



مركز الجزيرة للدراسات
ALJAZEERA CENTER FOR STUDIES

Report

Turkish Foreign Policy under Regional Transformations

*Murat Yeşiltaş**
*Ismail Numan Telci ***

15 December 2013





[Al Jazeera]

Abstract

Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East has been facing a number of new obstacles as a direct or indirect result of the Arab spring. This is not the first time that Turkey's regional policies are challenged by factors that are not originating from Ankara. As it was the case in the past challenges as well, Turkish foreign policy architects have been introducing fresh policy tools that would limit the negative effects of the Arab spring to Ankara's regional aspirations. In light of the recent developments in the region, this report is an attempt to analyze how Turkish foreign policy is shaped when it is faced with confrontations as a result of regional transformations. The dynamics that affect Turkish foreign policy in these processes are also investigated.

Introduction

The "new" Turkish Foreign Policy (TFP) under the AK Party government has been a headline grabber and a pressing issue that continues to ignite debate and controversy. The debates particularly focus on the political and strategic preferences that Turkey has been embracing during and after the Arab Spring, which dramatically altered the geopolitical complexities of the regional and international politics. Many critics are claiming that the unexpected developments in the Middle East and North Africa have largely invalidated Turkey's drive to become an influential regional power. Despite its completely new promise given to the wider region in terms of the democratic

consolidation of the old regimes and the strategic restoration of the traditional power politics in the Middle East and North Africa, it is true that the Arab Spring brought about a critical challenge for Turkey. In the new political environment of the post-Arab spring, the real challenge for Turkey will be the question of whether Ankara can deliver the daunting task of reinstating peaceful order in the region. Even though Turkey has been seeking to build a “new collective consciousness” in the region by prioritizing public demands, peaceful coexistence and just order, the radical transformation of the regional context and the substantial changes seen at international level force us to look closely at revisions and changes in the foreign policy of Turkey. The question of viability of Turkey’s discourse and foreign policy practices towards the recent developments in the Middle East requires an analysis of the new dynamism and Turkey’s struggle for reorientation of its position vis-à-vis the developments triggered by the Arab Spring.

The debate surrounding Turkey’s foreign policy reached its peak following the challenges of the Arab Spring, and the Syria crisis in particular. Therefore, one question is of particular importance in order to understand how Turkey will respond to the challenges that have arisen recently: has Turkey reached the limits of its power capabilities in the Middle East? This paper seeks to answer this question by focusing on the challenges Turkey is facing and it analyses the dimensions of the challenges that will directly influence Turkey’s international position, its regional engagements and its domestic politics in the near future.

Three Challenges for TFP

TFP during the AK Party government can be analyzed in three different periods; the periods have been mainly shaped by three regional and international challenges in the last decade. In the first period of the AK Party era, the new political elites embraced a new foreign policy paradigm that prioritized maximum integration and cooperation with the regional countries, particularly in the fields of economy and diplomacy that would transform the regional politics from a security-driven understanding to a more flexible relationship with shared values. (1)

In this period, the Zero Problem Policy (ZPP) became the cornerstone of Turkey’s foreign policy methodology and reformulated its strategic engagements in the Middle East and gradually dismantled the traditional political discourse of the Kemalist bureaucratic elites. The 2003 Iraq War, however, directly challenged Turkey’s regional foreign policy’s priorities, which were shaped by its ZPP principle, and it undermined its political discourse of regional order. By using multilevel and multidimensional diplomacy at the regional and international level, Turkey insistently supported Iraq’s territorial integrity

and tried to build a shared understanding and collective diplomatic mechanism to contain the Iraqi crisis. By distancing itself from the US-led intervention, Ankara has carefully expanded its relations with the countries in the region. (2)

In the second period of the AK Party era, with its increasing economic power and rising peace broker role in the wider region, Turkey started to deepen its engagement with the Middle East. Turkey's "strategic autonomy" has gradually risen in this period thanks to the diversification of the foreign policy engagements with different regions. (3) However, the "new engagement policy" of Turkey was criticized by its Western alliances and was challenged by domestic opponents because of the systematic "shift of axis" accusations from Turkey's long-cherished association with the West. Turkey's official critique towards Israel, its different strategic position in the Iranian nuclear issue and its close relationship with Hamas intensified this "shift of axis" critique as to whether Turkey is acting as a partner of the West in the Middle East or if it is prioritizing the Middle East over its Western orientation. Despite the harsh criticism from internal and international actors for its diverging foreign policy orientation, Ankara successfully maintained the ZPP as a core determinant of its foreign policy actions.

