

THE ARAB AGGIORNAMENTO IN SYRIA: TURKEY'S FOREIGN POLICY METAPHORS

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The Arab “Aggiornamento”

The Arab *aggiornamento*, which began a little more than a year ago, can be interpreted as a demand for freedom from tyranny. In this, it is another example of Camusian rebellion (Cf. “The Rebel”) like in Hungary (1956) or Czechoslovakia (1968), rather than an ideological revolution. It is a recognition that the regimes in question have stepped over the line of decency, rule of law and violated their political obligations as the sovereign. These rebellions were able to enlist the support of vast sections of the population despite ideological, religious and ethnic differences. Islamists and secular groups stood hand in hand in Tahrir Square in Egypt to defy the Mubarak regime despite the risks. Just as secularists may invoke Camus’ theory of rebellion, Islamists could also justify their rebellion against the regime using the notion of public welfare (*maslaha*) and deriving inspiration from Islamist rebels such as Qutb, Ghouccchi and Tariq Ramadan. Events in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria represent an opening or *aggiornamento* saying “no” to tyranny and “yes” to human solidarity and acceptance of difference. Syria is at the center of the problem of difference and represents more than the other *aggiornamento* states in this phenomenon. Syria does not represent a special case or problem, it is the solution – *aggiornamento qua aggiornamento*.

Turkey's Response to the Aggiornamento

Prior to the aggiornamento, Turkey's foreign policy under the aegis of the ruling Justice and Development Party, or AK Party, had promoted an idealized policy of "zero problems with neighbors". Closely related to this was the "bridge metaphor"; that is, Turkey's role to serve as a bridge between the East and West. In a word, geography asserts its rights. These foreign policy metaphors were designed such that Turkey could achieve a historic peace-maker role by interpreting the East for the West and vice-versa, thereby, discrediting the finality of the "clash of civilizations" theory of Samuel Huntington. Turkey was perceived by the West to be a pragmatic, Muslim, democratic state, and able to exert a stabilizing influence over the volatile MENA region – this notwithstanding its quarrel with Israel over the 2008 invasion of Gaza and the Palestinian rights issue. The "zero problems" concept worked well for Turkish business interests, fuelled by the teachings and outreach practices of Gülen and his followers.

The AK Party seemed to be the precise instrument, at exactly the right time, for the West to further stability in the MENA region. Flirting with Iran was part and parcel of the bridge metaphor, which, by and large, the newly elected U.S. Democratic administration swallowed wholly during their first term in office.

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Turkey's first response to the Arab aggiornamento was slow and hesitant, illustrating that it had not yet grasped, essentially, the liberating impulse of what was under way. In her article "Zero Problems with Neighbours: Time for a New Policy Narrative", Marietje Schaake alludes to the new challenge for Turkey: "The Arab Spring rather exposes a number of problems for Turkey's foreign policy... Syria will be a real test of whether Turkey can materialize its claims as a broker for regional stability and reconciliations."¹

Yet, the zero problems policy meant in fact that even tyrannical regimes run by dictators had to be treated with care lest the bilateral relations and Turkish soft power be damaged. The careful and deliberate policy of producing trade surpluses with many of the MENA countries meant that dictators might have to be

¹ Marietje Schaake, "Zero Problems: Time for a New Policy Narrative", *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol.10, No.1 (Spring 2011), pp.48-49.

tolerated, if only for a while. In any case, the bridge metaphor was still a defining moment for Turkish foreign policy pre –and early– *aggiornamento*, so Turkish policy makers found a rationale to hold their nose and deal with the tyrants including, and especially, Bashar Al-Assad. Indeed, the bridge metaphor offered an opportunity to entreaty them to relax their restrictions and implement reforms.

Nowhere is the impending paralysis of Turkish foreign policy more evident than in the Libyan case. Starting from the back of the bus, Turkey was playing catch-up in what was to be a flurry of events leading to the establishment of a no-fly zone in Libya. Turkey struggled to assert a clear policy and hegemony in one of their Eastern Islamic spheres of influence and, somehow, deflect the French from their inexorable purpose. In the end, Turkey signed on to the no-fly zone and participated

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in the prodigious international effort to root out Qadhafi and his collaborators. It should have been a “wake up” call for Turkish foreign policy. Instead, it became a hand wringing exercise, courtesy of endless debates in international fora as Syria, a closer neighbor, was already boiling over with rebellion and protests.

