



Transcript

Turkey and the Arab World: Ambition and Evolution

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Sir David Logan:

Well, good afternoon everyone, and welcome to Chatham House. I am David Logan I am the Chair of the British Institute at Ankara.

And we've got four extremely capable and distinguished participants in this discussion of Turkey and the Arab world. I'm going to start from my left. On my far left is Taha Özhan, who is the director general of SETA, which is the Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research. It's quite a new institution in Ankara. It was established about six years ago, and it's already made its name as an influential player among the policy institutes in Ankara, and that has a lot to do with Taha Bey's directorship of it. So we're very glad to have him here. On my left is Lale Kemal, who also works for a pretty new institution, *Taraf* newspaper, which I think was founded in 2007.

Lale Kemal:

No, earlier. I think 2006. But I'm an old journalist, I mean, a veteran journalist.

Sir David Logan:

2006. *Taraf*, as you all know, is a campaigning newspaper which made its name in particular on the issues of the relationship between the civilian government and the military in Turkey.

On my right is Fuat Keyman, who runs the policy centre at Sabancı University which I expect you all know. It's very much a premier policy institute in Istanbul. It's renowned for the quality of work it produces. And Fuat is a prolific author and a commentator, a regular columnist in *Radikal*, who previously worked and had distinguished posts at universities in the United States.

And on my far right is Fadi Hakura, who you all probably know because he's here at Chatham House. He runs the Turkey programme. So, first of all if I could ask Taha to speak.

Taha Özhan:

Yes. Thank you very much for the invitation and chance to speak in Chatham House. I'll try to summarize what I can say in a big title called 'Turkey and the Arab world'. I'll start with, if you were to talk about this title 20 years ago, first of all, it wasn't going to be a big title, as it is today. 20 years ago it will be, probably, a historical talk mostly, to prove Turkey has nothing to do with the

East. And they would get into details of history, and they could hardly touch on something happening in the modern times, mainly, let's say twentieth century. Another word probably we would have been hearing is going to be 'distance', mostly, I mean at least from media and academic life, from the words of politicians, I can pick up this word maybe thousands of times. And another thing – modern Turkey and so-called 'preferences' since the Republic will be – come on the table. They would be what underlie whatever those preferences are, mostly in the context of how the distance is big. Islamism, the threat of Islamism, the secularism, and all those clichés, both produced in the West and consumed in Turkey, will be on the agenda.

Another thing will be the relationship with Israel – how it is valuable, how it is 'strategic'. And you will be – probably we will be hearing how Turkey is an organic part of Western alliance, and if it was what, 20, 22 years ago, the biggest example would be the Gulf War, or attack to Saddam by the Coalition, and how Turkey being part of it without questioning anything. And if it comes to what economic terms, in insignificant trade volumes, rare visits would be on the agenda. And in Turkish media, academics and political life, they can easily see how Arab issues are in low profile and almost never mentioned except it is in the context of Islamic threat, how we distance ourselves from the East, how we distance ourselves with the Arabs – or their betrayal to the Ottomans, picking up very specific cases and just regressing it. In short, the disconnection with Arab world will be the main idea, and there is no returning back from that stage or phase. This was already purchased by academics, media, and political life under, let's say, establishment.

Today, instead of talking about that historic history in the sense of how we distance, it's all – it's one of the what, mostly used instrument in Turkish talk of Arab issues, but in a very different way and to show, and to use history, how Turks cannot be disconnected from the East, Arabs – social, cultural, political and economic re-imagining of the past is emerging. So again the history is on the table, but exactly in a different manner. The distance – it's been debated too much, especially in the last ten years. But to show how there is a proximity between Turkey and the region. The modern Republic and what they established 80, 85 years ago is also on the table, but in a different way. As just Prime Minister Erdoğan said yesterday, I mean media mostly focused on what he's talking about on Syria, specific to attack on Turkish jet, but I think he mentioned something which is very useful to our topic today. He said – I'm just translating in large terms – who thinks this country is being born in 1923 is mistaken, '23 is just declaration of modern Republic, it's just an important milestone in our history. In his words, 1923 is

just a date when this country re-emerged and continued where she stopped. So the history of the modern Republic is being debated in this sense in comparison to 20 years ago.

Instead of talking about Islamism and Islamic threat, the famous topic today is 'Turkish model', whatever it is. It's widely available also in the other side of the story, which is the Arab media, academics, politicians. So that threat issue is gone. Instead of having relationships, strategic very important relationship with Israel, we are having almost no relationship with Israel today. And instead of being part of the Western alliance to attack Iraq, right now Turkey is the what, maybe whatever we're talking about, the 'new Turkey' is emerged by the date when they rejected being part of the occupation of Iraq. Instead of having what very bad economic relations, there is a huge trade volume, no visas to most of the Arab countries.

And another critical thing is, many Arab issues right now, instead of being a very distant issues problem, are considered as domestic issues. And this is now the term, I am using it, many different people, politicians from very different political backgrounds, considering and bluntly saying this is a domestic issue to us, for example Syria. Intensive academic interest – there is not a month in Turkey, there are [sic] at least five, ten meetings related to what Arab issues.

