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Upheaval in the Middle East: What is the Turkish Strategy?

TPQ-GMF Black Sea Trust Washington Roundtable Conference Notes

On 12 May 2011, in collaboration with the **Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars** (Wilson Center), **Turkish Policy Quarterly** (TPQ) organized the fifth and final of its **German Marshall Fund of the United States** (GMF)-**Black Sea Trust** (BST) sponsored roundtable conferences in **Washington D.C.** In a room of over 60 experts, the main speakers of the panel discussion, **Columnist for CNNTurk and Milliyet daily, Semih Idiz**, and **Senior Transatlantic Fellow for the German Marshall Fund of the United States, Ian O. Lesser**, discussed **the implications of the Arab Spring for Turkey and its region** and speculated on possible **Turkish strategies towards the upheaval in the Middle East.**

“How can Turkey contribute to changing dynamics in countries like Tunisia and Egypt, and how critical is Turkey's position regarding the ongoing uprisings, such as Syria? How can we envision Turkey's foreign policy orientation in the aftermath of the revolutions in its neighborhood?” Discussions revolving around these questions constituted the centerpiece for the discussions that took place on 12 May 2011.

This roundtable concluded the series organized by Turkish Policy Quarterly with the generous grant offered by GMF-Black Sea Trust (BST). For more information (roundtable programs, pictures, videos, and press bulletins) on previous roundtables organized by TPQ, please visit <https://www.turkishpolicy.com/category/110/tpq-roundtables/>

Please find below categorized snapshots of key debates from the Washington leg of our roundtable conferences. We would like to thank GMF-BST for sponsoring this event, and the Wilson Center for their fruitful collaboration.

Oğuz Alyanak
Managing Editor
Turkish Policy Quarterly

Snapshots on Turkey-Middle East Relations, Turkey's Role as a Model Democracy in the Middle East and Turkey's Relations with the NATO

“What is happening today in the Middle East is a people-driven situation. It is based on injustices and dispossessed arguments. Should we fear Islamism as a possible outcome of the revolutions? None of the current developments point to such an outcome, yet.”

“Egypt comes to mind as a case of semi-democracy/military induced democracy. Not every situation is the same and democracy is not a guaranteed outcome. I follow Egypt closely. The assumption goes that “Turkey provides a model in the Middle East”. Turkey could be a model for these countries by being a country that is 99 percent Muslim. Pan-Arabism is also on the rise. Yet, Turkey also has to treat cautiously what is happening in the region. It is far more confusing a situation. Turkey's response in some aspects is diverging, thus making it a questionable candidate for a role model.”

“In some way, like for Saudi women, Turkey is a model because Turkish women drive cars. Or take the example of the Turkish women's movement in Turkey: it is a model for women in Syria. However you have to break it up to its components.”

“Turkey needs to go in a crisis management mode. The Turkish army is also on alert at the Syrian border for a possible intervention.”

“On Zero Problems with Neighbors Policy: After a decade of this very successful policy of the AKP, it faces very tough times. From an American interest perspective: there were aspects of Turkish policies, elements under AKP's policy which were very much in the interest of America, but the same cannot be told for today.”

“Turkey and the Barzani government have very close relationship now that the two sides are communicating in the political platform. Yet, one should keep in mind that in northern Iraq, civil obedience did not take much of a role. PKK still looks like their only solution, unfortunately.”

“Mubarak was called by Erdoğan to vacate his position. But in the case of Libya, AKP was not clear in its approach. Was Erdoğan supporting of or against the Libyan government? Erdoğan was as much concerned of Turkish interest as other countries were at the time of the upheaval in Libya for their own interest. And in Syria: Esad and Erdoğan have a close relationship. There is a “peace dam” between the two countries. It is a dam built on a famous river. Other improvements such as lifting visas and trade agreements may be falling through if the situation gets out of hand. Turkish government changed their idea on Libya; Erdoğan asked Qaddafi to leave his country for the benefit of his people. However, Erdoğan is still cautious on Syria considering that he did not take any action. He mentioned: “We do not want any Hamas presence in the region”. The entire Syrian community is not ready to give up on Assad yet. Situation in Syria doubly concerned Turkey with the possibility of the country being divided into two. Kurdish movement is another threat in Syria, along with the possibility of refugees given the fact that there are people who live in the border. On the issue of Libya, we have to be realistic. As a result of what's happening, Turkey is now very tuned with NATO. Turkey is neither hampering nor preventing these operations. Turkey is very much a part of the NATO. This is imposing a new outlook on the Erdoğan government. However, the same government is not very welcoming to dealing with the problems faced with Israel. Turkey's presence is downgraded (no longer a grand arbitrator) at the moment. The real arbiter in this case is Egypt.”

“There was always a friendly rivalry between Egypt and Turkey to stabilize the region.”

“Stability in the Middle East is key to Turkish foreign policy. The situation in Syria is not going to be in Turkey’s interest. If Turkey wants to act within the western framework, there are norms and values in doing so. Turkey needs to be more stable in its implementation of these terms.”

