



## **FPC Briefing: Weathering the crazy seasons- Turkish foreign policy in the era of political climate change**

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A common Turkish phrase says that in the summer, the summer does what it should do as the autumn does what is expected of it during its season, ditto winter and spring. It sometimes is brought up as a sort of rejoinder when someone complains about rainy weather in late September or the blistering heat of mid-July. However, as is increasingly the climatological fashion nowadays, the seasons seemingly suffer from a crisis of identity. They are confused as to which colors to wear and what face to show. It is now known beyond any doubt that this is the result of the world-wide, man-made phenomenon of climate change which is causing environmental and social havoc and disrupting popular expectations. Radical man-made climate change but of a political kind is also what has occurred within the Arab Middle East in the past year. What the region witnessed in 2011 in political terms has constituted an overthrow of the traditional order of the seasons and thrown popular expectations to the wind.

Despite the cheerful moniker of 'Arab Spring', rather than one specific political season dominating the political climes of the Middle East, an extremely diverse and disparate picture of trans-regional developments and processes has emerged. The spring of uprisings and revolution, the autumn of patriarchy and the winter of repression. It could be said that the seasons are playing crazy, appearing less predictable and stable than before when compared to traditional expectations. It seems that political weather forecasters will have to endure many second guesses trying to predict developments, trends and trajectories across this region. On one hand, fair and free elections in Tunisia in November 2011, the first country to have started the regional revolt against its former despots, seem indeed to cautiously portend a blooming of constitutional, multi-party democracy in this. On the other hand, the winter of bloody repression set in in other countries such as Bahrain and especially in Syria where over 5,000 people have been killed by the government since May 2011.

This whirlwind of political climate change over the past year has also affected and tested Turkey's position as regional and international actor. Previously, Turkey had been slowly identified as the new, powerful and increasingly prominent player within the constellation of actors in the Middle Eastern political landscape. In many ways Turkey's reaction to the Arab uprisings measured up well against a background of rapidly changing circumstances, adapting its stance quickly and intelligently. In fact, Turkey is perceived as having gained more importance and prestige in 2011 and Erdoğan enjoyed welcomes in some countries that were likened to receptions for a rock-star. Nevertheless, the events of the past year have raised the question of whether Turkey's aspirations of constituting a regional 'düzen kurucu' (order setter) through its well-known 'zero-problems with neighbours' framework will survive the volatile and fluid climate that dominates its Middle Eastern neighbourhood. This paper will attempt to summarize Turkey's reaction to the Arab uprisings in the past year and highlight the risks and uncertainties that the regional future currently holds.

The AKP's policy of open and pragmatic engagement with the Arab Middle East sets it apart from previous periods in Turkey's republican history in which foreign policy was heavily dominated by security concerns and a focus on 'hard power'. Recovering from the ravages of the First World War, the young republic adopted an isolationist and non-interventionist foreign policy that prioritized internal state and nation-building. External relations with its neighbours were confined to treaties confirming its territorial sovereignty and its neutrality towards the outside world. The Kemalist slogan of *Yurta sulh, cihanda sulh* (Peace at home, peace in the world) concisely summed up this stance. Furthermore, as the ideational basis of Kemalism was strictly focused on developing Turkey against the benchmarks of a hyper-idealized western-centric modernity, it had little interest in the



region of the Arab Middle East and resented the military support that Arab leaders gave the allied forces against the Ottoman Empire in the First World War. After the Second World War, Turkey's engagement with the Middle East occurred underneath the bi-polar logic of the Cold War and the country's strategic affiliation with the western security bloc, NATO and the US. It was only with the advent of Turgut Özal's premiership in the 1980s that Turkey began the shift towards opening up and exploring closer ties with the Arab Middle East. Nevertheless, the country's involvement in the 1990s remained piecemeal, security-dominated and beset with conflictual relations regarding neighbours like Syria and Iran.

