

## Turkey, the EU and the Middle East Puzzle: Cooperation or Mutual Testing Ahead?

Turkey's foreign policy methods and directions seem to evolve quickly over time, parallel to the upgrading of the country's international status. These changes are rather difficult to interpret for its EU partners, who need to understand Turkey's sometimes unexpected moves and assess the room for cooperation, but also anticipate possible divergences that may arise in the future.

Since the beginning of Turkey's accession negotiations to the EU (2005), the Middle East has in fact been a test region to appraise in concrete terms Turkey's willingness to align with European foreign policy positions and its added value to the definition of future common objectives. The rapid expansion of Turkey's influence in its Middle Eastern neighborhood clearly suggests that useful synergies could be developed.

The Arab Spring and its political outcomes presently force all the stakeholders to urgently redefine their priorities, evaluate their capacities and, if possible, re-agree on common principles of action, under very uncertain political and strategic conditions. Turkey, the EU as a whole and its member states will have to confront their interests in order to strike a new deal together, satisfying all ambitions and addressing future security threats at the same time.

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The recommendations presented in this issue brief were drawn from a Council workshop on December 14 and 15, 2011 in Washington, DC. Sponsored by the US Army War College and the Institute for Turkish Studies at Georgetown, the workshop brought together 60 top US, European and Turkish experts and policymakers to discuss Turkey's relations with the European Union (EU) and the United States, and the changing strategic context among them. We are grateful for the insights of the workshop participants, but they bear no responsibility for the content of this paper. The findings and conclusions presented in this paper are solely the views of the author.

## Turkey's power show in the Middle East: Virtually hyperactive?

Turkey's presence and clout in the Middle East have undeniably progressed since the coming of the AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, Justice and development Party*) into power, justifying Turkey's portrayal nowadays as a chief player in the region. Since 2011, the Arab uprisings nonetheless challenge this political construction, somehow revealing its fragility.

### ***Turkish "return" to the Middle East as a historical surprise***

Turkey's recent foreign policy attraction towards the Middle East has often been characterized as a "change of axis" and a consequence of the delusion over the fading European perspective. Indeed, some of the choices exposed since 2008 – early rapprochement with Syria or Libya, attempts to mediate with Iran on the nuclear file, estrangement with Israel – worried Turkey's Western allies as they may have seemed incompatible with NATO's strategic concept and the directions taken by the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).

Yet the first element of surprise simply lies in the high profile now assumed by the Turks in the region. Turkey indeed deliberately turned its back on the Middle East after the founding of the Republic (1923). The construction of a sound Nation State on the wreckage of the Ottoman Empire required the building of a new Turkish identity expurgating all past influences from neighboring cultures, especially the Arab one. Subsequently, the relations between Turkey and the Arab states remained cold throughout the 20th century, including during the Cold War, when Turkey rallied the Western camp as the Eastern pillar of NATO. The end of the Cold war and the events of 9/11 later paved the way for a redefinition of the geopolitical fundamentals in

Turkey's neighborhood, liberating the potential for a new, more autonomous, Turkish foreign policy.

### ***The motivations behind Turkey's presence in the Middle East***

The national motives lying behind Turkey's growing activism in the Middle East under the AKP government – from 2002 on – can be summarized as following.

As a background feature, one cannot ignore the greater affinities between the new team in government in Turkey and the region. While some observers wondered about the AKP's willingness to comply with the strictly secularist tradition of the Turkish Republic, the new Anatolian bourgeoisie effectively endorsed that Islam, as a component of private ethics and also in the conduct of public affairs, could become a shared reference with surrounding Arab elites.

Another essential variable is the new international vision framed up by Ahmet Davutoğlu, the current Minister of Foreign Affairs. His grand design is primarily aimed at pacifying the relations with neighboring countries, in order to consolidate Turkey's status as a geostrategic pivot. Reconciliation with Arab neighbors was essential in this scheme, notably with Syria and Iraq. Relations with these two countries had in effect been tense since the 1990s; their spectacular improvement from 2004 on provides a perfect illustration of the AKP's willingness to ameliorate the political climate in the region.

Turkey is also searching for new economic partnerships. Its high growth rates increase the country's exceptional energy needs. Syria left apart, the strongest ties were thus built with energy exporting countries such as Iraq, Libya and Iran. Turkish companies are also quickly moving into the Middle Eastern markets, in an attempt to compensate for the economic slowdown in Europe.

As the Turkish economy is highly integrated with the EU, the Middle East cannot stand as a substitute, but its share in Turkey's exports has risen up to approximately 20 % over the last two years.

### ***Turkey's new style in the region***

Economy has become an important tool for action in the region. The Turks effectively approached the Middle East in recent years with a new style, resting on a solid economic presence, growing cultural aura and a diplomacy of negotiation.