In the third period of the AK Party era, Turkey's foreign policy and the role that Ankara employed in the regional politics began to change. Initially, Turkey planned to intensify its relations with the Arab countries and sought to materialize the ideal of "regional integration". This was particularly clear in Ankara's actions aiming for more integration in the region, such as lifting the visa requirements with a number of Arab countries, establishing High Level Strategic Cooperation Councils with regional actors and intensifying the cultural cooperation within the region. By conducting such activities Turkey was aiming to lead the transformation of the political status quo in the region. (4)

The Arab Spring of 2011 significantly challenged this foreign policy strategy of Ankara. The revolutions in the Arab world were desired but unexpected for Ankara. This is the reason why Erdogan's government initially was, as many of the world leaders, undecided as to how to respond to these uprisings. However, one thing was clear: to support legitimate demands of the people in these countries. Nonetheless, the way to demonstrate this support differed from case to case. That's how Erdogan actually responded to the challenges to his foreign policy in the region caused by the Arab awakening. He sided with the people who were rising up against the decades-long serving Western-backed dictators. As stated above, by contradicting with the Western approach to the Arab spring, Turkey was also risking its regional actorness as well. This threat posed by the Arab spring for Turkey's grand strategy was an open threat for

Ankara's aim of leading the change in the Middle East. The initial goals of the Arab spring, such as functioning democracy, increasing freedoms and better social and basic rights have rapidly transformed into uncertainty especially with regards to the chaotic political environment in those countries and the deteriorating crisis in Syria. Turkey's strategic environment dramatically evolved from stability to structural chaos, which can be defined as a "state of turbulence" directly affected by the crisis in Syria, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Tunis and Iraq. (5) In this period, the challenges against Turkey did not only arise from the regional stability, but they also originated from the dissident groups in the domestic politics of Turkey. While the Syrian crisis was directly effecting Turkey's bilateral relations with Iraq, Iran and Russia at the regional level as well as its strategic cooperation with the United States at the international level, the fragmentations of the conflict within Syria was in a straight line challenging Turkey's societal security at the domestic level. (6) The lack of consensus among the political parties and the different societal groups towards the Syrian crisis and the military coup in Egypt began to undermine Turkey's struggle with the crisis in the region. Articulated as such, the Arab spring as the main challenging factor for Turkey's regional ambitions lead to update its strategic discourse vis-à-vis the multidimensional crisis in the region.

Dimension of Turkey's Strategic Reorientation in the new Middle East

One thing is very clear that the Arab spring turned to be a different stage. By taking into consideration of the current evolution of the Arab spring, Turkey's strategic reorientation in the new Middle East should be analyzed in terms of three interrelated dimensions. In the initial stages of the mass revolutions, Turkey's support for the regime changes rather than backing of the status-quo, has allowed Ankara to define its foreign policy discourse with more confidence and courage. With this attitude in mind, Erdogan's government focused on championing the transformations in the region. Turkey's position was firstly hit with the deteriorating and deepening situation in Syria and then with the military coup in Egypt. These two developments required Ankara to reconsider its strategies toward the regional transformation on the basis of the same foreign policy principles that had been operationalized during the last decade. In other words, Turkey has been transforming its strategies vis-à-vis the developments in the region, but has employed same type of principles in order to do so. While Turkey has acknowledged democratic consolidation as the core philosophy of the Arab Spring, Ankara aimed to lead this regional transformation in order to finalize this process without damaging the regional stability. Nevertheless, there are still three dimensions that are directly challenging Turkey's views of the region. These three dimensions also correspond to certain aspects of Turkey's strategic reorientation with regards to the new political developments in the region.

