

HOW THE ARAB SPRING IS TRANSFORMING TURKISH-AMERICAN RELATIONS

Once called the “Model Partnership,” the Turkey-U.S. relations were in a semi-crisis mode by the time the Arab Spring began in the early months of 2011. Much of the initial optimism that was created following the mesmerizing bilateral visit by President Obama to Turkey was dented significantly by disagreements over various regional and conceptual issues between the two countries later on. By the beginning of 2011, the uprisings across the greater Middle East have not only challenged those states at where they took place but also others who have vast interests in the region, such as Turkey and the U.S. –whose bilateral ties were also impacted as a result.

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The Bush presidency, particularly in the second half of its last term, following its years of unilateral “war diplomacy,” had become extremely wearisome in the international arena. Claims about Saddam having weapons of mass destruction as the justification of the Iraq War turned out to be baseless. Consequently, American diplomacy went through a significant credibility blow, especially in the Middle East. This, coupled with the ongoing Israeli-Arab conflict and the absence of a viable path to the Middle East Peace Process, caused U.S. image in the world to sink to its lowest points. America urgently needed a new chapter and found it with the new Obama administration in the beginning of 2009.

The Obama administration began its foreign policy drive with an impeccable multilateral rhetoric. Senior U.S. State Department officials, such as Anne-Marie Slaughter, the first woman in U.S. history to serve as the Policy Planning Director – known as the in-house think tank of the State Department – was one of the most outspoken advocates of this new chapter. Slaughter emphasized the importance of burden sharing with regional allies for security and stability across the globe. This new U.S. administration focused heavily on groups like G20, instead of G8, and sought ways to increase partnerships especially with those having the potential to take on regional roles. As one of the worst economic crises in U.S. history began to take a toll on the country’s economy, Washington accelerated its transition process in order to maintain its super power status with a manageable cost.

Meanwhile, Turkey with its stable posture, growing economy, and a series of economic and political reforms, which have been undertaken in quest for full membership to the European Union, appeared to be an ideal candidate for this new multilateral U.S. diplomacy framework, or as President Obama himself would call it, “a model” partner across from the Atlantic.

In her latest book, “No Higher Honor,” Former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, also describes, plainly, how the Bush administration saw Turkey as a model for the Muslim world as well, following the September 11 attacks. Rice says:

Freedom agenda as we knew would be the work of generations. Nevertheless, in the short term, it was important to have some concrete manifestation of the possibility of its success. Turkey was a stable country that, in its transition, was providing evidence that democracy and Islam could exist side by side.

The Bush administration had never been able to bridge the gap with its Turkish ally, ensuing the great divergence experienced with the start of the Iraq War in 2003. The threats that Ankara perceived coming out of Northern Iraq and the potential spillover effects into Turkey’s restive southeastern region, as well as, the persistent

high death tolls within Iraq's Muslim population during the years of the invasion, made Ankara wry against Washington.

Ankara, occasionally, and sometimes very heavily, criticized the U.S. invasion of Iraq. It also accused Washington for its less than forthcoming attitude with regards to cooperation in combating with PKK, a separatist movement recognized by both Ankara and U.S. as a terrorist organization. Washington, on the other hand, neither forgot nor fully forgave Turkey's rejection of allowing U.S. troops to use its land to open up a second front from Northern Iraq during the invasion.

Before the Arab Spring

Even though the relations between the Obama Administration and Turkey's Justice and Development Party, or AKP, began early with the mesmerizing bilateral visits by President Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to Turkey, talks about the "model partnership" began to evaporate quickly following the rapidly worsening relations between Turkey and Israel. Especially because of the strong bipartisan support of Israel in the U.S. Congress, the deterioration of Turkey-Israel relations had negative impacts for Turkey's relations with Washington.

Israel's War on Gaza at the end of 2008, called "Operation Cast Lead," was criticized by Erdoğan furiously. Soon after, Erdoğan had a spat with Israeli President Shimon Peres during "the Davos Summit" in 2009. The relations between the two countries eventually hit the bottom with Israel's "botched" operation on the Mavi Marmara flotilla, leaving eight Turkish and one American-Turkish activist dead and bringing Turkish-Israeli relations to a halt.