They exerted their social skills on a regional scale, continuously engaging in proximity relationships with a variety of actors at state level, with regional organizations such as the Arab League, and also directly with civil societies. The rationale there is to keep all channels open to allow for mediation in case of crisis. Turkey for instance claimed to be the only player able to talk to all parties in the Arab Israeli context, until its relationship with Israel deteriorated drastically. It managed to maintain good relations both with the Hamas and the Fatah and tried to broker an inter-Palestinian reconciliation agreement – which was finally obtained by the Egyptians. Until the Arab uprisings of 2011, Turkey had established excellent relations with most Arab heads of state and government, including with some personalities who were later literally wiped away by the revolutions, such as the Libyan leader Muammar al-Kaddhafi.

Turkish assertiveness was reinforced by their growing popularity among the Arab public, as was shown in various surveys from 2009-2010 on (notably the TESEV series). Polls early suggested that the Turkish diplomatic posture, especially its antagonizing Israel, was quickly winning the hearts of Arab people. Turkey then started to market its image as a successful Muslim democracy, a core element of the “Turkish model” nowadays proposed to the Arab world.

### ***Towards virtual overstretch?***

Turkey's extremely active foreign policy in the region nonetheless raised controversies. Some commentators labeled it as “neo-ottoman”, echoing concerns about a potential neo-imperialistic turn in Turkey's international ambitions. The 360-degree approach of Ahmet Davutoğlu at times seemed to be not proportioned with the effective means of action available to the country. Maintaining zero problems with neighbors who are often at odds with each other, as happens in the Near East, is indeed a difficult task on the long run – becoming almost impossible to pursue when the internal stability of partner states is brutally shaken by revolutionary movements.

### **The Middle East argument in the Turkey/EU relation**

Due to geographic and historical parameters, the Middle East is a place of structural intersection between European and Turkish foreign policy making. It can be considered as a shared theatre of operations, or stand as a disputed issue inside the Turkey/EU relationship.

### ***Compared status of the Middle East in the Turkish and European foreign policy framework***

In order to reflect upon possible synergies and cooperation between Turkey and the EU vis-à-vis the Middle East, one has first to compare the status of the region in the respective foreign policies of both parties. They were equally taken by surprise by the political processes erupting in Arab countries. Yet the delay observed in understanding and reacting to events has to do with the very nature of their action in the region up to the moment when the revolts started.

Turkey's current approach to the Middle East has often been described as a form of soft power. The same label applied to the European Union operating through the Euro-Mediterranean

Partnership (EMP), later Union for the Mediterranean (UfM). The nuance here is that Turkey positioned itself as an active economic power, relying on the solid nexus of interests between Turkish Anatolian businessmen and the new political AKP elites to conquer markets in the region. Turkey has taken advantage of the relative backwardness of Arab economies to make itself indispensable through the exportation of much needed goods, and proposed a free circulation integration model gravitating around its own territory. The European contribution to economic development was more that of a public donor, an investor and also a producer of commercial norms. The partnership it proposed excluded free circulation of the people between the EU and the MENA zone. The motto was thus to economically develop third Mediterranean countries, but to avoid too much social contact.

Similarly, if political dialogue was institutionalized between the EU and the today contested Arab leaders, exchanges were more of a technical nature, or dealt with topics of constant interest for Europeans, such as the containment of migrants. This minimal interaction was enough to portray the EU as a systemic supporter of the regimes. Its position was in fact closer to a *no comment*, not overplaying politically its institutional ties with local leaders. At the same time it paid more attention to the social and economic context of the countries, through the implementation of its various aid programs. One has to keep in mind that social and economic development was effectively the core objective of the EMP since 1995, in accordance with a revisited Kantian scheme to bring peace to the region.

### ***The Middle East and Turkey's accession process to the EU***

Since the beginning of the accession process, Turkey has tried to play the Middle East as an asset to foster diplomatic rapprochement. The Turkish

authorities firstly insisted on their proximity and influence in the region, in order to be accepted as an indispensable member of the EU diplomatic team. In so doing, the Turks apparently overestimated the scope and efficiency of European foreign policy, which appears as a never-ending construction not producing convincing results. Besides, the Eastern motive in the Turkish marketing discourse was always considered by the Europeans as ambivalent. To some member states, notably France, Turkey is situated too close to the Middle East to be safely admitted in the EU: taking Turkey on board would indeed mean sharing borders with Iran, Iraq and Syria, mechanically increasing the threat level for Europe. Keeping Turkey outside of the EU borders and assigning it a mission to ensure European security thus always looked better to adversaries of the Turkish accession.

Once the accession process stalled, from the end of 2006 on, Turkey played the Middle East differently than its EU partners. The Turks started to balance different items on their diplomatic agenda, sometimes presenting rapprochement with the Middle East as an alternative to the EU perspective. They also insisted on the parallelism between their own policy options in the Middle East and the EU's. Both had in effect their "neighborhood policy", even if realities associated with the expression differed. Convergence was still presented as the ultimate goal, but there was undeniably a sense of looming competition.

