



~MIDDLE EAST MEDIA MONITOR~
**TURKISH MEDIA COVERAGE
OF THE WESTERN INTERVENTION IN LIBYA**

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Middle East Media Monitor is an FPRI E-Note series, designed to review once a month a current topic from the perspective of the foreign language press in such countries as Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, and Turkey. These articles will focus on providing FPRI's readership with an inside view on how some of the most important countries in the Middle East are covering issues of importance to the American foreign policy community.

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Following the Tunisian and Egyptian examples, uprisings in Libya against Colonel Muammar Gaddafi began on February 17, 2011 as part of the “Arab Awakening.” The international community—contrary to its reactions in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Bahrain—has intervened militarily in Libya in response to Gaddafi’s violent suppression of the revolt. It took nine days for the UN Security Council to impose its sanctions on February 26 after the United States, and the West in general, reacted strongly against Gaddafi’s crackdown of the uprising. On February 28, the European Union imposed similar sanctions including an arms embargo. On March 12, the Arab League called for a no-fly zone to be imposed over Libya; five days later the UN Security Council authorized it. By March 19, a coalition led by the United States, Britain, and France began a military intervention in Libya in line with UN Security Council Resolution 1973. And, on March 24, it was agreed that by March 29, NATO would take control of all the military operations in Libya.

This seemingly smooth progression was not without problems, especially when considering the Turkish position(s) and the ensuing controversy between Turkey and France. Turkey vacillated from being completely opposed to any intervention in Libya to both supporting and participating in the intervention within NATO’s framework. The Turkish shift can be explained by considering two issues. First, for Turkey, there is a difference between “Western” intervention and NATO intervention. As a member of NATO, Turkey has the power to veto the military intervention at any stage, as long as it is carried out by NATO forces. Second, for Turkey, the initial intervention by the Western coalition under France’s leadership posed a significant threat to its new foreign policy of assuming an active leadership and mediation role in the Middle East.¹ In short, Turkish considerations center on Turkey maintaining a prominent position in the region. However, the language and rationalization that Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan used regarding Western intervention in the Middle East, especially at the beginning, caused confusion both at home and abroad. In fact, Erdoğan had initially called a NATO intervention in Libya “unthinkable” and “absurd.”²

Significantly, in an international survey conducted by the global research company Ipsos, Turkey was ranked as among the least likely countries to support the NATO mission. The survey, which polled citizens of 23 countries after the UN established a “no-fly zone” over Libya and NATO began its military campaign, found that only 35 percent of the Turkish population supported the military intervention. This percentage is the second lowest, after Russians, among the polled citizenries.³

¹ Ian Traynor, “Turkey and France clash over Libya air campaign,” [guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk), March 24, 2011.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/mar/24/turkey-france-clash-libya-campaign>

² Jonathan Head, “Libya: Turkey’s trouble with NATO and no-fly zone,” BBC News, March 25, 2011.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/mobile/world-africa-12864742>

³ See: “Majority (60%) of Global Citizens Support NATO’s Military Intervention in Libya,” Ipsos Global Advisory, May 12, 2011.

<http://www.ipsos-na.com/news-polls/pressrelease.aspx?id=5234>

Not surprisingly, the media plays an important role in both reflecting and influencing public opinion in Turkey. Since the outbreak of the first protests in Tunisia, Turkish media coverage of the Arab Awakening has portrayed a confused but ambitious picture of Turkey's role regarding an intervention in Libya. Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's "zero problem (with neighbors) policy" and Turkey's role model status for democratizing Middle Eastern countries have contributed to an optimistic and ambitious domestic environment. However, the pace of developments in the Middle East, which required swift responses from Turkey and the West, unfolded more rapidly than Turkey had expected, causing confusion in Turkish government and foreign policy circles, as well as in public opinion. This is particularly evident when examining some of the most popular newspapers in Turkey—*Hürriyet*, *Milliyet*, *Zaman*, *Taraf*, *Radikal*, and *Haber Türk*—and their portrayal of the Western intervention in Libya.

The Turkish media in general, and columnists and commentators in particular, are primarily concerned about Turkish foreign policy direction and an appropriate Turkish response regarding the recent events in the Middle East.⁴ Pleased with Erdoğan's responses to the uprisings in Tunisia and especially in Egypt, many columnists supported Turkey's initial criticism of the Western intervention—regardless of their general attitude towards the government and its policies. However, while several columnists lost interest, others ceased opposing the intervention once Turkey began participating in it. They, then, shied away from criticizing government policies, which presented a complete reversal of its position vis-à-vis the intervention within a few days. So, the media's initial criticism of the Western intervention in Libya—like that of the Turkish government—appears to have been rooted in opposing France's leadership of the operation.⁵

However, the majority in the Turkish media—namely the Islamists, leftists, and nationalists, continue to oppose any Western involvement in the Middle East. This unifying position among various opposing blocs in Turkey reflects a general suspicion of Western intentions in the Middle East. This theme features prominently in the government's own discourse, especially with the approaching elections on June 13, 2011. Moreover, the West is perceived as monolithic in Turkey; only rarely are distinctions made between the U.S. and the European powers. Rarer still are the policies of the European powers evaluated individually. News of America's \$25 million of financial aid to the opposition in Libya,⁶ the death of more than 800 Libyans fleeing Gaddafi's crackdown,⁷ and NATO's "indifference"⁸ to the growing number of people dying or trying to escape has caused increasing suspicion in the media.⁹ Coverage and analyses also usually focused on this type of headline grabbing news.

