

# BULLETIN

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## The Turkish Reaction to Events in North Africa

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*The position of Turkey on the crises in the countries of North Africa is not clear. In some cases the Turkish government has refrained from involvement while in others the response was more decisive. This tactic stemmed primarily from the vested interests of Turkey and its relations with different countries in the region. Turkey's position at the time of the revolution in the countries of North Africa should not weaken its position on Tunisia and Egypt. However, it could lead to the loss of strong economic and political ties with Libya.*

**Tunisia.** The revolution that swept Tunisia came as a surprise to the Turkish government. Initially, it only watched the developments closely and did not advocate for either party. The first official post appeared only four weeks after the start of the protests that led to Tunisian President Zin al-Abidin Ben Ali being forced to leave the country. Turkey's Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu then issued a brief statement in which he confirmed his country's readiness to support the democratic demands of Tunisians and expressed his hope that the coming transition process would be conducted with respect for democratic and pluralistic principles.

Such a position by Turkish authorities was the result of several factors. First, Tunisia is not a strategic partner in the region. Economically, historically and culturally, Tunisia is mainly connected with its former colonial patron, France. The improvement of Turkish–Tunisian relations occurred only during the current AKP government (since 2002). In 2005, both countries signed a free-trade agreement, which gave an impetus to trade between Turkey and Tunisia. Despite the agreement, the level of economic cooperation has not brought the desired results. Another factor that contributed to the restrained position of the Turkish government was the small number of Turkish citizens living in Tunisia (less than a thousand people). The lack of a response from Turkey also may have been due to the relatively rapid progress of the “Jasmine Revolution.”

**Egypt.** Turkey's reaction to the crisis in Egypt was more decisive. The Turkish Prime Minister was one of the first world leaders to take the side of the anti-government opposition. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan presented on 1 February a speech addressed to members of his AKP party, which acceded to the Egyptian opposition's demand for the departure of President Hosni Mubarak.

In contrast to Tunisia, economic relations between Turkey and Egypt have been stronger—the annual trade is estimated at \$3.2 billion. Despite this, Turkey's Prime Minister risked and gave support to the opposition. Such efforts by R.T. Erdoğan may have been largely because Egypt under Mubarak was a major rival to Turkey in the Middle East. Turkey has for several years maintained a dynamic Middle Eastern policy and attempted to weaken the position of Egypt in this part of the world. This is confirmed by even the words of Prime Minister Erdoğan in 2007, when he clearly stated that in its actions in the Middle East, Turkey was not going to be a passive actor but actively involved in decision-making processes. He also stressed that all actions in this region should be consulted with Turkey. It is worth noting that the seizure of such a clear stance on the events in Egypt reflects the fairly clear-cut attitude of Egyptian society, which strongly demanded the resignation of Mubarak.

**Libya.** Turkey adopted a completely different tactic to the crisis in Libya. Since the beginning of the conflict, Prime Minister Erdoğan tried to remain neutral. At the invitation of the rebel Provisional National Council of 7 March to condemn Turkish mercenaries who fought for Qaddafi, Turkish authorities responded by ensuring that the rebels could count on aid. Other than humanitarian aid, Turkey, however, did not want to give any political or military support. At the same time, Turkey also has supported UN sanctions against Libya. Turkey also opposed the introduction of no-fly zone to

prevent attacks on forces loyal to the Qaddafi regime. Turkey only supported the introduction of a no-fly zone after the UN Security Council adopted Resolution No. 1973. Turkey was opposed to international military intervention in Libya. Its position has not changed since coalition forces comprised of mainly NATO countries (the U.S., UK and France) began military action in Libya. Turkey changed its position on 24 March, when the United States announced that the coalition countries agreed to take over command of NATO's operation in Libya. At the same time, Turkey criticized the French government for taking the active role in air attacks against Qaddafi forces and insisted that NATO command all air operations over Libya. Eventually, this happened on 31 March. At the same time, Turkey has offered to mediate in negotiations that could lead to a ceasefire in Libya. It also has prepared a proposal to end the conflict that provides for a ceasefire and the withdrawal of Qaddafi forces from parts of the cities. It was also a more critical attitude towards Qaddafi, as evidenced by the statement of the Prime Minister of Turkey on 4 May. It was the first time the Turkish Prime Minister strongly criticized the Libyan leader and urged him to immediately step down, for the good of his country.

At the beginning of the civil war in Libya, Turkey was opposed to international intervention and economic sanctions against Qaddafi's regime because it feared the loss of economic influence. Libya has been a strategic economic partner with Turkey since the early 1980s. Before the outbreak of the revolution in Libya, there were about 200 Turkish companies in the country, employing about 25,000 Turkish citizens. Turkey conducted more than \$15 billion worth of projects in Libya. While the annual trade between the two countries was about \$ 2.4 billion.

Economic cooperation between Turkey and Libya favoured the reference of good personal relations between their leaders. Evidence of this includes the controversial award in the field of human rights, which the Libyan leader accepted in 2010 in Istanbul from Prime Minister Erdoğan. Turkey's opposition to military intervention in Libya also could arise from experience drawn from the recent war in Iraq. During the conflict, Turkey not only lost multimillions of dollars worth of contracts, but also had to accept about half million refugees. Not without significance is the fact that the Prime Minister of Turkey, advocating intervention in Libya, could expose himself to political losses in upcoming elections. The majority of the electorate is firmly opposed to any intervention by Western countries that results in the death of Muslim civilians. However, Turkey took the decision to join the military action by NATO in Libya because it wanted to have an impact on the campaign. Demanded the hand-over of command to NATO reduced the role of France in the intervention.

**Perspectives.** After the revolutions in North Africa, Turkey will seek to establish close political and economic relations with the new authorities of those countries. Evidence for this is found in the visit to Tunisia by the Foreign Minister of Turkey on 21 February 2011. Davutoğlu, who at the same time is the president of the Council of Europe, offered his help in building a democratic political system in Tunisia. Turkey could quickly rebuild its economic and political ties with Egypt following the support it gave the opposition. The situation is different in Libya, however. The rebels have not hidden their disappointment with Turkey's attitude and have accused the country of obstructing the operations of NATO forces against Qaddafi. Therefore, if the collapse of the Qaddafi regime follows and the rebels seize power, Turkey may lose influence in the country (mainly to France) to the detriment of its economic interests.