Finally, some Turkish foreign policy choices started to backfire on the accession process: the political connection with Iran and the quarrel with Israel come at odds with the EU policy choices, and caused intense worry or even irritation in Europe. The convergence/divergence of EU and Turkish foreign policy has thus been very much tested in the Middle East since 2009.

### ***Turkey and EU's first reactions to the Arab spring***

The differences in profiles and policy approaches between Turkey and the EU largely account for differences in the timing of reactions and resetting of priorities after the Arab spring. Social and economic inequalities, coupled with a general lack of freedoms, and repressive governance, provided the backdrop for political insurgencies in Tunisia, Egypt and beyond. With its already long established partnership and institutional agreements, and clear even if low profile objectives, the EU seemed better equipped to reform its cooperation programs once stability returned to the region. The main challenge is always to better take the people into account, in the framework of its traditional shared development approach. No emergency reaction was truly expected from the EU as a collective institution, contrary to the member states, some of them like France starting a race to make up for several lost political decades.

The moment of truth was certainly far more violent for the Turks. As a business operator in most Arab countries, Turkey's position regarding the political turmoil was reserved at first. Furthermore, it was not strongly engaged either politically or economically in Tunisia and Egypt. Yet the pressure to officially react to the revolts was strong, as Turkey had been positioning itself for a while as a rising power and a facilitator to solve crises in the region. In other words, more was expected of Turkey than the EU. The Turks were finally drawn into acting because of the level and quality of their commitment on a regional scale and the brilliant socialization network they had built through the "Zero Problem" policy.

Turkey's reaction mobilized two main channels. The first one was passive, counting on symbolic resources via the promotion of the "Turkish model" as a relevant alternative for Arab politics after the fall of dictators. The Turkish authorities voluntarily

underplayed it in order not to appear too assertive in the general context of the revolutions, which essentially appealed to the national pride (*karama*) of the Arab people. The second channel for Turkey was active diplomacy, in order both to meet its followers' expectations and to contribute concretely to the shaping of the post-revolutionary balance. Turkish diplomatic *savoir-faire* in maintaining fragile equilibriums was strongly challenged by the simultaneity of demonstrations and revolts in the whole Middle East. Balancing the demand of transatlantic partners with what was perceived as the new claims from the Arab field was certainly a crucial concern, as the Libyan crisis has shown. Turkey dragged its feet for several long weeks before joining the NATO anti-Kaddhafi coalition in the summer of 2011, and chose to play an intermediary role there, not participating in combats on the ground.

After the Libyan episode, the rapid deterioration of the situation in Syria hastened a diplomatic change of style. The Turkish government welcomed on its soil activists from the opposition, later the Syrian Liberation Army. It explicitly condemned the Syrian regime and stood rather firmly with the anti-Assad coalition, in agreement with a range of partners going from the Arab League to the United States. Turkish diplomacy has thus reaffirmed its inclusive inclination, but also made an *aggiornamento* claiming from now on to stand on the side of the people.

### **Working together: Operationalizing Turkey/EU cooperation in the Middle East**

Reinforcing Turkey/EU coordination of policies in the Middle East will certainly prove essential in the medium term in order to facilitate peaceful political transitions in Arab countries. Closer cooperation will also be needed to contain the security threats that may arise in the region in the aftermath of the Arab spring. Such harmonization

supposes a fair appraisal of the respective interests of both actors and of the parameters shaping their interaction.

***New motivations to coordinate policies***

- Both Turkey and the EU now face a **highly uncertain and risky regional context**, as long as the transitions processes have not reached an end.

A realistic assessment of the current situation suggests that we may not have reached the peak of the crisis yet. Eruptions of political violence will continue with a risk of spreading beyond the borders of states and even degenerate into regional conflicts – the Syrian conundrum stands as a trial here.

- Intervening in the Middle East with their respective timing and methodologies, Turkey and the EU may **develop complementarities for action**. They have a contrasted experience and historical narrative about the region. European nations remain somehow driven by a sense of historical guilt, while the EU has emerged as a politically virgin type of player, relying on a heavy and rather inefficient decision-making structure, and displaying little political ambition. Still the very nature of the EU construction makes it a potentially more powerful actor when its member states reach a solid consensus on shared political objectives, as the collection of their single contributions then comes in support, as an *extra*, to the common position.

