

## Turkey and the New Middle East

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"Will the Arab Spring bring democracy to the region?" is the reductionist question preventing observation of other serious developments in the Middle East that were triggered by the Arab Spring. Despite its limited contribution to democratisation, the Arab Spring has already changed the general tectonics of the Middle East. We face a new Middle East, where many of the dynamics and priorities have changed. However, there is no universal interpretation of the recent activism in the region. Each country has its own particular picture of the Arab Spring that may differ from that of other countries.

Asserting that the Arab Spring has seriously changed the political dynamics of the region, this commentary focuses on two issues to analyse how Turkey is being influenced by the new dynamic and priorities that were introduced by the Arab Spring.

### The Rise of the Shi'ite Paradigm

One critical development that is vital to Turkey is the rise of the Shi'ite axis in the Middle East. Historically speaking, the Shi'a Muslims have been an important part of the Islamic Ummah. They were politically influential in countries like Iran and Lebanon. However, as part of the Arab Spring, Shi'a Islam has come to the forefront of Middle Eastern politics as a regional system. Now, there is a Shi'a system of international action that encompasses a wide geography. More significantly, Baghdad under Nouri al-Maliki's government has recently attached itself to this Shi'a system. Certainly, the rise of Shi'a rule in Baghdad is as great a historic event as the rise of Sunni rule there during the Abbasid dynasty of the 800s.

Muslim states dominated by Sunni elites (or governments) have perceptions of global politics that are different from those of Muslim states dominated by Shi'ite elites. For instance, Turkey (Sunni) differs from Iran (Shi'ite) on Syria. The Sunni-Shi'ite split becomes critical – as seen in Lebanon, Iraq, Bahrain and Syria – when the sectarian demographic balance is sensitive and different sectarian groups compete for power.

Obviously, the rise of the Shi'ite axis is critical to Turkey. Naturally, Ankara has been aware of the realities of the Shi'a world. Thus it has always assigned top-level priority to Tehran. Even on thorny issues like the nuclear question, Ankara has balanced Tehran's concerns against those of the US. Even in the Lebanese politics competition, despite some serious losses, Ankara has recognised Iran's role. But these issues were all within traditional boundaries of Sunni-Shi'a relations. Now, the situation is that the Shi'a axis is expanding at the expense of these traditional boundaries (also at the expense of Turkey) by including new regions like Baghdad. This is plainly beyond Turkey's powers of endurance.

The rise of the Shi'a axis will of course coerce Turkey into pursuing alternative strategies. One possible scenario is a rapprochement with Sunni groups (even the Sunni Kurds) in countries like Iraq. Another is the consolidation of regional alliances with other states like Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Most probably, Mohamed Morsi's Egypt will side with this camp against Iran. But it remains unclear exactly how the new activism in the Shi'a axis will influence historical competition with Sunnis in the political realm.

### The Kurdish Spring

Since the US-led war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq, the Arab order has been in the grip of two different dynamics: Arab and Kurdish. The Kurds have carefully maintained their independent agenda within the Arab dynamic, and they have successfully implemented it. In Iraq, the Kurds played critical roles with the Arabs in the struggle against Saddam's regime. However, simultaneously they made enormous progress on the Kurdish cause by creating a more sophisticated political setting for it. A similar thing is happening in Syria. There is a general Arab dynamic working against the regime. However, the Kurds have a very prudent strategy on Syria that is highly reminiscent of their Iraqi one. On one hand, they are part of the Arab

dynamic aiming to overthrow the Assad regime. On the other hand, they have an independent agenda to secure a more structured political setting for themselves. Due to the latter dynamic, the Kurds have never aligned with the Arabs. Instead, they maintain a distanced and balanced position. In short, the Kurds are not making the overthrow of the Assad regime their sole aim. They are also positioning themselves to create a better environment for themselves in Syria.

It is time to realise that the Arab Spring has a strong inner 'Kurdish Spring' effect. The Kurdish question is before regional states like Turkey, Iraq and Syria. If the Kurds secure the ability to have two regional governments, the traditional strategy of 'solution within the nation-state' may fall forever. There is another major development: despite their differences on other issues, Turkey, Syria and Iran were united on the Kurdish issue. Such a coalition no longer exists. Forty years ago, Iraq was part of this nation-state coalition against the Kurds. Iraq was dismissed in the 1990s. Syria can be similarly dismissed.

The new Kurdish geopolitics is expected to forge a new paradigm on Turkey. Since it is beyond Turkey's capacity to curtail the 'more autonomy' demand of Kurds in the region, inevitably Ankara's policy is to develop a new strategy of peaceful coexistence with autonomous Kurdish regions in countries like Iraq and Syria. Given the rise of the Maliki government in Baghdad – a regime more aligned with Iran and hostile to Ankara – Turkey's only option is to consolidate its relations with the Sunni Kurds. However, it is open to question whether Turkey would find the same strategy reasonable for the Syrian Kurds too. In other words, Turkey's success will be determined by Ankara's ability to work with the existing and the embryonic Kurdish autonomous regions in the Middle East.

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