The country's new about-turn with the Middle East only began to take shape after the AKP's election in 2002. This dynamic and innovative shift towards its neighbouring regions along with the emergence of an independent-minded dominant thrust in Turkey's foreign policy which Ian Lesser has called 'not so much neo-Ottoman as neo-non aligned',<sup>1</sup> should also be seen as a long-term consequence of the Cold War's end and Turkey's readjustment as an upwardly mobile regional power towards a new international climate of multi-polarity. The core figure involved in orchestrating this shift in Turkey's foreign policy has been Ahmet Davutoğlu, the current foreign minister who conceptualized and designed the current overall framework of interaction with regional neighbourhoods which has become known as the 'zero-problems with neighbours' foreign policy. This policy contributed much to the perceived ring of amiable and friendly relations that Turkey developed with most of its surrounding neighbours in the last decade, especially Greece and Syria. This approach was wholly impartial regarding internal political developments in neighbouring countries as seen by Turkey's silence on Iran's quashing of the pro-democracy Green Movement in 2009 and 2010.

In sum, one could see Turkey's framework of regional interaction in the past decade as based on those principles and strengths through which it aspired to project the country's own desired self-image in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: as that of a dynamic, open-minded, democratically stable and economically energetic actor. Its regional engagement has occurred on the basis of an Ankara-centric soft and civilian power that has emphasized diplomacy, trade, cultural products and co-confessional solidarity. Turkey's development of a vibrant and booming economy in the past decade, currently the world's 17<sup>th</sup> largest, provided it with the necessary leverage to promote this civil power across the region. In that sense, some have referred to Turkey internationally as a 'trading state'.<sup>2</sup> The popularity of Turkey's cultural output, especially popular music and soap-operas like *Gümüş*, *Noor* and *Aşk-ı Memnu*, in households across the Middle East and beyond should also not be underestimated in this sense. The ability to act as an impartial but concerned mediator in resolving regional disputes was another key strength which tended to enhance Turkey's position as a positive force, although this influence began to decline in parallel with the gradual deterioration of relations with Israel after 2008.

These elements combined with the regional perception of Turkey, especially since the AKP's emergence, to represent a source of inspiration across the Arab Middle East and the wider Muslim world. This became an enormous source of symbolic capital that allowed Turkey to legitimately project itself as a modern and dynamic force for change. The AKP's image as a moderate and pragmatic Muslim-Democrat party has constituted a key ingredient in that mix. Tunisia's current Prime Minister, Rachid Ghannouchi, for instance, described the AKP as 'the best model I can think of'.<sup>3</sup> Tariq Ramadan, the grandson of the founder of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood also made comments reaffirming the relevance of Turkey's experiences. In a climate in which Islamist parties

<sup>1</sup> Lesser, I. (2010) 'Turkey, Brazil and Iran: A Glimpse of the Future', *Today Zaman*, May 23

[http://www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail\\_getNewsById.action;jsessionid=0553866C36AADE3EF128FD0F5FBDCD42?newsId=210928](http://www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail_getNewsById.action;jsessionid=0553866C36AADE3EF128FD0F5FBDCD42?newsId=210928)

<sup>2</sup> Özel, S. and Özcan, G. (2011) 'Turkey's dilemmas', *Journal of Democracy*, 22(4), p.134

<sup>3</sup> Yananç, B. (2011) 'Reluctant but „model“ Turkey seeks change', *Hürriyet Daily News*, Feb. 1 -

<http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=turkey-wishes-for-change-but-unwilling-to-play-a-role-2011-02-01>



are likely to set the political tone in many of the new democracies, this sense of socio-political 'modelhood'<sup>4</sup> will also benefit Turkey's regional standing. It is obvious that Turkey's membership of the Muslim world and its strong historical and cultural ties to the Middle East has enhanced its image as being the most relevant to follow.