Around the same time period, Turkey did something unimaginable and opposed its "strategic partner," the U.S., at the United Nations Security Council by going against further sanctions on Tehran for its nuclear developments.

The U.S.-Turkey relations, which were praised, only a year ago, as the dawn of a new model of partnership between Christian majority America and Muslim majority Turkey was now being described rather differently. Ümit Boyner, the head of TUSIAD, Turkey's largest business association, was one of those who saw the changing dynamic of the relations between Turkey and the U.S. During her visit to Washington in July 2010, which also included a meeting with the Secretary Clinton, Boyner described the relations between Turkey and the U.S. as "difficult and sensitive," pointing out, several times, that there were serious "communication problems"¹ between Washington and Ankara.

¹ Quoted from Ümit Boyner's statements which she made during her visit to Washington, DC at a press conference, held in the TUSIAD's DC office, with the Turkish media.

The biggest scandal regarding this communication issue was witnessed when Turkish leaders went to Tehran and signed the now infamous Tehran Nuclear Deal: how Ankara and Washington could be so unsynchronized diplomatically, leading to such result is still a mystery today. One high level Turkish diplomat, during a visit to Washington, recently called it an “embarrassing moment” for Ankara, both because it damaged Turkey’s image and ultimately proved to be a futile attempt, achieving nothing more than capturing the Turkish, Iranian, and Brazilian leaders in a photo showing their short-lived celebration. It took five permanent UNSC members only a few hours to pass even tougher sanctions against the Iranian regime and Secretary Clinton did not bother to hide her disdain towards the deal.

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This marked the first time Turkey opposed the U.S. in the UNSC. Ankara frequently reiterated its goal to increase trade volume with Iran to up to 30 billion dollars a year within the next few years. This was considered by Stuart A. Levey, the first Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence within the U.S. Department of the Treasury as Turkey “trying to take opportunities that other countries are foregoing in deference to the international community.” Levey,

who has been known as the architect of the economic sanctions against the Tehran regime since 2004, said, in an exclusive interview in 2010,² the following about Turkey’s attitude during the UNSC discussions:

...there was, undeniably, a disappointment with Turkey’s “no” vote, though we did succeed in getting a very powerful implementation program in the U.S., EU, Japan, and many other countries. It is this broad consensus that is important. To the extent that Turkey separates itself from this broad consensus, it undermines the overall efficacy.

By the end of 2010, as an aftermath of long discussions and following a visible hesitancy on Turkey’s part before and during the Lisbon Summit in November 2010, Turkey agreed to the concept of a NATO missile shield, which would be built to protect all member nations’ territories and people against ballistic missile threats coming mainly from the Middle East. Even though Turkey’s consent was considered by other NATO members as significant, its objections left the West wondering about its eventual accession to the project.

² Quote from an interview the author had with Levey at the headquarters of the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) – where Levey works – in Washington, DC during the first week of August 2011.

U.S.-Turkey relations appeared to be more in a *semi-crisis state* than a model partnership by the time 2011 arrived. Turkey's AKP was accused of shifting Turkey's axis from the Western alliance to the Eastern one. At that stage, visits of high level Turkish officials to Washington were marred by endless questions about their "real" intentions with regard to their country's direction, placing Ankara squarely on the defensive mode rather than helping to enhance the two country's partnership.

The Arab Spring Comes

The new year, 2011, brought huge transition to the Arab world, kindled by a Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi, who set himself on fire to express, as nakedly as possible, how he would rather die through one of the worst possible conditions than to live under the dictatorial rule that does not allow the average citizens to prosper. This spark quickly jumped to Egypt; then, transited to other states in the region. Ongoing transition in the greater Middle East can still be viewed, by and large, with a Black Swan analogy in mind – that predictions about the end scenarios are prone to be flawed.

From the very beginning of this grand transition, Washington and Ankara had a lot to discuss, from events that rapidly evolved in Tahrir Square to how the Qadhafi regime should be dealt with. The two had not always met on the same page, however, the recent fire in one of the most volatile regions of the contemporary world stage, which also happens to include some of the former states of the Ottoman Empire – succeeded by the Republic of Turkey only less than a hundred years ago – suddenly opened up a new communication channel between Washington and Ankara that did not exist before.