The Turks by contrast have so far managed to partly rehabilitate the Ottoman past in the hearts of the Arab people, and now allege their cultural proximity with the region in order to legitimize their initiatives. Turkey's clout in the Middle East is presently a reality and the "Zero Problem" strategy will recover its relevance once the bulk of the crisis is over. The European Union will be a more relevant actor in the phase of re-building of sound institutions and fostering economic development after the crisis. The Turks, on the other hand, have

shown their ability to intervene in rather tense crisis environments, which is the situation likely to prevail in the Middle East for the next decade. Turkey is thus bound to keep a more adventurous profile in the region, while the West will be on the defensive or even on the retreat.

- Both parties have also affirmed their **willingness to coordinate**.

The crises in Libya and Syria have demonstrated that they don't have the potential to weigh effectively on the course of events in isolation from one another. The Syrian internal conflict must be either tamed or contained, as any contagion to bordering states, such as Turkey, would have disastrous effects on regional stability, thus touching directly upon European interests. This is the reason why Alain Juppé, the French Minister of Foreign affairs, extended in November 2011 an invitation for Ahmet Davutoğlu to join the EU's General Affairs and External Relations Council in order to discuss the Syrian issue directly with its European counterparts.

***Constraints for the Turkey/EU rapprochement in relation to the Middle East***

**- Strain on the EU/Turkey relation**

2012 doesn't look like a promising year regarding the EU/Turkey relation. As Cyprus will take over the rotating EU Presidency in the second half of the year, Turkish authorities have already threatened to freeze the negotiation process. Turkey's motivation to speed up its internal reform process in order to implement the *acquis communautaire* has reached a halt and the country might chose to pursue in parallel its quest for strategic autonomy, possibly driving away from European positions on the Middle East.

Divisions inside the EU regarding the Turkish accession process should also be acknowledged. While France is still opposed to Turkish

membership in the EU, the British government does support it and Germany has remained ambiguous. A consensus thus has to be reached among these leading states regarding the Turkish contribution on foreign policy.

### **-The convergence / divergence of interests issue in the region**

As an emerging international power, Turkey is in the process of redefining and reasserting its strategic interests and diplomatic style. Its Middle Eastern agenda still comprises some specific items that cannot be merged as such into the EU's common priorities. The Kurdish issue stands as a political burden for the Turks that can hardly be converted into a European concern. The Cyprus deadlock interferes more specifically with the Turkish accession process and Turkey remains rather isolated in its perception of the issue.

The divergences could go further as Turkey is presently trying to restore the regional equilibriums affected by the Arab spring, and to consolidate at the same time its status as a regional power. Turkey is notably working now on appeasement with Iran, as the relations between the two countries are under severe strain due to their opposed stances on Syria and Turkey's participation to the NATO defense missile system. In the wake of the Arab spring, some observers also perceived a slightly more Islamic flavor in the Turkish foreign policy discourse and practice. They suggested that the AKP wanted to push Turkey as a Sunni power on the regional scene, notably by refreshing relations with Arab Islamist political parties on the rise. This tactic does not seem to be in line with the EU political tradition, even if a general *aggiornamento* is presently underway to take into consideration the Islamist political forces in Arab countries.

### **-Role of the United States**

The transatlantic factor interferes in an ambiguous way on the delimitation of common interests between the EU and Turkey in the Middle East. Turkey has demonstrated lately a remarkable capacity to play on American concern regarding further destabilization in the Middle East. Turkey's NATO membership makes it even more self-confident that it can strike advantageous deals with the EU with the unfailing support of the United States. The American administration's pressures to re-dynamize Turkey's accession process are also usually perceived as unwelcomed interferences on the EU side.

### **-The Turkish model caught between Europe and the Middle East:**

The idea of Turkey being the most wanted participant in the new Arab political game may prove to be a transitory *cliché*. The Turkish model, or "success story", or "source of inspiration", as the Turkish government now labels it, is rather ambivalent and may not apply to all situations in the Arab world. It may also be too cumbersome an accessory for the new Arab political elites whose role is notably to consolidate the national pride. As the polls show, fascination with Turkey is mixed with wonder about its future attitude as a rising power who might become the next intruder in the region, siding with the Western powers whose image is still blurred. Furthermore, the Turkish democratic model presently seems to be in jeopardy at home, serious concerns being issued lately about the state of basic freedoms in Turkey and a possible authoritarian turn of the regime.

### **Conclusion: how to operationalize cooperation**

A few basic guidelines should apply in the months to come in order for Turkey and the EU to work more closely together in the Middle East.

1. Define a minimal set of shared goals, as the combination of interests between the two parties

might prove too complex to engineer on the short run.

2. De-link Turkey's accession process from cooperation in the Middle East, and invent a provisional institutional system to work in an efficient, reactive way. The Middle East should not be systematically considered as the place where the potentially widening political gap can be closed between the EU and Turkey.

3. Rely on complementary instruments and skills, in order to increase mutual confidence through operational moves, notably with regard to humanitarian assistance, which will be much needed in the Syrian case.

4. Foster more cooperation between the EU and Turkey on other international issues, beyond the Middle East.