

**Understanding Ankara - Turkey's Resurgence Amidst Regional Unrest**  
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Though Western and indeed even regional media has not attached massive significance to the role of Turkish diplomacy in the unrest gripping the region, Ankara has been about as active as any international player throughout. As Turkey has turned its attention to the Middle East, it has invested significant political capital into building partnerships with important actors in the region. Ankara has altered its public diplomacy strategy to cater more strongly, perhaps even centrally, for the Middle Eastern/Islamic audience. A clear strategic vision combined with the ability to read Arab public opinion as well as it has until now has given Ankara the foresight to anticipate potential threats offset by recent developments and position itself as a force to contain them.

At the diplomatic level, Ankara's objective has been to politically bolster the Turkish brand, emphasizing its importance with Western/NATO allies on the one hand, and supplementing its resurgence in the Middle East on the other. The latter has involved a set of calculations to mitigate potential risks to Turkish interests – particularly keeping in mind the Kurdish issue, regional sectarian divisions, and wider regional stability. While Ankara has sought to improve its grassroots appeal amongst the Arab populace by supporting their calls for more freedom, it has tried to do this without seriously jeopardizing its relations with regimes like Syria, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. But it has also surely, if subtly, encouraged the evolution of civil society in the region by aligning itself morally if not always explicitly with popular movements.

The subtle Islamic political lineage of the AKP combined with its heavily pro-business outlook has made Ankara a versatile political-diplomatic force in the region. Over the past few years, Turkey has sought to fill vacuums around the region – its 'zero problems' with neighbors policy and efforts to keep regional tensions diffused were vital in enabling Ankara to act out such a role. Unsurprisingly, Ankara's vision seeks to protect Turkish investments and interests, but for various reasons finds appeal with important actors in the region – cross-cutting the political alliances that currently define it. In recent weeks and months, Ankara has again sought to fill voids and exert a moderating influence on developments that tie together a set of complex issues which often transcend the borders of any one state in their potential implications. Turkey's reaction to protests has varied from country to country and the following is an attempt to make sense of Ankara's recent role and activism.

## **Egypt**

While Turkish-Egyptian trade ties continue to grow with steadiness – they hope to more than double their modest levels of current mutual trade of US\$3 billion in the next two years – broader bilateral relations have little to remark about. Though Turkey and Egypt are both strategic players in the region, none of the two have featured significantly in the other's foreign policy paradigm. Much of this may have had to do with 'looking the other way' for the leaderships in both countries. However, while Egypt under Mubarak had been reduced to a waning Arab power with steadily eroding influence in the region, the opposite is true for Turkey. Crucially, perhaps, whilst both Ankara and Cairo have placed a key emphasis on regional stability, they subscribed to starkly different visions for the region and their own roles within it.

The weak chemistry at the leadership level between Mubarak and Erdogan was another reflection of Turkish-Egyptian ties. Despite both being pro-Western, allied to Washington and, along with Jordan, being the only regional Muslim countries to have diplomatic relations with Israel, the two leaders have often found themselves on opposite sides of key issues. Some of those differences may indeed have something to do with their political backgrounds– Erdogan derives his political power from popular support, and Mubarak derived his from an authoritarian set-up blessed with support (and aid) by successive White House administrations. As a comparatively young and charismatic leader, Erdogan may lead Turkey for some time yet. Mubarak on the other hand was growing old and it was clear his era of leadership was drawing to a close. 'The writing on the wall,' as it were, meant Erdogan sensed little political risk in throwing his support completely behind Egyptian protestors and becoming the first international leader to explicitly call on Mubarak to step down.

It may be a reasonable supposition that Turkey also had an interest in encouraging political transformation in Egypt at a strategic level because of the resultant impact that could have on the regional balance of power. Specifically, a resurgent Egypt would have the potential to counterweigh the rise of Iran, if not by itself then certainly in unison with an Arab alliance led by Saudi Arabia, and (more subtly) Turkey itself. The impact of that would not necessarily create a new regional power-center in the form of Cairo, because Egypt will need time to rebuild itself as a political, and perhaps more importantly, an economic force to compete as a 'top tier' regional power. But by renewing its commitment to the Palestinian cause, as expected, and taking a step back from the sort of unequivocal support for Tel Aviv that had become a characteristic of Egyptian foreign policy under Mubarak, a resurgent Egypt would have the likely effect of forcing a redistribution of influence more equitably between key regional forces such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran.

