

TURKEY AND TURMOIL IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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The Middle East has always been a focus of attention for the Turkish diplomacy. Historically, most of the Arab countries of the Middle East including Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, Yemen and the Hejaz area, which is part of Saudi Arabia today, were under the direct rule of the Ottoman Empire. When the First World War started in 1914, even Egypt - occupied and governed by the British Empire since 1878 - was still under the nominal suzerainty of the Ottoman Sultan. Arab soldiers, alongside their Turkish comrades in arms, fought valiantly during the war in the Dardanelles, in the Caucasus against the Russians and in the Sinai. In the Ottoman Parliament, Arabs had 60 seats against 147 seats for Turks. Yet, when the Governor of Hejaz Sharif Hussein raised the banner of revolt against the Ottomans at the instigation of the British in June 1916, Turks and Arabs found themselves in opposite camps.

This historical background has inevitably affected Turkish and Arab perceptions of each other in various ways. Their impact, of course, still lingers on to a certain extent - sometimes positively and sometimes negatively, depending on the state of relations.

Since the Republic was founded, Turkey never appeared as active in the Middle East as it is today under the AKP (Justice and Development Party) Government. However, this does not necessarily mean that Turkey has in the past neglected the area. Its reach was limited because circumstances were different: The Cold War logic of preventing the expansion of Soviet influence in the Middle East prevailed for a long time. The First Gulf War also left its mark, in particular, as it led to a considerable deployment of Kurdish PKK terrorists in Northern Iraq.

THE AKP'S MIDDLE EAST POLICY

The AKP won the parliamentary elections in 2002 and obtained the majority of seats in the Parliament. The new Government was immediately confronted with the consequences of 9/11. It was clear that the Bush administration would not focus solely on Afghanistan, but also undertake a vast military operation against Iraq since it had convinced itself - under false premises - that Iraq was not only developing weapons of mass destruction, but also supporting al-Qaeda.

The new Turkish Government was fully aware of the disastrous consequences of a war against Iraq. It organized consultations and meetings between regional countries to find a way out. But Washington was making it quite clear on a daily basis that its decision was irrevocable. It also had the support of some NATO members and Arab countries - in particular Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar, which were ready to cooperate militarily with the USA. As to Turkey, it was the recipient of two requests by the US: authorization to use seaports and air bases, plus permission to invade Northern Iraq through Turkish territory. The Turkish Government was not in principle opposed to these demands. As a first step, the Parliament approved an interim resolution in February 2003, which accepted the sending of military and technical staff whose mission would be to assist Turkey in the modernization of its ports, military bases and installations. The aim was to create an infrastructure that would enhance the logistics of the operations.

A draft resolution on the use of Turkish territory to invade Iraq from the North submitted by the Government to the Parliament on March 1, 2003 reflected the agreement reached between Turkish and US Governments after protracted negotiations. Three points of the draft were of considerable importance for Turkey. First, it was recognized that Arabs, Kurds and Turkmens were the founding peoples of Iraq. Secondly, it was agreed that some 20-25 thousand Turkish troops would be deployed on the Iraqi side of the border along a 20-25 kilometer wide corridor. These forces would also have the authorization to conduct operations against the PKK. The third point was about the arms that would be given to Iraqi Kurds. It was agreed that Turkish and US military authorities would cooperate in the distribution of these arms and in their collection at the end the operations. The

commanders of the Turkish army were convinced that these arrangements would permit the elimination of PKK terrorists. But the Turkish Parliament rejected the draft submitted by the Government with a narrow majority - a decision that would affect Turkish-American relations negatively for a long time.

Turkey's policy in the Middle East after the invasion of Iraq continued to be very active. It was inspired largely by the concepts developed by Ahmet Davutoğlu, a very influential adviser to the Prime Minister until 2007 and Foreign Minister since then. In his book entitled "Strategic Depth", Davutoğlu underlines five basic principles:

- 1) Security and freedom are intertwined: The legitimacy of a political regime cannot be based solely on the provision of security. It should also guarantee basic freedoms and human rights.
- 2) The principle of "zero problem" with all neighbors: Any country that aspires to play a global role has to first resolve its problems with the other countries in its region.
- 3) The necessity to constantly follow a proactive policy in the region and beyond.
- 4) Foreign policy has to be harmoniously multidimensional: In other words, Turkey's interactions with different global actors should not be in contradiction with each other. On the contrary, they should be complementary.
- 5) The foreign policy ought to be "rhythmic" in the sense that there should be a continuous flow of activities in bilateral and multilateral diplomacy at all times, the purpose being to enhance the visibility and the scope of the foreign policy.