Media interaction is quite huge. Not only Turkish media in Arab world, but Arab media in Turkey, too. For example, one example – Al Jazeera Turk is, I think, in the process of being established and they are going to start their broadcasting. And instead of having the Palestinian issue as an Arab issue, and never touch it 20 years ago, right now Palestinian issue is a daily issue in Turkish political life. And it's important, after Israel attacked the aid ship, Mavi Marmara, in 2010, it turned itself definitely into a domestic issue. So Turkey became the part of Arab-Israeli axis and created a triangle. So right now we can easily talk about Turkey, Arab and Israeli triangle. And definitely a new thing happened. While the last 70, 80 years we were not able to have Arab issues in a hypothetical, in a thinking manner, suddenly we found ourselves physically hosting Syrian opposition. So these are the dramatic changes. I'll stop here. If I continue to talk on these changes, five minutes is not enough. Thank you very much.

Sir David Logan:

Thank you very much indeed, Taha. Lale.

Lale Kemal:

Good afternoon to all the guests. I mean the topic of today's engagement is rule of engagement between Turkey and the Arab world. So, ironically, the Turkish prime minister announced yesterday that Turkey changed its rules of engagement in its dealings with Syria. So the Syrian downing of the Turkish jet, we may discuss perhaps later, perhaps it will further constrain, while widening Turkish opportunity in the Arab world. But I should underline that despite all its shortcomings, Turkey is a success story in the past decade, or perhaps more than a decade, in its democratic transformation. I mean, nobody can deny it. Turkey changed remarkably in the past ten or twelve years, furthering its democratic standards, bringing its military under the – to a certain extent – or curbing the military's power in politics, which I think should be a factor in influencing the Arab citizens in the streets, who have long been ruled by their autocratic regimes backed by the militaries.

Turkey has also been trying to address its Kurdish issue and the terrorism problem. These are important issues because you have to deal successfully with your internal problems if you want to assert your soft power, in particular, and military power in the neighbouring states. Thirdly, Turkey is, through its legal reforms, at least introduced or enabled a compromise between the mild secularists and the practising Muslims in Turkey. So we needed a compromise that brought the mild secularists and the moderate Islamists [so they] could live together in a democratic Turkey. Because our problem is, we have still extremes on both ends – one extreme is a militant secularism and the other is the Islamic extremism. But they are not powerful at all. So, I think – and also economically, Turkey made quite good advances in the economic field, though we can all dispute the figures released by the Turkish officials. But all these elements that I mentioned have changed Turkey's profile in the world, I guess positively.

And now we are, in the Middle East we are facing on Turkey's doorsteps serious uprisings. How these uprisings will evolve, nobody knows, but it's going to take a long time for all these countries to really install whatever model they like. But it will for sure be more on the side of democracy. So the longer the search is for settling disputes in the Middle East will take the longer it will have – of course some negative influences on Turkey, like we witnessed with the Syrian downing of a Turkish plane that both sides dispute where it has taken place, but this is another issue.

So, to sum up, I still see that the more democratic Turkey which settled its course with its internal problems, which re-wrote its new constitution, where the parliamentary commission is trying to re-write a new Turkish civilian

constitution, which was altered in 1982 by the military after the junta took over, upset the civilian government. So I think the main parameter is for Turkey to be a model for the Arab countries, for a majority of them, because there may be different choices, for Turkey is to complete its transition to a democratic country, and this will be possible with the completion of a democratic, civilian constitution. So we can elaborate, perhaps, later. Thank you very much.

Sir David Logan:

Thank you, Lale. Fuat.

Dr Fuat Keyman:

Thank you for inviting me. What I would like to talk within five minutes, maybe sort of sharing with you a dilemma that Turkey faces, especially in this recent conjuncture which we call the 'Arab Spring' and the discussions about Turkey's model role. I think Turkey's model role, or the importance or increasing interest in Turkey, has to do with Turkey's, what can be called 'demonstrative effect'. That means the historical experience by which or within which Turkey has achieved a number of things. One actually is, despite all the problems that we have in terms of the Kurdish question, freedom of speech, civil-military relations, Turkey has going through, or navigating in the road towards democratic consolidation and demonstrating that democratic, secular consolidation is possible in a dominantly Muslim setting, which is extremely important for the Arab Spring too.

The second demonstrative effect has to do with the vibrant Turkish economy and entrepreneur culture, which has occurred in recent years in what we used to call a traditional periphery, that is Anatolia, not the centre – Ankara, Istanbul – but Anatolian middle classes, Anatolian entrepreneurs. Europeanization through customs union and globalization, integrating the global market, has created extremely dynamic, vibrant entrepreneur and dynamic culture. So that is also very, very important in terms of the Arab Spring. As a matter of fact, as far as I'm concerned, this is the place where Turkey makes its most contribution to, if it will succeed, the post-revolutionary Arab societies, because as we know that, if the revolution is successful all these countries will face extremely significant economic, you know, problems, which I will talk about in the afternoon session.