The Turkish media primarily covers the Western politicians and Western media rather than Arab leaders and Arab media. While most are suspicious of Western intentions in the region, it appears, the Turkish media remain disinterested in the details of this complex situation. For example, in various columns, a few key reasons are most often cited as motivating the West's intervention in Libya. Yet most lack an analysis of the intricacies and the realities on the ground. Libya's oil reserve, in particular, is the most popular reason for which Western intervention is claimed to be carried out.¹⁰ The second reason most often cited is the conflict of interests among Western powers in Libya and in the Middle East.¹¹ Some also mention the threat of Libyan immigrants escaping from Gaddafi regime to Europe as an incentive for European countries to build a more stable regime and to prevent this flow of migration. For instance, Yalçın Doğan from *Milliyet* argues: "France, Britain and Italy expect that the fall of the unpopular Gaddafi government would provide the necessary conditions for dissidents to stay in Libya."¹²

⁴ Cengiz Çandar, "Türkiye'nin 'garanti belgesi' ..." *Hürriyet*, March 16, 2011.

<http://hurarsiv.hurriyet.com.tr/goster/ShowNew.aspx?id=17282194>

⁵ Mehmet Ali Birand, "Kaddafi gidecek de bakalım kanlı mı olacak kansız mı?" *Hürriyet*, March 22, 2011.

<http://hurarsiv.hurriyet.com.tr/goster/ShowNew.aspx?id=17337742>

⁶ Haber Türk, April 25th, 2011, <http://www.haberturk.com/dunya/haber/625086-obama-muhafilere-25-milyon-dolar-verecek>

⁷ "Libya'dan kaçan yüzlerce kişi boğuldu," Haber Türk, May 10, 2011. <http://www.haberturk.com/dunya/haber/629221-libyadan-kaçan-yuzlerce-kisi-boguldu>

⁸ "Akdeniz'de NATO dehşeti," Haber Vaktim, May 10, 2011.

http://www.habervaktim.com/haber/184793/akdenizde_nato_deh%C5%9Feti.html

⁹ Ayşe Tosun, "BM'den Avrupa'ya mültecilerin yardım çağrısını duyun çağrısı," *Zaman*, May 11, 2011.

<http://www.zaman.com.tr/haber.do?haberno=1132753&title=bmden-avrupaya-multecilerin-yardim-cigligini-duyun-cagrisi>

¹⁰ Fehmi Kuru, "Benzerliğin bu kadarı," *Zaman*, March 21, 2011. <http://www.zaman.com.tr/yazar.do?yazino=1110377&keyfield=>

¹¹ Hasan Pulur, "Libya nedir, ne değildir?," *Milliyet*, March 27, 2011. <http://gundem.milliyet.com.tr/libya-nedir-ne-degildir-gundem/gundemyazardetay/27.03.2011/1369446/default.htm>; Ahmet Selim, "Benzer senaryolar," *Zaman*, March 24, 2011.

<http://www.zaman.com.tr/yazar.do?yazino=1111899&keyfield=>; Ali Bulaç, "Libya'ya İslam barış gücü," *Zaman*, March 24, 2011.

<http://www.zaman.com.tr/yazar.do?yazino=1111900&keyfield=>

¹² Yalçın Doğan, "Bir baska saldırıya kadar üç silahşörler," *Hürriyet*, March 22, 2011.

<http://hurarsiv.hurriyet.com.tr/goster/ShowNew.aspx?id=17336333>

Taraf newspaper, known for its support of the government's conflict with the military, as well as publishing the WikiLeaks documents concerning Turkey, defends Western intervention and tries to explain it on humanitarian grounds in the majority of its coverage.¹³ A disagreement on the issue is apparent between one of its most prominent columnists, Roni Margulies, and other writers in *Taraf*. Margulies blames columnists like Ahmet Altan for being too naïve about Western intentions. He claims that “concepts such as peace and democracy cannot be juxtaposed with capitalism and profit.” He continues: “American weapons defended Gaddafi for 42 years for a reason, and it is the same reason today that these weapons are pointed at him.”¹⁴ On the other hand, other *Taraf* columnists, such as Markar Esayan, criticize Margulies and many others from leftist, Islamist, and nationalist camps, for “confining themselves to the outdated assumptions about the relationship between capitalism-imperialism-and-the evil West.”¹⁵