The proactive policy of AKP had indeed attained a large degree of success. Turkey was elected a member of the UN Security Council for the period 2009-2010 with overwhelming support from Arab and African countries. It was active in the politics of Iraq and Lebanon with some success. It was trying to facilitate negotiations between Syria and Israel on the Golan Heights. It stood on the forefront of countries castigating Israel's "Operation Cast Lead" in Gaza at the end of 2008 and the beginning of 2009. It tried, together with Brazil, to find in Tehran an interim solution to the problem posed by the Iranian nuclear program. Through its policies and economic assistance, it strongly supported the Palestinians. It was one of the first countries to accept the political reality that Hamas represented. Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan became extremely popular throughout the Middle East. A very large majority of the Turkish public opinion supported his policies and his occasional defiant rhetoric enthusiastically.

Some - in particular in the West - have questioned the role of religion in the policies of AKP. There is no doubt that the great majority of the members of this party are deeply religious. Official statements reflect religious sensitivities from time to time. But it cannot be said that religion is the determinant factor in the formulation of basic policies. Turkey is a member of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) since the 1970s. Yet it did not join the OIC for religious motives, but rather out of *realpolitik* considerations. Turkey believed that this membership would enhance the reach of its policies in the Middle East. The AKP has not changed this approach.

The political achievements under the AKP Government were accompanied by an important development in economic relations. In 2010, the exports to Arab countries amounted to some 20 billion dollars and direct investments in these countries totaled approximately 2.5 billion dollars. The contracts obtained each year by Turkish businessmen in these countries were valued at several billions of dollars. The FDI coming from Arab countries represented 15% of total FDI in 2008.

THE ARAB SPRING AND TURKEY

When a street vendor named Muhammed Buazizi set himself on fire in Tunisia in December 2010, nobody could have imagined that this would trigger a wave of popular protests first in Egypt and then in other countries in the Middle East. There was the feeling that the totalitarian regimes were strongly entrenched in practically all the countries in the region and that they had the means to repress any opposition. The United States had, under President George W. Bush, developed a geographical concept called "Greater Middle East" which was largely

perceived as being designed to promote democracy in the area. Arab Governments had then reacted by pointing out that such a scheme would lead to free elections enabling the radical Islamists to seize power and hold on to it indefinitely.

The Arab Spring, as it unfolded, showed that this time peoples were at the forefront of the struggle for democratic liberties and that they insisted on shaping their own destiny. It evolved rapidly in Tunisia as President Ben Ali had to exile himself immediately and elections were held without undue delay. Tunisia with its high level of education, long experience in secularism and religious tolerance can hopefully become a successful model for others.

In Egypt, the situation is more difficult and uncertain. The procedure devised for parliamentary and presidential elections is time consuming and complex. The army, which took over after the removal of Hosni Mubarek, has been governing the country without interruption since the 1950s and, in the mean time, had acquired extensive tutelage powers and privileges. The fact that, not only the Freedom and Justice Party issued from the Muslim Brotherhood gained 40% of the votes at the first phase of the elections, but also the more radical Islamists obtained a share of 20% was certainly not very reassuring for the army. This trend continued in the final stage of the voting for the Lower House, which means that the Muslim Brotherhood and its potential coalition members will have the upper hand in the drafting of the new constitution. Historically, political developments in Egypt have had a great resonance in the Arab world and most probably the same will happen again.

In Syria, the inflexible Ba'athist regime of Bashar al-Assad has not retreated from its relentless repression policies until now, despite the fact that more than five thousand people have been killed and international pressure, including pressure from the Arab League, has constantly intensified. The political opposition represented by the Syrian National Council is recognized or supported by a number of countries and defectors from the Syrian army have started armed resistance. The regime is increasingly isolated. The UN Security Council has been prevented by Russia and China from adopting a resolution that would include sanctions. Russia and China also vetoed in February 2012 a resolution calling for a "Syrian led political transition to a democratic, plural political system." The resilience of the *Ba'athist* regime basically continues and it might be optimistic to predict its imminent collapse. It is impossible to say at this stage whether the removal of the present regime in Syria will promote a convincing democratic process, but it would almost certainly have far reaching geopolitical consequences for the region, particularly for Iran, by fatally weakening its influence over Syria, over Hizbullah in Lebanon and over Hamas in Gaza. The relations between Syria and Lebanon would also be fundamentally affected by removing the traditional tutelage of Damascus over Beirut.

In Libya, the emergence of conditions for a rapid normalization on a national scale will be extremely difficult. Muammar Qaddafi never built a national army, which could take over at least temporarily. Qaddafi was overthrown by mostly independent militia groups numbering probably more than one hundred, each of them considering itself autonomous. They prevailed thanks to the air support provided by some NATO countries on the basis of a UN Security Council resolution. The militias have somewhat recognized the National Transitional Council (NTC), but are not ready to abandon their arms at this stage. The NTC will be obliged, therefore, to work in conjunction with the militias and the remnants of the national army cadres who defected to support them. In any case, until a credible central authority and functioning national institutions come into existence, it is very difficult to see how Libya can be governed efficiently.