When one looks at the individual cases of the uprisings in the last year one can see that Turkey's response differed substantially depending on the context of the respective cases. Along with most of the international community, the outbreak of the Arab uprisings and the speed with which they jumped across the region caught the country by surprise and forced it to adapt to dramatic and rapidly changing circumstances. In its responses, one can identify a tension between instances in which Turkey offered its own internal experiences as a source of inspiration and others in which it became more pro-active in urging authoritarian regimes to institute democratic change. Jonathon Monten's distinction between different means of international norms promotion, 'exemplarism' and 'vindicationism', can be applied to this tension in Turkey responses.<sup>5</sup> While 'exemplarism' as a stance consists of promoting values and norms by presenting a forthright example of them, 'vindicationism' involves taking more pro-active and interventionist measures to disseminate them further.

In the case of Tunisia and Egypt, Turkey's government was quick to wholeheartedly endorse the pro-democracy demonstrations and press for the resignation of its authoritarian leaders. In the Egyptian case, Erdoğan publicly called upon Mubarak to relinquish his grip on power and respect the democratic wishes of the Egyptian people. This stance earned Turkey enormous kudos across the region which was multiplied and intensified through the regional mass media that has also emerged in the last decade. Indeed, Erdoğan, crowned as Time's man of the year for 2011, has enjoyed the status akin to that of a rock-star on state visits to countries like Egypt. In these cases, Turkey chose to go beyond projecting itself as an example of what people see in it and used its position to directly challenge the authority of Mubarak and Ben Ali.

In other circumstances however, such as the popular uprisings in Bahrain and Yemen or pro-democracy demonstrations in Saudi Arabia, Ankara has chosen to tone down the call for democratic change and preferred rather to present itself as a successful example of democratic values. Of course it needs to be said that Turkey was certainly not alone in choosing this path where it suited its interests. Libya and Syria were more complicated and Turkey was initially reluctant to back calls for the regimes to step down. Again this needs to be seen through the prism of the particular relations with both countries. In the case of Libya, the heavy presence of Turkish construction businesses with large contracts and a workforce of 25,000 Turks at the outset of the uprising hobbled its reaction quite understandably. Additionally, the government's evident unease with a western-led armed intervention against the Gaddafi regime caused Turkey to initially abstain from involvement before eventually shifting its position 180 degrees.

The ongoing situation with Syria is even more complicated as relations prior to the uprising had undergone a considerable rapprochement since both countries came close to war in 1997. The upturn in relations included a large rise in bilateral trade, visa agreements and frequent visits by high-level state officials between Ankara and Damascus. Turkey invested a lot of time and energy into fortifying this relationship and used it to advance its case for being accepted as a constructive and important power in the region. For that principal reason, the on-going repression of Syria's populace and the determination of the Assad regime to stay its bloody course at all costs have been a slap in Turkey's face. The repression struck a nerve with the Turkish public who sympathize with the

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<sup>4</sup> Çavdar, G. (2006) 'Islamist New Thinking in Turkey: A Model for Political Learning?', *Political Science Quarterly*, 121(3), p.497

<sup>5</sup> Monten, J. (2005) 'The Roots of the Bush Doctrine Power, Nationalism, and Democracy Promotion in U.S. Strategy', *International Security*, 29(4), p.113



plight of their southern neighbours. Furthermore, it embarrassed the government in the international arena by revealing how ineffective the goodwill it had developed with the Assad regime was as a bargaining tool in urging the Syrian government to stop its repression. Since then, Turkey's tone has hardened and even pointed towards the possibility of military intervention in Northern Syria. Furthermore, the government has allowed the Syrian National Council to hold meetings and press conferences in Turkey.

These different developments highlight the datedness of the overall 'zero problems with neighbours' concept that has been at the centre of Turkey's framework of interaction with its neighbouring regions in recent years. Turkey's support of pro-democracy uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya as well as its calls for harsh sanctions against the Syrian regime highlight the difficulty of maintaining a friendly but non-interventionist stance with its neighbours in the current climate of socio-political upheaval. In the case of Syria, Turkey's new stance has also complicated relations with Iran which have been quite fragile recently since a NATO radar shield was installed in the east of the country near Malatya. Promoting democratic values and norms or perhaps even liberal principles focusing on human and civil rights and liberties in a region with a strong tradition for authoritarian governance cannot be reconciled with a regional position that bases itself on 'zero problems' with its individual member states.