Barring an outbreak of war, the impact of that redistribution of power could be to develop a more cooperative regional security architecture in which the role of Turkey is bolstered, particularly on issues centrally concerned with Israel and Iran. Turkey could well emerge as the only regional state to hold genuine sway in almost every part of the region – an influence that would also re-emphasize its importance to Washington. Interestingly, it was in Istanbul that Ashraf Abdel Ghaffar, the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt, took refuge during the earlier part of the anti-Mubarak demonstrations. The

beckoning relationship that might point to suggests hitherto unprecedented access and influence with the future political set up in Egypt for Ankara.

### **Syria**

Syria has required Turkey to be more careful at the policy level. Historically, Turkish-Syrian relations were problematic, if not altogether hostile. The Turkish army almost mounted an invasion of Syria only a couple of decades ago, and Syria in the past supported Kurdish rebels against Turkey as leverage against a much stronger neighbor. Those tensions have almost disappeared as Syria and Turkey have moved closer politically. Turkey has been courting Syria over the past few years and Syria has become the cornerstone of its regional policy. Syria has developed a liking for Turkey as it explores options to balance its strategic dependence on Iran by creating an alternative regional ally in Turkey. Turkey and Syria have growing economic ties and Syrians now enjoy visa free travel to Turkey. Notably, in Assad's words, Turkey – not Iran – is his “best friend.”

Erdogan and Assad also enjoy friendly relations, and Syria has been willing to facilitate Turkish resurgence in the Middle East. On key regional issues such as Iraq, Kurdish separatism, and perhaps even the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, Turkish-Syrian relations have converged more closely together than ever before and created a genuinely strategic basis for strengthening ties. Yet, the authoritarianism of the Syrian regime is somewhat problematic for Ankara because Syria's geostrategic value for Turkey means that it will remain vital to Turkish interests regardless of the regime in power. Ankara has therefore tried to subtly engage the Syrian public as well as the regime – visa free travel and other programs to enhance cultural interaction have supported these efforts and helped build a positive image of Turkey among ordinary Syrians.

Erdogan's recent public diplomacy activism and almost daily calls for political reform in Syria may not however be designed entirely as an insurance policy for Turkish interests in Syria. Because Erdogan has implicitly endorsed Assad by calling for reform rather than change, Damascus can feel frustrated but not angry. In his capacity as a friend, Erdogan may privately be trying to convince Assad that reforms are important for a stronger leadership and are in his own interests. At face value, even Assad seems to agree with this – the question of reform may now be more about timing than anything else. Indeed, a regime more receptive to popular aspirations would be positive to Turkey because it would likely pull Syria closer to Ankara at the cost of Tehran. That may not be particularly disastrous in itself for Assad, either. Assad knows his pro-Ankara stance combined with the context of Kurdish separatism – an issue that continues to linger in the background – means Ankara will not be keen to see the end of his rule. Most importantly, Assad seems to trust his Turkish counterpart.

### **Libya**

The international consensus in the case of Libya, where Turkish businesses have growing investments, made it relatively easy for Ankara to take a clear position. Washington and key NATO/European leaderships in Paris, London and Berlin were quick to pounce on the opportunity to hasten the end of Colonel Gadhafi. The UN mandate to protect Libyan civilians gave the international community legal cover for military intervention.

But that mandate was potentially open-ended in its interpretation, and global powers like Russia and China who reluctantly allowed the passing of the resolution wanted intervention capped to the enforcement of a no-fly zone. As some Western powers showed enthusiasm for wider military action on the ground, as a NATO member Turkey was early in calling for clarity from the alliance that military intervention would be limited to the enforcing the no-fly zone. At the same time, Ankara maintained the diplomatic pressure on Colonel Gadhafi to step down.