Iraq, which had remained unaffected by the Arab Spring, suddenly found itself in a serious political crisis as soon as the US troops were evacuated - a crisis, which, if not resolved, could rapidly threaten the delicate balance between the Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds. Like in Syria, a potential danger to national unity and territorial integrity is ever present in Iraq; but, obviously, its disintegration would have much more disastrous consequences for the region and the world.

The approach of the Turkish Government has been, from the beginning, to unequivocally support the demands of the peoples for democracy. This was in conformity with the concepts developed by Davutoğlu and also with the views expressed by the President of the Republic, Abdullah Gül, at least on two occasions before protests started in Tunisia. During a visit he paid to Indonesia in July 2009, President Gül said that "the difficulties inherent in the globalization process can best be remedied by a democratic system of government. We are constantly

reminding this to our neighbors.” In August 2010, in a speech he gave at the Center for Islamic Studies of the University of Oxford, he underlined the same theme: “The peoples of the Muslim countries should be made aware of the emphasis in Islamic culture to democracy and development. A sustainable development is only possible in countries where Governments act in a transparent, coherent and responsible manner.”

Turkey, therefore, had no qualms in supporting instantly and wholeheartedly the democratic processes. President Gül visited Egypt in the early stages of the process in March 2011. As to Prime Minister Erdoğan, he emphasized the importance of secularism for democracies during a visit to Egypt in September 2011. In an interview he gave then in Cairo to an Egyptian television channel, he made the following remarks: “...in the Turkish constitution the definition of secularism implies that the state should be at equal distance to all religions. Personally I am a Muslim, but I am also the Prime Minister of a secular country. There is no contradiction in that and I would advise Egypt to adopt in its new constitution the principle of secularism.”

The Turkish approach to the Libyan uprising was not as clear-cut as its approach to Egypt and Tunisia. Turkey was deeply concerned for the security of its 35,000 citizens residing in Libya and the potential losses that dozens of Turkish companies established there would suffer. On the other hand, Prime Minister Erdoğan was taken aback by the activism of President Sarkozy of France. Erdoğan’s first reaction was to state that “NATO has nothing to do in Libya”. However, when the UN Security Council adopted a resolution implicitly authorizing air and naval operations, he agreed to provide considerable support to NATO’s naval and air forces. He also strongly advised Qaddafi to resign. The Prime Minister visited Libya after the removal of Qaddafi and received a tremendous welcome.

The most difficult issue in the Arab Spring for Turkey is Syria. Relations with Damascus had improved and intensified in recent years in extraordinary proportions. Even the visa requirement for travelling between the two countries had been lifted. The Councils of Ministers of both countries were holding joint meetings. Trade between them was constantly increasing. A very close friendship had developed between Prime Minister Erdoğan and President Bashar al-Assad.

As soon as the protests started Erdoğan immediately urged Assad in a friendly tone to undertake political and social reforms without further delay. But when Assad’s security apparatus embarked on a violent repression killing thousands of peaceful demonstrators, Erdoğan no longer minced his words and demanded the resignation of Assad. Turkey accepted thousands of Syrians who were seeking a safe haven. Permission was given to the opposition to hold meetings in Turkey. In a nutshell, Turkey went beyond any Western or Arab country in castigating the Assad regime and in actively seeking to unseat him. The problem is that Assad and his oligarchy proved much more resilient than expected and in the meantime the intensive economic relations between the two countries started to suffer considerably.

Turkish policy towards Iraq has been consistent since the end of US military operations in 2003. Turkey constantly advocated cooperation and harmony between all confessional and ethnic groups and maintained sustained relations with all of them. It strongly supported the territorial integrity and unity of Iraq and on this basis normalized and improved its relations with the Kurdish Autonomous Region in Northern Iraq. But since the withdrawal of US forces some tension has surfaced in the relations with the Prime Minister Maliki because of his allegations that Turkey is interfering in the internal affairs of Iraq.

Turkey and Iran are managing a complicated relationship. In reality, the theocratic system established in Iran following the 1979 Islamic Revolution could only be described as the antithesis of the secular regime in Turkey. The two countries, nevertheless, succeeded so far in maintaining a considerable economic relationship, active diplomatic contact and the façade of some degree of concordance in their regional policies. The Turkish Government refrained from commenting on the large-scale protests which erupted in Iran after the presidential elections in 2009. It tried to find an interim solution to the dispute regarding the nuclear program of Iran. But it is clear that in reality there are several areas where their respective interests clash, in particular in Iraq and in the Gulf. Contrary to Iran, Turkey attaches great importance to the stability and territorial integrity of the Gulf countries. Although Ankara left the impression of somehow justifying the Iranian nuclear program by invoking

Israel's possession of nuclear weapons, it has nevertheless accepted the deployment of NATO radars in Turkey as part of the Alliance's missile shield.