The International Dimension

The political behaviour of international society is mainly shaped by its pragmatic and discursive support of the transformation in the region. This was one of the most important aspects in support of Erdogan government's political discourse, which would be enabled in order to operationalize the foreign policy practices of Turkey and to provide a strategic autonomy against the ambiguity in the region. By garnering support from the international community, Turkey also tried to implement a more active policy vis-à-vis the regional transformation process. These efforts, however, did not have any structurally geopolitical impact to contain the post-Arab spring turmoil in the region. Diverging interests and the policy choices of the global and regional actors with regards to the Syrian crisis and the political tragedy in Egypt prevented Turkey's ability to solve the regional crisis by use of peaceful mechanisms. The strategic competition and the discursive differentiation among the global and regional actors deepened the crisis due to the increasing radicalism, particularly in Syria, causing anxiety for the Western powers vis-à-vis the opposition groups in Syria. (7)

More to the point, Turkey's proposals to end the stalemate could not convince the international community. One has to remember that by taking a great risk for its own internal security, Ankara even advocated a military intervention in Syria to topple Bassar Assad. In Erdogan's views, this was a necessary option in order to cease the bloody massacres committed by Assad's internal forces and their external supporters. Ankara was also aware of the fact that the characteristics of the oppositional groups fighting in Syria have radicalized the political environment causing an irritation for the Western capitals that strongly oppose any kind of fundamental movements to have a say in the political setting of post-Assad Syria. As a result of these conflicting positions, even the Friends of Syria meetings have become irrelevant gatherings where the division among the actors deepened rather than converged.

Another similar problem that Turkey has confronted was the military coup in Egypt in July 2013. Instead of denouncing the military intervention, the Western and regional actors have shown a very pragmatic political attitude by supporting the military intervention in politics. By doing so, they have shown that if their interests are at stake they would easily tolerate undemocratic moves in the post-Arab Spring politics. Such a response was, however, targeting Turkey's short and long term political aspirations, which would eventually benefit all the countries in the region. When the Muslim Brotherhood came to power, Ankara considered Egypt as one of the most crucial allies in its vision for the Middle East. With the coup, however, Cairo has become strategic restraint rather than leverage for Turkey. With the unwillingness of the international

society and the intensified security threats emanating from the Middle East, Turkey has preferred to reinforce security ties with NATO and Western countries.

The Regional Dimension

In addition to the international dimension, Turkey's new strategic reorientation towards the Middle East cannot be understood without considering the effects originated from the new regional dynamics. One of the most visible aspects of the new regional political setting is the uncertainty of the transformation, which the region has been experiencing for three years. Somehow, the political turmoil increased the faultiness among the regional actors and it paved the way to new strategic antagonism between the regional players such as Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey. This is the main driving force behind the catastrophic outcomes of the mass killings of civilians and the displacement of thousands of the Syrian people. In the recent years, Turkey has been relentlessly working to eliminate enmities among the regional actors and to try to integrate them into the global geopolitical system as a whole. However, as a result of the conflict in Syria, Ankara's strategic vision has been different from that of Tehran's, Damascus's and recently Cairo's. This situation has been negatively affecting Turkey's regional engagements more than its international dimension. Therefore, Ankara has been stuck between its intentions to attach itself to major international actors in solving the regional issues and playing the role of a regional actor.

The Internal Dimension of Turkey's Strategic Reorientation

In addition the regional dimension of Turkey's strategic reorientation, another striking repercussion of the regional transformations to the Turkish foreign policy has been felt at the national level. Erdogan's government has utilized the foreign policy activism as leverage for transforming the power structures in domestic politics. The Turkish position with regards to the Syrian crisis, the straining relations with Egypt, the problems with the central Iraqi government and the deteriorating cooperation with Israel have opened up a new political space for the opposition parties and groups to actively employ foreign policy in its domestic political calculations. The opposition has accused Erdogan's government for not being pragmatic enough and for employing ideologically-driven policy preference with regards to the regional politics. As a result, they argue that the government has lost its strategic flexibility and was left alone in conducting its policies regarding the Middle East.

