

Turkish foreign policy and the Arab Spring

Amanda Paul and Demir Murat Seyrek

While Turkey's domestic politics remain bogged down by football match-fixing allegations, foreign policy is in full swing. This is particularly evident in the Middle East where Turkey is increasingly taking a leading role, further consolidating its strong position in the region.

Over the past decade Turkey has reinvented relations with its Middle East neighbours. It has done this through improved economic ties as well as through better relations with both governments and ordinary citizens, including offering visa free regimes. This has given its policy a unique edge compared to other powers, which have often been perceived as putting strategic goals and political stability ahead of the fate of the ordinary people. The policy has paid off in several ways including raising Turkey's profile in the region. The fact that Turkey has been able to reconcile democracy, Islam and economic development has made it an attractive model. Hence while the image of the West - in particular the US and EU - has become tarnished, Turkey's continues to rise.

The Arab Spring in particular has vaulted Turkey into a key regional role. So far Ankara has demonstrated that it is more in tune with regional developments than either Washington or the EU. In the first place, it is Turkey's direct neighbourhood, meaning what happens there has a direct impact on Turkey. Secondly, while Turkey has had disputes in the past with a number of its neighbours, including in particular Syria, overall Turkey has no real "baggage" in the region - unlike the US and several EU member states, therefore it is better placed to respond to developments, offering assistance without attaching any strings or having ulterior motives or "perceived" ulterior motives. With a very complex situation continuing to unfold, Ankara has shown a measured response engaging with different governments and political groups in the Arab world, calling for negotiations, reforms and reduction of violence, preferring nations to rebuild themselves without too much outside interference or without violating territorial integrity. Moreover, through its membership of NATO Turkey has also contributed to the strategy of the West. Although, as was the case in the early days of Libya crisis, it has not always seen eye to eye with its allies - initially blocking NATO's intervention into the crisis. Turkey has also proved to be a crucial partner for the EU, with Foreign Policy Chief Catherine Ashton in regular contact with Foreign Minister Davutoğlu.

Syria represents the first foreign policy challenge of the ruling AKP's third term. The once close relationship between Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, came to an end following al-Assad's failure to introduce expected reforms and the ongoing brutal attacks on civilians by the security forces. Erdoğan characterised Syria's crackdown as "inhumane" and Turkey supported a UN Security Council resolution condemning the regime - something Russia and China opposed.

Without Turkey's support, Assad has become less insulated and more susceptible to external pressures, and the regime is less secure. Indeed, Turkey is not only moving away from the Assad regime, it's looking to help organise its successor. In a bold move in June, Turkey hosted a conference for the Syrian opposition on its territory - a clear statement by the AKP that it has assessed that Assad is irredeemable. Moreover, sharing a border with Syria means that Turkey has been one of the first countries to be directly affected by the chaos and instability, receiving thousands of refugees. Turkey's policy on Syria, and the level of coordination with its Western allies in building this policy, has consequences for Turkey's relations with the West and Israel. Moreover, potential regime change in Syria increases concern in Iran, which has had something of a critical approach towards Turkey's deepening role in Syria. In this respect, the Syrian crisis may act as a litmus test for the reshaping of foreign policy dynamics in this region.

Close cooperation and consultation with all actors is crucial, particularly given that a number of countries have a significant influence on regional developments. In light of this, Ankara's shuttle diplomacy has been in full flow with Davutoğlu, touring the region visiting Saudi Arabia, Iran and Lebanon to ascertain views on the resolution of the Libyan and Syrian conflicts. He also has on his programme visits to Syria, Jordan and Bahrain, exactly the nations that are the centre of the hidden war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. It is important to have a clear understanding about the expectations of these two nations because, if they are not taken into consideration, efforts to find a long-lasting solution to regional problems will almost certainly prove fruitless.

The situation in Libya is also becoming more entrenched. The limited NATO air operation does not seem to be leading to the fall of Gaddafi, while public support for it is diminishing, making it increasingly unlikely to have a consensus for a more active NATO role. On 15-16 July, Turkey will host a key meeting in Istanbul of the Libya Contact Group which includes representatives of the Libya opposition, a number of foreign ministers from Western nations, including US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, EU Foreign Policy Chief Catherine Ashton, Head of the Arab League and the NATO Secretary General. This is a crucially important meeting because it is hoped that it will set the foundation for forming a compromise between Tripoli and Benghazi to avoid further instability when and if Muammar Gaddafi eventually leaves. A Turkish prepared proposal will be discussed as a roadmap. This includes the setting up of a restructuring commission for any post-Gaddafi Libya, mechanisms for supplying basic needs to war-torn cities, and possible exit strategies for Gaddafi from the country. However, the adoption of the UN Security Council resolution 1970 that included referring the situation in Libya to the International Criminal Court may have reduced the chances of Gaddafi leaving - something Turkey had warned about, only to have it fall on deaf ears. However, the forthcoming holy month of Ramadan, beginning 1 August, may offer a window of opportunity to secure a ceasefire which could be monitored by the UN including Turkish participation.

The future of Turkey-Israel relations is another important issue. US efforts to "reset" Turkey-Israel relations in the run up to the June 12 Turkish parliamentary elections came as no surprise. With developments in the Arab world, and Iran's nuclear programme bringing instability to the region, the US desires an end to the tensions between its two democratic, reliable and stable allies. Thus, we should expect an increasing amount of American diplomacy to reconcile Turkey and Israel in the coming period. While Erdoğan continues to demand an apology from Israel for the killing of nine Turkish citizens in the Mavi Marmara flotilla crisis last year (the Mavi Marmara has now been withdrawn from taken part in upcoming convoys to Gaza), compensation for the losses, and end to the embargo on Gaza at the same time, Israel continues to rule this out as it fears it would make an example for further cases and question Israel's sovereign rights. However, meetings continue to take place between officials from both sides in an effort to bring an end to the crisis. Tel Aviv needs to assess the changing regional balances in its relations with Turkey, the only other western orientated democracy in the region. Turkey should also see Israel as a democratic ally in the region and avoid an artificial crisis simply to boost its image in the Arab world.

Without doubt the Arab Spring has already begun to change the Middle East's political landscape. This is a unique opportunity for Turkey to prove its new foreign policy approach can have positive results for the region in promoting democratic regimes and political stability. Although Ankara was not prepared for the Arab Spring and the reaction came quite late in the case of Libya, it is now playing a key role including acting as the lynchpin between the region and its allies in the West.

Amanda Paul is a Policy Analyst at the European Policy Centre and Demir Murat Seyrek is an independent expert and PhD candidate at the Catholic University of Leuven.