“How central will Turkey be in the Middle East? Tendency in the Turkish debate is to see Turkey in the centre. How central is Turkey? Is this an exaggeration? Turkey can be both a victim and/or a stakeholder. I am not sure who is going to be central and shape the region. In the case of Tunisia: it is easier for Turkey to perpetuate Western arguments. In the case of Egypt, Turkey was on the same sense with its partners again. And on Syria, normalization of Turkey’s relationship with this country was part of the zero problems policy. Turkey’s vulnerability will manifest in its approach to Syria.”

“‘Model vocabulary’ became a widely accepted frame in Turkey: Turkey has an ambition to act as a model in civil and military circles (collaborative military operations were part of this) as well as in commercial circles.”

“Within NATO, Turkey stands as one of the most conservative party. Within the framework of NATO, and NATO’s relations with Libya Turkey also acts as a conservative neighbor. Turkey also has a problematic relationship in coming to terms with NATO’s arguments over Syria. Syria is not going back to the same situation and this is a challenge for Turkey to come to terms with.”

“On the case of Iran: Turkey really has an interest in developing relations with Iran. The aspect of commercial relations is very important in understanding the two countries’ relations for the relationship is heavily commercialism driven. “

“Every government in Turkey remained some type of relationship with Iran. Energy as an issue is not purely ideological. Erdoğan downgraded the arguments on Iran’s nuclear ambitions and used it towards his own electorate. He argued that while others have nuclear energy, why should not Iran?”

“What is NATO going to do with these [Iran’s] nuclear weapons? This is going to provide some complexity to Turkey’s situation. On the account of Libya, however, Turkey changed its position and is very much in line with the NATO.”

“Regarding Turkey-Israel relations, I argue that relations are not going to be same again. There is a brutal constituency both in Turkey and Israel. How far will this slide go? There are a lot of people with very stiff stand on the situation in Palestine, both in Turkey and Israel.”

“The Middle East will need five more years before any power, including that of the Turkish government can make any plans and intervene with the situation.”

Snapshots on Turkish Domestic Politics

“The current political campaign in Turkey is an ugly one; it is interesting to note that at his Charlie Rose interview, Erdoğan said that Hamas is not a terrorist organization in order to send signals to his domestic electorate. While the foreign minister expressed his great satisfaction on the death of Osama, Erdoğan did not comment on it in order to protect his image with his domestic audience. For some, Obama’s killing was not fair at all.”

“I personally doubt that AKP will win again by itself in June. The Republican People’s Party (CHP) diminishes AKP’s presence and makes the opposition stronger. But it is also clear that many people feel that AKP is what they need.”

“Kılıçdaroğlu is turning its party to its original roots more effectively than CHP’s former leader, Deniz Baykal. Mr Erdoğan is trying to dazzle the electorate with mad projects. However, Turkey has southeast Anatolia to develop before engaging in big projects. Canal Istanbul will not contribute to the welfare of south-eastern citizens.”

“All Erdoğan’s ads for the general elections are in the material dimensions. The fact is this [AKP] is another rich man’s party with their own political outlook. They represent another class in Turkey. Anatolian tigers are turning into Anatolian monsters for some people. But they are successful at the end of the day.”

“On the issue of constitutional amendments’ effect on the domestic politics and the campaign: Much of the campaigning is focused on this. Results are converted into the vote of confidence for AKP. It is a vote for Erdoğan rather than the package. According to the recent survey results declared by Metropol company (a company known with its close ties with the AKP) shock the nationalist party. It is uncertain whether MHP (Nationalist Action Party) will go under or above the 10 percent threshold. AKP is confident that it can bury MHP. MHP cassettes [sex scandals] are affecting MHP’s votes. Representatives of MHP were arguing that AKP was “selling the country”. However, this argument did not receive much attention. The results of the previous referendum are an advantage to AKP. I believe that a complete and comprehensive constitutional revision will take place if AKP wins the elections. In reality what Turkey needs is a constituent assembly, but this plan is cooked at AKP’s backroom.”

Turkey and the West

“Eventually, Turkey will think strategically. Turkey’s foreign policy is very articulate. Turkish politicians argue that they are shaping the Middle Eastern environment by creating new patterns. There are big projects for Turkey these coming years. Turkey, however, needs friends for intelligence sharing and trade with trusted partners in the area.”

“The driving force for Turkey’s foreign policy is to develop relationship with other countries such as China and Russia. The motivation is based on self-interest and the need for finding foreign markets.”

“Iran is in American administration’s top agenda. And what is Turkey’s posture on Iran? I see that Turkish policy makers are in denial of a nuclear Iran. Iran, for Turkey, constitutes a political question and for the U.S., it is a security question.”

“Turkey’s Iran’s policy does not show any converging outlook to the U.S. Turkey talks about its access to Iran and about the nuclear issue but I see more divergence than convergence on this idea. This is not something the U.S. often likes to hear.”

“Regarding Turkey-Europe relations: I do not see relations as changing since for Turkey, joining the EU continues to remain a cynical ambition.”

“On EU-Turkey relations, one could argue that there is very little happening in the EU side as well. It is often said that Turkey’s membership is an open-ended project. At the same time, we have Germans who are annoyed of assisting poor nations. NATO could be utilized for repairing relations between Turkey and the EU.”