The fact that Obama called Erdoğan more than his British counterpart during the Arab Spring is an undeniable testament to this newly emerging communication policy. The "communication disorder" between Ankara and Washington, as Ms. Boyner described it six months prior to the events in the Middle East, at a time when the relations were in semi-crisis mode, was now on its way to be sorted out through intensive diplomacy over the Arab Spring.

About a week after the protests against the government of Egypt started in Tahrir Square, the Turkish Prime Minister called on then Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to step down. Later, Colonel Qaddafi's threats of wiping out the rebellion in Benghazi prompted the establishment of UNSC resolutions which made it legal for NATO forces to undertake the mission of protecting civilians against Qaddafi forces through the UN mandate.

Initial opposition of Ankara to NATO's intervention in the beginning of the Libyan rebellion caused a temporary divergence with Washington. Ankara argued that it had to get 25 thousand Turkish citizens out of Libya before taking a side against Qaddafi. For some others, it was the Turkish business interests that Ankara did not want to put under risk in Libya and AKP's mercantilist administration faced a heavy lobbying of the businessmen who had vast investments in Libya.

It appears now that the Turkish attitude towards Qaddafi was formulated through a mix of both of those factors and they eventually caused Turkey to hold back from endorsing rebel forces in Benghazi as quickly as some other Western states did.

In the first week of March, Ambassador Selim Yenel, Deputy Undersecretary for Public Diplomacy of Turkey, was visiting Washington right about the same time as Moammar Qaddafi's forces began their move to crush raising rebel forces. Yenel's message to Washington was:

The Libyan case is a little different because of our vested interests there. Our people are working there, our companies. That is why we are taking a cautious approach on how we address this matter... We have to look out for our interests there... saying certain things are good, but living in the real world, of course our approach and our policies have to gear toward this realism.³

Even though Turkey never partook in the aerial bombing operations against the Qaddafi forces, it participated in the naval arms blockade on Libya and also carried out humanitarian aid missions. Turkey was also very slow in implementing "the asset freeze imposed" by UNSC 1970 resolution⁴, in articles 17, 19, 20 and 21, which urged for its application "to all funds, other financial assets, and economic resources" of the Qaddafi regime in member states.

As the NATO operations intensified and the Libyan National Transitional Council (NTC) proved to be a formidable alternative during the International Contact Group meetings, the Turkish administration began competing with the French and British to take on a bigger role supporting the NTC: Ankara gave cash as aid; Davutoğlu visited Libya right after Tripoli was captured by the NTC; and Erdoğan made an Arab Spring tour, visiting Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia.

AKP, by then, long abandoned the occidental rhetoric that had been previously used by Erdoğan and some other top Turkish foreign policy teams accusing

³ İlhan Tanir, "Washington, Ankara grow closer as wave of revolts continues," *Hürriyet Daily News*, 4 March 2011, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=washington-and-ankara-get-closer-as-wave-of-revolts-continues-2011-03-04>.

⁴ UNSC Resolution 1970, the United Nations, 26 February 2011, <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N11/245/58/PDF/N1124558.pdf?OpenElement>.

the West, particularly the French and British, of exploiting Libya's rich natural resources. Although Ankara was able to come up with arguments to somewhat justify its relatively late comer status for the democratic cause of the Libyans, it never adequately explained what it had based the allegations of the imperial motives of the West on.

Great Syrian Episode

Ankara's sharp stance against Assad surprised many Turkey experts even though it came slowly and gradually. Some well-established Turkey watchers in Washington also appeared taken aback by Ankara's willingness to forego its decade long diplomatic and economic investment in Syria.

Indeed, Turkey's relations with Syria had been marked by a remarkable turn since 2005, when Damascus recognized Turkish sovereignty over

Hatay; and a few years later, a free-trade agreement and mutual abolition of visa requirements between the two resulted in Turkey's exports to Syria nearly doubling between 2005 and 2010, as well as, a huge surge in tourism. The number of Syrian visitors to Hatay increased by 80 percent after the visa agreement, according to the local chamber of trade and industry.⁵

These peaked relations quickly shattered as the protests intensified in many cities of Syria. Hikmet Çincin, the Chairman of the Chamber of Trade and Industry in Antakya, estimated that trade at Hatay's formal crossing points with Syria has fallen by 80 percent and informal trade of small goods in private cars, worth about 600 million dollars a year, has stopped altogether.⁶ Trade volume between the two countries had gone up from 729 million dollars in 2000 to almost 2.3 billion dollars in 2010 according to Turkish Foreign Ministry records⁷, of which about 1 billion dollars was gained by Turkey. The series of steps taken by Turkey and Syria opened up cultural exchanges between them as well.

