and strategically, the impact of the unrest on its efforts to quell Kurdistan Workers' party (PKK) fighters active in the south east of the country, many of whom are Syrian based.<sup>22</sup> This has been an old Turkish concern and also, a major negative response, as far as sharing intelligence about its own anti-Kurd operations as well as its increasingly close links with the Syrian regime has caused much discomfort in Ankara.<sup>23</sup> The increasing proximity in relations between Tehran and Damascus, in the backdrop of Syria's isolation is viewed by Ankara in negative light.

Just as the Syrian assault on its civilian population gains momentum, Ankara is beginning to show more sensitivity to the situation in troubled Syria. The Turkish Prime Minister has stated that Turkey cannot remain a bystander to what happens in Syria. Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan has claimed that what happens in Syria is an "internal affair" for Turkey and not a foreign policy issue, given the fact that they share an 850 kilometer border and also because they share deep historical and cultural links.<sup>24</sup>

This is a direct hint that Turkey might intervene in Syria, if need be. So far, Turkey's efforts to convince the international community to increase pressure over Syria have not been met with enthusiasm. The international community's response to Turkish assertiveness has not at all been positive and meanwhile the Syrian government has announced reforms and Syrian refugees have also started returning home, although the government sponsored assault continues. Overtures from Ankara have been met with negativity by Damascus, and in response to the Turkish Prime Minister's announcement of sending the Turkish Foreign Minister with a message to Damascus, Assad's foreign policy adviser is reported to have said, "If Davutoglu is coming to Syria to deliver a decisive message, then he will hear even more decisive words in relation to Turkey's position". This shows that Syria is the most difficult of Arab Spring countries, as far as Turkey is concerned. Syria has proved to be a much bigger challenge, not just for Turkey, but for the international community.<sup>25</sup> All these developments have led to a steady deterioration in Turkish-Syrian relations. Turkey has painstakingly tried to maintain good relations with Syria, following the unrest; however, it has not been successful in implementing its "zero problems with neighbours policy. One thing which cannot be ruled out is that for the past few years, Turkey has been successful in building an image in the region, which has managed to increase its attractiveness in the region and made Turkish leaders popular in the Arab street. This has resulted in greater expectations from Turkey as a responsible power, and at the same time increased criticism of Turkey.<sup>26</sup> With the Arab Spring still in full swing, little can be said about the shape of things to come and how it will affect the future landscape of the region and beyond.

## **Conclusion**

The Arab Spring has affected Turkey in numerous ways and has raised many questions about Ankara's future role in the region. Although Turkey has remained a proactive player in the Middle East, its role during the Arab Spring has largely been criticized by many, on the grounds that Ankara has failed to provide the leadership role in the region, which was expected from it. Although Turkey has partially been successful in playing a very positive role in the region, by way of easing tensions with its own neighbours and also trying, with some success to play the role of a mediator between rivals. However, it has somewhat failed to convert its soft power in the region into concrete influence, which could guarantee desired results. Turkey is an important regional player, but it has yet to develop a consistent response to the crises in the region. Despite contradictions, Turkey's response to the Arab Spring has been measured and Ankara has

been calling for negotiations, reforms, and an end to violence and has opposed international intervention fiercely. Just as the Assad regime in Syria is becoming more isolated, a potential regime change in Syria raises concern in Iran, and this is where Turkish Iranian relations come into interplay. Iran is deeply critical about Turkey's role in Syria; therefore the Syrian crises may be instrumental in creating a rift between Turkey and Iran.<sup>27</sup> As far as Turkey's relations with the west are concerned, more specifically after the beginning of the Arab Spring, it can be seen that there has been considerable warmth, although differences may exist on a number of issues. Although Ankara and Washington remained at odds with each other as far as a number of Middle Eastern issues were concerned, however, the crises in the region has brought the two countries together as Turkey and the United States are closely coordinating their policies on a range of issues.<sup>28</sup> This is evident from the fact that Washington has participated in summits held in Turkey to discuss possible solutions to the unrest in the region. Similarly, the US also shares some of Turkey's concerns via a via Syria and the future political landscape of the region. Turkey's role in the ongoing Arab Spring cannot be overrated, but at the same time its role cannot be underestimated as Ankara is an important regional power with numerous political, strategic and economic stakes in the region.

## Notes & References

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