

Turkey's shifting regional relationships after Arab Spring

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Since the establishment of Turkish Republic in 1923, Turkey played a limited role in the regional Middle East system, when the Justice and Development party (AKP) came to power in 2002 its foreign policy began to place a greater focus on the Middle East while still seeking to improve relations with the European Union. This approach allowed Turkey to “better engage” with neighboring countries of the Middle East and begin “a process driven not only by mutual economic interests but also by common identity based on cultural affinity”. A key early component was the improving of relations with Arab states, including Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Iraq and GCC countries through policy tools such as mediation, visa liberalization and free trade.[1]

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Under Justice and Development Party (AKP) leadership Turkey promoted a strategic vision in which, with its rising economic and political power and historical connections to with the Middle East countries, the county could play a role in helping to define an order for the region. Turkey articulated a set of norms for the organization its relations with the Middle East countries. The “zero problems” formulation, which are based on the theory “strategic depth”, envisioned how Turkey could play a central role in organizing Middle East regional, order due to its economic strength, and cultural and historical ties with the Arab region . Turkey sought to play a key role as a model state, a partner with extensive economic and diplomatic ties to the region.

Leverage and interests in the region shifted in the mid-2000s following the challenges it faced in Iraq and elsewhere, Turkey looked to play a larger role as mediator in regional politics. In 2009 it tried to use its relations with Iran to help defuse US-Iran tensions over the latter's nuclear program, and Turkey has tried to mediate in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

The dynamics of events which took place in Middle East since the Arab Spring of 2011 posed challenges to Turkish economic interests; damaged good political relations with some countries in the region; influenced on balancing of the bilateral relations with regional powers such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Iran. Turkish political behavior began to shift from a cooperative and peaceful nature based on the principle of zero problems with neighboring countries to that of tension and interference in the internal affairs of Arab countries which constitutes a real challenge to Turkey's bilateral relations with Arab countries such as Egypt and Syria, which was reflected in the Turkish region role in the Middle East and North Africa.[2]

The events of the Arab Spring represented an opportunity to Turkey and an obstacle in front of it at the same time. In Turkey's attempt to support the promotion of democracy as a central philosophy of the Arab Spring that will in turn promote peaceful political transformation without destroying regional stability, Turkey became reluctant and biased. In his statement,

(Ahmad Daoudġlu), the former Prime Minister of Turkey, said "A new Middle East is about to be born and Turkey will have a big role in it." After a couple of years, Turkey actively participated in the process of peaceful settlement in Syria.[3]

Turkey's foreign policy failed to fulfill balance in its relations with the Arab countries during the crisis of Arab Spring; hence Turkey was unable to take a leading role which will promote effective political transformation in Arab Countries affected by the crisis. One of the main factors which led to the decline of Turkish role is biasness towards certain political parties in the countries affected by the Arab Spring. For example, Turkey supported the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and did not recognize the revolution of 30 June 2013 in Egypt considering it a military coup. Therefore, Turkey wasn't in a position that allows it to mediate the political crisis in Egypt after the revolution of 2013 because it was criticized for its biasness and interference in the internal affairs of the countries of the region.[4]

Turkey's position towards the Syrian crisis and its support to the armed opposition which demanded a change of the Syrian regime in Damascus had a significant impact on the Turkish foreign policy, aspirations and priorities. Turkey's position towards Arab Spring, its support to religious political movements such as Muslim Brotherhood, its non-recognition of the revolution in Egypt of 30th June, 2013, the retreat of the Turkish role in settlement the Palestinian- Israel conflict, its support to Qatar after the embargo which was imposed by Saudi Arabia and its allies in 2016. All of the above mentioned have influenced its relations with the countries of the region.[5]

There are also many other reasons why Turkey's role declined in the Middle East and its relations with some of its countries deteriorated. Turkey's preoccupation with confronting many internal security challenges, especially after the cessation of the internal peace process and the resumption of armed conflict with the Kurdistan Workers Party fighters, which escalated inside Turkey, as well as the growing threat of armed terrorist groups in the border areas; the growing strength of the Democratic Union Party in northern Syria, which Turkey classified as a terrorist organization and as a threat to its national security because it encourages the establishment of a Kurdish entity in eastern Turkey.[6]

The events of the Arab Spring "into a traumatic experience for regional and global order overturned Turkish designs for a leading role in the Middle East region" . Turkey had to readjust its position in line with developments. The Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), whose armed wing the People's Protection Units (YPG) had gained US backing in its battles with ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), began to claim more territorial autonomy in northern Syria. Turkey soon came to view them as one of its most pressing threats like other states in the Middle East, lacking support or leadership from the USA, Turkey began to focus more on its own immediate interests and security concerns as it faced challenges from refugee flows.

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