Hard Power versus Soft Power

One of the important elements of Foreign Minister Davutoğlu's intriguing book, *Strategic Depth*, is highlighting the importance of soft power and Turkey's need to develop it. For too long, Turkish foreign policy had been

hostage to a pro-American Cold War reflex. The Iraq invasion by the U.S. in 2003 changed all that and Turkey understood the need to distance itself from the military invasion and portray itself more as an Eastern country. Dovetailing with this new requirement was the progressive liberation and wresting of the civil authority in Turkey from the hands of the military. The AK Party election victory in 2007 securing Abdullah Gül as President against the military's will and the more recent resignations, firings and investigative efforts such as the Ergenekon and Sledgehammer cases have solidified AK Party control over the military.

Turkish soft power plied its wares under the aegis of the zero problems with neighbors policy, empowering Gülenist business and political elites and strengthening the links between them and the ruling AK Party. However, these investments in soft power (more Turkish schools and embassies in Africa, regional trade surpluses in the MENA region, expansion of Turkish language and culture centers into surrounding regions including the Balkans) did nothing to stop the decline of its hard power assets.

For some observers, to allow such a downgrading of hard power in a region as highly charged as the Middle East is a strategic miscalculation despite the obvious logic of its democratic rationale. Not only is this trend irreversible for the short and medium term, it has sapped the morale of the Turkish armed forces, downsized its professional leadership and created an atmosphere of foreboding – who or what is next? So, when the issue of creating a buffer zone in Syria was advanced by the Syrian National Council, Turkey’s government, and Turkish advocates of Turkey as a model state, demurred, perhaps lacking the assets and capacity required to create and defend such a buffer zone against a smaller yet hardened Syrian military.

The Turkish Reaction to Syria

Like in Libya, Turkey was somewhat hesitant to move on the Syrian conflict. Certainly, the complexities of this sub-region of MENA would make even the

most daring states hesitate. However, one can attribute part of Turkey’s slowness to the inertia of the “zero problems” policy. This policy had, until the conflict, worked fairly well. For Turkey, it was loath to drop the policy despite widespread carnage inside Syria and amidst growing numbers of refugees. If they could only convince Bashar to desist. The Syrian state, on the other hand, had its survival as its first priority. The business elites and bilateral relations could wait; the survival of Bashar meant that the security services became the first priority.

Hesitantly, step by step, the Turkish leadership began to openly criticize the Assad regime, requesting that it urgently stop the bloodshed and find a political solution.

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Armed with a 14 point plan to deliver to Bashar, the Turks were only too happy to oblige, invoking the erstwhile bridge metaphor. After a six hour visit of Foreign Minister Davutoğlu to Damascus, the Turks returned to Ankara confident that their message had been heard. The refugees could finally go home and Turkey would be crowned as having done that which the West had been incapable of achieving. Two weeks past, during which the carnage continued to rage in Syria. In effect, Bashar demonstrated that his first priority was regime security. Although Turkey has upped the rhetoric on several occasions until the present, little has proved effective in solving the crisis. No hard power assets have been mobilized to show the Assad government that Turkey, the Arab League or the West mean business.

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The result effect of this reticence in foreign policy matters has been to effectively take Turkey out of the Syrian conflict despite the importance of its regional interests in seeing a more stable and democratic Syria. Turkey could have been a game changer in Syria, a nation fraught with Iranian and anti-Sunni elements sitting on Turkey’s doorstep. Instead, Turkey has demonstrated, to its chief future regional protagonist, that it is a “paper tiger”.

Regionally speaking, Iraq began the hemorrhage of Turkish influence and, despite its toe hold in Northern Iraqi Kurdistan, a lack of daring on the Syrian brief will have to be weighed against the cost of allowing other states to define the extent and nature of Turkey’s own regional interests.

It is, therefore, with some scepticism that one reads that, “Turkey is increasingly more relaxed, mature and flexible in its foreign policy, constantly changing its repertoire of tools without any obsession with slogans that might restrict its manoeuvring.”²

Modern Turkish foreign policy has left the idealized “zero problems with neighbors” and “bridge metaphor” policies questionable. It remains to be seen if Turkey’s insistence on soft power and its deliberate downgrading of hard power for the foreseeable future will put into question its role as a mentor to the new emerging Arab aggiornamento states.

² Cengiz Dinc, “Perceptions” *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol.16, No.2 (Summer 2011) p.62.

Some pro-democracy observers would like to see Turkey establish a dialectical balanced dynamic in its foreign policy, allowing it to promote its own interests in harmony with the values of human solidarity and freedom embodied by the courageous peoples of the Arab aggiornamento.