The civil war in Syria has also been affecting Kurdish politics at the regional level and this necessitated Turkish foreign policy to urgently adjust itself to the changing dynamics

of the politics in the region. Even though Ankara has judged the Arab Spring to be in line with the democratic aspirations of the oppressed peoples of the region, Erdogan's loyalty to democracy has been questioned with regards to the events during the summer of 2013 across the country. In response to these accusations, Erdogan's supportive discourse on democratic institutions became stronger particularly with the military coup in Egypt. Turkey's harsh stance against the coup resulted in more discomfort for some of the regional and international actors that backed the military intervention in politics. (8)

Conclusion

Turkey is the leading regional actor, which can probably play the most significant role in sustaining regional security and order. The strategic flexibility of Erdogan government in conducting its foreign policy was the cornerstone of Turkey's success story in regional politics during the last decade. Various structural developments, however, threatened Turkey's foreign policy objectives and necessitated Ankara to re-organize its policies with regards to regional developments. This new political environment uncovered the urgent need for not only Turkey but also for other regional actors to soften their positions with regards to the conflicts in the region. This could only be achieved with a process of regional transformation in which all actors would have agreed upon basic political positions that would optimize their interests. The most important aspect of this regional transition is the elimination of political antagonisms and obstacles against the long term strategic partnerships. Turkey, which initially has been regarded as the winner of the Arab Spring period, is now being confronted with challenges that are the result of this very transformation. Many argue that Turkey's capabilities fall short of producing the outcomes that Ankara desires. In fact, this is not only a problem for Turkey. International parameters and the new regional dynamics prove that none of the regional and international actors alone –including the USA- are able to lead these transformations peacefully. Therefore, if Ankara's limited capabilities are seen as a disadvantage, the same applies for the other actors as well.

Against this backdrop, there are three geopolitical levels on which Turkey's short term foreign policy toward the Middle East is built upon. Each of these layers can be either supportive or destructive. Firstly, the geopolitics of the Kurdish issue is of great importance for Ankara's success in this transformation process. Instead of employing methods that can only be used domestically, Turkey has placed the Kurdish problem at a more regional level. Erdogan's public use of the term Kurdistan –a long time taboo word for Turkish politics- at a meeting in the biggest Kurdish town Diyarbakır, can be considered as Ankara's acceptance of this reality.

To be clearer, Turkey's interests have parallels with that of Kurds. Put it differently, democratic and economic gains of Kurds in the region can also be considered as a benefit for Turkey. This will most probably lead to more cooperation between the two groups. This development will significantly affect the second dimension, which is the relation with Iraq. The initial signals of rapprochement between Baghdad and Ankara were given with the recent visit of Ahmet Davutoglu to the Iraqi capital and the holy city of Karbala. This visit was particularly important in order to soften the hostile relations between Sunnis and Shias in Iraq in particular and in the Middle East in general. The final dimension of Erdogan government's strategic reorientation is to create a positive environment in which four regional actors –Turkey, Iran, Egypt and Saudi Arabia– can jointly shape the future security of the region as a whole. Finally, it should be underlined that Turkey is prioritizing the security of the regional transformation in order to maintain a peaceful existence of all actors in the region. To this end, Erdogan's government will be focusing on eliminating the strategic antagonisms among the regional actors by using Turkey's strategic flexibility as a main foreign policy methodology. According to Ankara, this approach can only be achieved by focusing on integrating the interests of all regional actors vis-à-vis the crises.

* *Murat Yeşiltaş is an Associate Professor at Sakarya University's Center for Middle Eastern Studies. His studies focus on geopolitics, political geography, critical theory, Turkish foreign policy and the Middle East.*

** *Ismail Numan Telci is a PhD Candidate at the Department of International Relations, Sakarya University. He is also a researcher at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Sakarya. Telci's work focuses on Arab spring, Egyptian politics and Turkish-Egyptian relations.*

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