This stance seemed to work in a period of apparent regional regime stability in which the emphasis in relations focused on economic rather than political dimensions. The uprisings of the past year and the brutality of their suppression in neighbouring states like Syria point towards the need to construct a new manner of framing Turkey's position within the wider region of the Arab Middle East. Regional climate change across the Arab Middle East can claim to have swept away a key pillar of Turkey's regional foreign policy. Under the circumstances, given the immense popularity of its political leaders in the region, one could say that Turkey has managed to pass through the past year in better shape than most of the relevant powers. Additionally, the threat of a global economic recession emanating from the US and the EU has made both powers seem rather weak and ineffective in contrast to Turkey, although it will surely also undergo an economic slow-down in the future.

However, the million dollar question now will be how Turkey plans to reconfigure its regional outlook to match the new circumstances of an environment that is likely to remain unpredictable and increasingly unstable. If the promotion of democratic norms and values were to increasingly figure as an objective in Turkey's foreign policy, how would it be projected across a region that includes a mix of autocratic regimes, like Saudi Arabia and Iran, liberalizing monarchies, like Morocco, Kuwait and Jordan, and democratizing countries like Tunisia and Egypt. It is clear that a rhetoric of variable and selective application whereby pro-democracy uprisings are supported and endorsed in some countries but not in others may damage Turkey's position across both sides of the divide. Furthermore, does Turkey possess the capacity and the resources to assert a pro-democratic vision across the region? If this is in doubt, it may lose significant standing once the gap between the rhetoric and the capabilities materializes if it indeed wishes to integrate such a vision in its foreign outlook. In Syria for instance, Turkey's position took a hit when its accumulated goodwill with the Assad regime did not enable it to exercise enough influence to discourage the bloody repression of demonstrations. Ankara should also not take the current popularity it enjoys across the region for granted. Egypt especially can be expected to try to reassert itself as the dominant regional power in the future and it will not look favourably upon any new challengers to its claim. Some have suggested that under the present circumstances in which security seems to be returning to the agenda in regional politics, Turkey may benefit from a closer re-engagement with traditional allies like the US and EU in assembling a new framework of interaction with the Middle East rather than pursuing a unilateralist position.



Moreover, Turkey's ambition to inspire the fledgling democracies of the Arab neighbourhood through a policy of exemplarism that offers its own values, experiences and practices as a source of inspiration bears a few risks of its own. As such, the government should urgently address some of the problems and faults that currently figure prominently in the domestic arena. This would need to include particularly the authoritarian drift that has increasingly affected Turkey's social and political pluralism in recent years and the Kurdish conflict which re-ignited in the past summer. Closer scrutiny of these issues by foreign audiences could increasingly conflict with Turkey's desired perception of itself as a beacon of inspiration in the region. Secondly, in order to capitalize on the momentum of popularity that its symbolic capital has generated across the Middle East and beyond, Turkey's own internal dynamics of democratization and the reforms related to the EU accession process need to be kick-started with renewed vigour. Bringing the current efforts to draft a constitution for a civilian, democratic and multi-cultural Turkey to a successful conclusion would be an excellent way of announcing a fresh wind in this direction.

The whirlwind of regional climate change in the Arab Middle East is bound to continue expanding and advancing in the next year, confounding expectations and making it difficult to forecast the weather. While spring may still blossom in many other unexpected places, this may occur next to very wintry situations in other locales. Against this canvas of uncertainty and instability, Turkey will have proceed with caution and insight in framing its strategies and projecting presence in the Middle East but how it weathers the future as an international actor of rising significance will also depend much on how the struggle to advance the consolidation of democracy in Turkey will proceed and be perceived abroad.

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