Turkey's relations with Israel have fluctuated over the years mostly under the influence of the Israeli-Arab conflict. Turkey had opposed the United Nations partition plan for Palestine in 1947, but established diplomatic relations with Israel soon thereafter. Although these relations were never severed, Turkey lowered its level of representation several times in reaction to Israeli policies. In the 1990s, a substantial cooperation in defense, military training and intelligence was started. The AKP Government did not alter this policy in the beginning. In 2007, Shimon Peres became the first Israeli President to address the Turkish Parliament, but Israel's disproportionate use of force in "Operation Cast Lead" triggered an immense reaction in Turkey.

The worst was to come in May 2010 when the Israeli Defense Forces intercepted a multinational flotilla carrying humanitarian assistance to Gaza in high seas, boarded the leading vessel, the Mavi Marmara, and killed nine Turks. In a presidential statement, the UN Security Council expressed its deep regret for "the loss of life and injuries resulting from the use of force during the military operations in international waters against the convoy sailing to Gaza". A report by the UN Human Rights Council concluded that crimes against international humanitarian law and human rights law had been committed by Israel. In addition, the Secretary General of the UN established a Panel of Inquiry composed of Sir Geoffrey Palmer, former New Zealand Prime Minister; Álvaro Uribe, former President of Colombia; a representative from Turkey; and another one from Israel. The report of the Panel, drafted and signed only by Sir Geoffrey and Mr. Uribe found that the violence and "loss of life" caused by the Israeli Defense Forces was "unacceptable" and that Israel had provided "no satisfactory explanation". The Panel did not, however, provide a rational answer to the crucial question of whether or not Israel is entitled to keep the people of Gaza under a siege through a naval and land blockade. On the contrary, it surprisingly expressed the opinion that the blockade of Gaza is legitimate - a view that clashes with those of a majority of jurists and with the opinion of the UN Human Rights Council.

In addition to the work of the Panel, Turkish and Israeli diplomats have tried to find a way out of the deadlock in parallel confidential contacts. They have failed since Israel was ready to pay compensation but refused adamantly to offer an apology - a *sine qua non* for Turkey.

Although the views of Turkey and Israel seem at this stage totally irreconcilable on the Mavi Marmara incident, an ingenious compromise, including an apology by Israel, should not be beyond the reach of astute diplomacy. The restoration of confidence between the two countries is crucial in a period of turmoil in the Middle East.

CONCLUSION

At this stage, nobody can offer a convincing prediction on what could be expected in the Middle East. A huge Pandora's box has been opened and we have so far seen only a very small part of its content. Democratic processes have started in Tunisia and Egypt. Tunisia, for the moment, offers the best hope for a relatively smooth transition. In Egypt, as things stand at present, this process will probably be more complicated. Of course, what happens in Egypt is crucial, since it will certainly have a considerable impact on other Arab countries. It is also clear that the transition of Arab countries from autocracy to democracy will render the Arab-Israeli conflict much more acute. It will be wise for both parties to resolve this conflict as rapidly as possible.

So far, with the exception of Bahrain, the monarchies - not only the wealthy ones - seem to have resisted the Arab Spring much better than the authoritarian Republics. But they must realize that they cannot forever remain unaffected and therefore should rapidly undertake political and social reforms. As far as inter-Arab relations are concerned, the decision of the Arab League to take the initiative of sending observers to Syria should be welcome as an encouraging first step in strengthening Arab solidarity.

A military confrontation in the Gulf or a preemptive strike against Iran will lead to disastrous consequences. An alternative policy of discreet exploratory talks between the United States and Iran is certainly worth trying.

The developments in Iraq and Syria will have immense consequences for the region. Every effort should be made to prevent the disintegration of these two states. All countries, which have a stake in the prevention of instability in the area, should work hard to maintain the territorial integrity of Iraq and Syria. This is certainly an area where Turkey could be active without giving the impression that it favors a particular ethnic or religious group.

The Turkish policy towards the Middle East has been largely successful before the Arab Spring, and once the protests started, Turkey has supported and encouraged the democratic demands of the peoples. The two great challenges for Turkey come at present from its direct neighbors, Syria and Iraq. Separatist movements in the two countries can cause a permanent instability in the region with serious implications for Turkey, among others. As things stand at present, Turkey should craft a careful policy that would permit the use of its influence without getting entangled with any ethnic or religious group.

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