Erdoğan's statements regarding Western intervention in Libya also received wide coverage in both the Turkish and international press: “The Middle East and Africa have been viewed by the West as sources of oil and used as pawns in oil wars for decades.”¹⁶ Following his example, many columnists accused Western powers of acting only according to their strategic and economic interests in Libya, while emphasizing that Turkey is backing opposition movements in the Middle East for the sake of democracy and human rights. As Erdoğan has appealed to people's consciences and values, some columnists do the same. However, after Syrian President Bashar Al Assad's crackdown on his own people intensified—culminating in the killing of more than 1,000 people in Syria—the same columnists saw nothing wrong with prioritizing Turkish economic and strategic interest in Syria, strongly urging against an intervention at any cost. For instance, Cengiz Çandar agreed with the prime minister, accusing the West of being hypocritical in its approach to the Middle East. Yet, he shows the same hypocrisy regarding Syria.¹⁷ However, he is not alone in his strategic approach to the Syrian situation. Many in the Turkish media are also myopically focused on the economic and political repercussions of a Western intervention with little regard to the human rights abuses that are taking place.¹⁸

There are some exceptions to the majority of columnists and commentators who appear to favor human rights and democratization for Arab people but only focus on the economic and strategic ramifications of Syrian instability when Turkish interests are at stake. Nuray Mert from *Milliyet* is a prominent example. Mert argues that what is going on in the region has very little to do with the “Arabs struggling for freedom” and claims that Western and Turkish interests in the region usually overlap.¹⁹ In Bahrain, Mert argues that both the West and Turkey see no evil, hear no evil, and speak no evil. Instead, she asserts, they resort to pure realist arguments based on the possible repercussions of a Shiite-Sunni conflict rather than to democratic and human rights of protesting Bahrainis.²⁰ She also differs from her colleagues with her in-depth analyses, taking into account not only the recent outbreak of popular protests in the Middle East but also the long-term struggles and complicated relationships both within and outside of the region.

To summarize, it is apparent that the Turkish media, despite a handful of exceptional analyses, is struggling to keep pace with events unfolding in Arab countries. Many columnists and news outlets seem content to offer superficial arguments and analyses regarding the Middle East and Western involvement in the region. Considering the upcoming elections and the intensity of domestic politics, it is unlikely that the Turkish media will offer more detailed coverage of the region than the present. Furthermore, the majority of the comments so far have been in support of the government's foreign policy in the Middle East. Given the lack of expertise and interest among most of the Turkish columnists and commentators regarding this

¹³ Ahmet Altan, “Dünya,” *Taraf*, March 20, 2011. <http://www.taraf.com.tr/ahmet-altan/makale-dunya.htm>; Murat Belge, “Libya Olgusu,” *Taraf*, March 25, 2011. <http://www.taraf.com.tr/murat-belge/makale-libya-olgusu.htm>

¹⁴ Roni Margulies, “İyiler Federasyonunun Libya Serüveni,” *Taraf*, March 23, 2011. <http://www.taraf.com.tr/roni-margulies/makale-iyiler-federasyonu-nun-libya-seruveni.htm>

¹⁵ Markar Esayan, “Libya Müdahalesi ve R2P,” *Taraf*, March 27, 2011. <http://www.taraf.com.tr/markar-esayan/makale-libya-mudahalesi-ve-r2p.htm>. Also see: “Sizi bir arada görmek ne güzel,” *Taraf*, March 24, 2011. <http://www.taraf.com.tr/markar-esayan/makale-sizi-bir-arada-gormek-ne-guzel.htm>

¹⁶ Ian Traynor, “Turkey and France clash over Libya air campaign,” *guardian.co.uk*, March 24, 2011. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/mar/24/turkey-france-clash-libya-campaign>

¹⁷ Cengiz Çandar, “Yine Suriye yine Güneydoğu,” *Radikal*, May 11, 2011. <http://www.radikal.com.tr/Radikal.aspx?aType=RadikalYazar&ArticleID=1048929&Yazar=CENG%DDZ%20%C7ANDAR&Date=14.05.2011&CategoryID=97>

¹⁸ İlnur Çevik and Emrullah Uslu's comments on the issue demonstrates a similar pattern. See: “Turkey's changing tunes on Syria” Inside Story, Al-Jazeera, May 14, 2011. <http://english.aljazeera.net/programmes/insidestory/2011/05/201151582435734752.html>

¹⁹ Nuray Mert, “Karışık bir tablo Bahreyn, Suudi Arabistan, İran, ABD ve Türkiye,” *Milliyet*, March 17, 2011. <http://gundem.milliyet.com.tr/karisik-bir-tablo-bahreyn-suudi-arabistan-iran-abd-ve-turkiye/gundem/gundemyazardetay/17.03.2011/1365193/default.htm>

²⁰ Nuray Mert, “Bölgede bahar bitti, yaz sıcak geçecek,” *Milliyet*, May 15, 2011. <http://gundem.milliyet.com.tr/bolgede-bahar-bitti-yaz-sicak-gececek/gundem/gundemyazardetay/15.05.2011/1390434/default.htm>

region and the prevalent suspicion of Western intentions, a shift the Turkish media's position seems unlikely.

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