That position would eventually go down well in the Arab street as, after some flip-flopping, the Arab League eventually decided it too did not support wider military action on the ground. Following the human suffering of the Iraq War, supporting wider military intervention in the Arab world by Western powers, even if against a regime as generally reviled as Colonel Gadhafi's, could be politically disastrous. Limited help to Libyan opposition groups could be acceptable, but a full-fledged military campaign by NATO was completely off the cards as far as the Arab world was concerned. Whether this was entirely because there was an Arab desire to curtail Western military activity in Libya in itself, or to keep the West from taking up another potentially troublesome item on its agenda that would shift attention away from Iran, or both, was less important. Turkey again found itself aligned with the Arab world as it endorsed measures to protect civilians and support humanitarian objectives, but insisted that Libyans should be left to decide their fate by themselves. That position would be appreciated more widely too – in Moscow and Beijing, as well as amongst some NATO allies whose political appetite for a wider NATO campaign in Libya was low.

### **Bahrain**

Bahrain posed an entirely different set of issues for Ankara. The Sunni-Shi'ite/Saudi-Iranian context creates historically-entrenched complexities in the case of Bahrain, which have little to do immediately with Turkey. Though Bahrain in itself is not vital to Turkish interests in the strategic context, Ankara fears Bahrain could create much wider Sunni-Shiite tensions and drive a further wedge between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The consequences of such a rise in tensions could be potentially disastrous – for the region and especially for Turkey. Rather than taking a position of silence on Bahrain, Turkey used powerful religious symbolism to suggest Turkey did not want to see another 'Karbala,' and called for Saudi restraint in Bahrain. Karbala is a town in modern day Iraq where forces allied to the then-Caliph Yazid ibn Abu Sufyan massacred the grandsons of Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) – one of the most important events in Islamic history, particularly in the Sunni-Shi'ite schism.

The metaphor of Karbala may have been used to suggest that coercive action is not the answer against protestors in Bahrain. Though Bahrain's Shi'ite population could theoretically strengthen the hand of Iran in the region by toppling the Sunni king, Ankara feels that a military-driven solution in Bahrain could further radicalize Shi'ites around the region and provoke a violent Sunni reaction – an alternative outcome that is much less desirable. Add Iraq with its large Kurdish population into this wider context, and Ankara's fears about what Bahrain could potentially become clearer. Turkey's rapidly growing gas dependence on Iran and massive investments in Iraq underline the breadth of vulnerabilities Ankara feels in the context of a regional sectarian conflict violently flaring

up. Ankara's calling on Riyadh for restraint has been combined with engagement with Shi'ite leaders such as Ayatollah Ali Sistani in Iraq to keep Shi'ite leaderships on-side and tensions minimized. Ankara's role will also be encouraging and a potentially moderating influence on the Iranian leadership, as Turkey, once the seat of the Sunni Caliphate, throws its weight behind a political – not military – solution to Bahrain.

### **Conclusion**

Though Ankara has not always placed itself completely on the side of change, it has ensured its messaging was generally on the 'right side' and friendly to progressive elements. So Ankara's partnerships have not just targeted governments and regimes but reached out to new civil society actors demonstrating their power as conduits of change. In some instances, Ankara has chosen to be more timid and less assertive. This self-censorship is another reminder of the selectivity that the Turkish leadership is happy to adopt in its foreign policy strategy. True, such a strategy may create inconsistencies in its role – but Turkish public diplomacy is geared towards other priorities. Turkish diplomacy has tried to grasp opportunities to serve its interests and reduce the potential for regional instability. These may not all pay off, but it reflects the strong awareness Ankara has to developments around its neighborhood.

In sum, Turkey wants to be seen as a reliable partner for countries in the region as much as it may want to emerge as a regional leader. Ankara has sought to maintain a balanced strategy of protecting its key relationships but also encouraging developments that it sees as progressive – a complicated task to craft together in a region that traditionally views change with suspicion. In the Turkish context, all partnerships it builds in the region will, as it sees it, inevitably reinforce its leadership status and credentials. Turkey may be hoping to come out of the regional unrest as the state to "turn to" for arbitration, leadership and indeed even inspiration. It will certainly hope to come out as a state regarded as worthy of deepening ties with in the future. Bluntly said, Turkey may wish to re-configure the region in its own image – though that will take time, some commentators have already suggested that Turkey's resurgence contributed to oppositional sentiments against many of the regimes simply by exposing them with its own political model.

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