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⁵ Abigail Fielding and Funja Güler, "Trade flow between Turkey and Syria dried up," Financial Times, 3 August 2011, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/c12824ce-bb62-11e0-a7c8-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1eADgxUdd>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ "Turkey-Syria Economic and Trade Relations," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey, 2011, http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey_s-commercial-and-economic-relations-with-syria.en.mfa.

It is argued often whether Ankara should have held back from investing too much in dictators like Bashar al-Assad, and should have limited itself in doing business with them. Ankara chose to invest and open new markets for its backbone constituency, the rising class of the Anatolian businessmen, which heavily support AKP government and expect open access to such markets.

Ankara played hardball in the region to take a bigger piece of the pie in Iran, Syria, Libya, and others through a very realist regional policy. In fact, during a conference in Washington in the fall of 2010, right before the Arab Spring started, İbrahim Kalın, top foreign adviser to Erdoğan, was very much unwilling to talk about Turkey's moral role in discussions and considered the question in terms of "democracy promotion," a bad reminder of Bush's Middle East foreign policy.

To set the record straight, it was not only Ankara who was pursuing a "stability first" attitude in the region. In 2009, the newly elected President Barack Obama, all of a sudden, had found his administration in a situation having to deal with Iran's post-election unrest just when Obama's realist foreign policy was distancing itself from the Bush's "maligned" idealist Middle Eastern policy. To make up for the damage remaining from the Bush years, Obama sought to repair his country's somewhat strained relations with Egypt's Hosni Mubarak and started a rapprochement with Bashar al-Assad, while, at the same time, downplaying the protests in Iran.

Turkey's reproachment with Syria had hit some flacks from the U.S. Congress, especially between 2005 and 2007. However, when the Obama administration took over and also sought normalization with Syria itself, consequently sending a U.S. ambassador to Damascus by a presidential appointment, the pressure on Ankara about its dealing with Damascus evaporated. Many thought, and loudly hoped, that Turkey's relations with Syria would help it open up to the Western world and save it from Iran's orbit.

These hopes did not last long. The Arab Spring reached Turkey's backyard, Syria, a country that can be considered the most significant leeway for Ankara to increase its influence in the greater Middle East. Ankara, at first, tried hard to convince Assad to take the path of reform with no avail. It became clear following Davutoğlu's six and a half hour meeting with president Bashar al-Assad in early August (2011) that Assad was not going to listen to Turkish advice.

As the Syrian forces resumed attacks on their people, the Ankara administration began to conduct long discussions which led it to reverse its policy against Assad, as one senior official mentioned in November: "Turkey could have just taken a 'realist' approach to protect its economic interests," said the official while explaining

how Ankara's Syrian policy evolved over the past summer (2011).⁸ Though Turkey quickly brushed aside this alternative after calculating that giving such room to Assad would eventually lead to even bigger numbers of human rights abuses, tortures, and killings in Syria. And, such an option would potentially have caused hundreds of thousands of people to seek refuge in Turkey, and, consequently, necessitate Turkey to intervene.

According to the same Turkish official, Ankara now considers the developments with regards to the *Arab Transition* ultimately a sign of an unstoppable force of democracy. Ankara made a strategic decision to actively support human rights causes but, at the same time, to maximize its economic interests. Ankara aims to meet with these two objectives at an optimal point. In other words, Ankara is to blend realism with an idealistic tone, as the demand for universal values appear to be on the rise.

U.S.-Turkey: Eye to Eye?

Turkey's aspirations for being a regional leader and playing a global role require enriching of its relations with the U.S., a country that is still the only global power with entrenched interests in the Middle East, on strategic and economic levels. Mostly due to its failure in the Middle East process, Washington's approval ratings among Arabs nosedived, giving back all points it had gained through the Obama presidency's initial uptick. Therefore, partnership with Turkey, whose Prime Minister Erdoğan cashes in a strong popularity in the Arab Streets (mainly attributed to his outspoken language against Israel), appears to be an opportunity too great for Washington to pass by.

The Arab Spring not only helped the U.S. and Turkey to grow closer but also helped diplomats on both sides comprehend the local factors that affect each other's lives and interests. For instance, while a year ago Turkey's Iran policy was chastised, especially in the background talks in Washington, by U.S. officials, after the Arab Spring began, U.S. officials slowly began mentioning some of the Turkish points, such as Turkey's historic ties with Iran or its proximity.⁹

If, indeed, Assad follows the path of other disgraced dictators, as widely expected, Turkey's strategic position in terms of shaping the post-Assad Syria will be even more significant. Turkey also looks to increase its influence in Iraq after the withdrawal of the U.S. troops in order to be able to encounter Iran's potential

⁸ Quote from a conversation the author had with a Senior Turkish official.

⁹ The author makes the following statement about the subject: "I personally have encountered U.S. officials lecturing me on such points, as if a Turkish reporter would not already know it."

influence. According to Richard Armitage¹⁰, Former U.S. Deputy Secretary of State, the game between Turkey and Iran is already finished and the Turkish model is the winner. Gregory Meeks, a ranking Democratic member of the U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Europe and Eurasia has put it as this: “Iraq now has to open up itself to the West, increase its trade to stand on its own feet. There is only the Turkish model for Iraq, the Iran model means isolation.”¹¹

The Turkish Dilemma: Is Having Better Relations with Washington Helping Turkey’s Own Democracy Struggle?

Turkey, following a series of political and economic reforms, in many ways, has transitioned into a less restrictive society. As it tried, for a couple of years, to normalize its relations with Armenia, it also has become more courageous and open minded in terms of debating the tragic events of 1915. Meanwhile, the Turkish state has also stepped up to be much friendlier with its Kurdish citizens; Erdoğan began acknowledging the Kurdish problem more openly.

Nevertheless, there are significant signs that Turkey is still a “mixed bag” in terms of progress in many of the freedom issues. Turkey’s ranking with regard to freedom of press has been consistently dropping during the AKP rule over the last ten years. Rising numbers of jailed journalists and academicians mainly based on the Anti-Terror Law of Turkey, in addition to hundreds of other suspects under the Ergenekon investigations, a police investigation into a neo-nationalist gang alleged to be the extension of a clandestine network of groups with members in the Turkish armed forces, have been going on for years without any result. Many experts argue, long jail periods without sufficient proofs is a huge obstacle for justice. In April, the International Press Institute released a report indicating that Turkey has more journalists in prison than any other country in the world, including China and Iran.¹² And, this climate, without a question, leads to an atmosphere in which a significant portion of the society is afraid to speak against, criticize, or oppose the ruling party. The European Union bodies have asked Turkey to take steps to solve these problems. Though since Turkey’s EU accession process is in a state of complete halt, one wonders how much leverage, compared to past years, the EU currently has on Ankara.

Washington, on the other hand, recently, appears less willing to criticize the AKP government for these shortcomings since its relations with Ankara have flourished. This current “honeymoon” of relations between Turkey and the U.S., in many ways,

¹⁰ Statements Armitage made during an Page: 8 interview the author had with him at his office at the Armitage International, in Virginia, U.S. on October 2011.

¹¹ Statement Meeks made, at his office in the U.S. Congress, during a conversation with the author on October of 2011.

¹² Steven M. Ellis, “OSCE Report Finds Turkey is Holding 57 Journalists in Prison,” *International Press Institute*, April 2011, <http://www.freemedia.at/index.php?id=926>.

reminds us of the Cold War years when Turkey's strategic importance in terms of encountering the Soviet threat overrode all other concerns for the U.S. – with regard to deficits in its democracy, rule of law, and freedoms.

In Washington's calculations, AKP appears the only alternative, for the moment, to move forward with, and Washington treats the AKP government accordingly. In this new Arab Spring paradigm, the U.S. will continue to seek close relations with its Turkish ally in order to stay more relevant with the tremendous changing dynamics in the region. Unless Turkish opposition gets its act together and proves itself as a formidable alternative domestically, as well as in its foreign vision, there is no reason for anyone to believe Washington will start paying more attention to the significant setbacks that the Turkish democracy is currently facing internally.