The third one, actually, is the AK Party experience. In the last ten years, Turkey has demonstrated that if actors coming from Islamic circles are integrated, incorporated in the system, can be moderate and can actually be very successful. So in this sense, for example the Egypt elections right now, if the system is open to the participatory mode, to what we call the peripheral actors, or the outside system actors, the result would be successful. So in this sense the third demonstrative effect, actually, of Turkey actually is the recent experience of political Islam in the world, but especially in Turkey has been quite significant from a much more dogmatic, ideological type of Islam towards a much more pragmatic centre-right – it is, you know, a kind of political actor which pays more attention to delivering to society than talking ideologically. So in this sense, this third part also actually is quite important in terms of Turkey's demonstration that this is possible in this region.

But the dilemma occurs with, for instance, what happened two days ago, and the sort of the new rules of engagement in Turkey. When we talk about Turkey's role in the Arab Spring, we are not talking about Turkey's historical experiences, they are significant and so forth, but Turkey's kind of pushing and pulling into this, you know, conflict, and kind of a system-making or order-making actor. That is, Turkey as a social actor towards... Turkey is integrating into or participating in the conflict and actually creating results. That means that Turkey's capacity to make a difference in terms of regime change. Then Turkey faces a big problem because then Turkey are put into a test case – how much capacity Turkey has in terms of, you know, creating a regime change in these kind of societies.

And in the question and answer period I will actually elaborate on this, because I read this recent, you know, attempt by the Syrian forces to shut down Turkish regime. It's a way of looking at Turkey. How far can Turkey can go, how much influence Turkey has in terms of creating regime change and actually – countries like Syria.

So in this sense the dilemma, actually, is this: there has been an upsurge of interest in Turkey, there has been a very, very important experience going on in Turkey, but there has been disconnect between what Turkey does in terms of making contribution to Arab Spring, what Turkey should not do but is expected to do, both from outside, inside, in terms of significant, hard-powered, regime-change type of activities. Right now, Turkish foreign policy is facing this dilemma, and at the crossroads to decide about its future, because if the wrong decision is taken, this whole demonstrative effect of Turkey might collapse too. So in this sense, you know, not only in the Arab Spring but in Turkey, too, given the very, very important and very, very, you know,

significant experience that we had the last ten years – but you know, the timing which we are talking about is quite blurry and including Turkey every actor should be careful about what Turkey can do and what is going on in this region.

Sir David Logan:

Thank you very much for that. Fadi.

Fadi Haruka:

I would say that there are three broad trends you're going to find in Turkey and the Middle East and North Africa since – in the post-Arab Spring period. First, now the Arab countries and Turkey are questioning the relationship between the military and the religious establishment. Traditionally, in the Middle East, in the Arab countries and Turkey you had two powerful groups: the military on one hand and the religious establishment on the other. Not much in between. There was not much civil society, non-governmental organizations, trade unions, etc, at least powerful enough to challenge those groups. Now that questioning and confrontation is taking place.

In Turkey's case, the transformation is far from complete because there are question marks now – what kind of democracy is emerging in Turkey? For example. These are now increasing questions being asked, not just in Turkey, but also in the Western media, and increasingly also in the Arab media as more attention is now being paid, focused on Turkey. And you're now seeing that also in Egypt, with the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) very reluctantly giving up power to the now-elected president, Mohamed Morsi, from the Muslim Brotherhood. So now you're seeing that altercation, interaction, develop for the first time in the region en masse, in Turkey and the Arab world. How it develops from here is a different story. What we see in Turkey is that the de-militarisation process has led to further political polarisation in Turkey, which is not a healthy – the way that it's been unfolding, and the evidence indicates, that there's an increasing polarisation, especially between the secular-leaning CHP, the Republican People's Party, and the governing, Islamist-rooted Justice and Development Party.

In Egypt, on the other hand, I'm slightly more optimistic. In the last elections, we're beginning to see a centre in Egyptian politics emerge, where the polarisation one finds in Turkey is not so deeply rooted in Egypt. To give an example, in the first round of presidential elections, Hamdeen Sabbahi, who is

a Nasserite, who had a very populist economic campaign, he's a secular, he has a secular campaign, he got a lot of votes – he came number one in a lot of the religious areas of Cairo, for example Imbaba, where the Brotherhood and the Salafis used to do very, very well, he actually came number one. That – you do not find a lot of that in Turkey. And that's healthy. But in Turkey I think that will eventually emerge. But at the moment we're seeing increasing polarisation in the Middle East. I'm a bit more optimistic that we're seeing a centre of politics emerge, especially in Egypt.

The second point I would make is that, increasingly now, you can see that political Islam has come to government, whether in Egypt now, Morocco, Tunisia, potentially in the future Libya, and perhaps Yemen. What we see is that this bogeyman about political Islam embracing politics would result in armageddon is turning out to be not true. If you look, for example, with Mohamed Morsi, who's just been elected in Egypt, he gave a speech to the nation when he won the elections, and his most important line, he said, 'I will honour all the international treaties that Egypt has signed'. That's code word for the Camp David Accords between Israel and Egypt. So one can see that I think we have reached the peak of Islamist politics in the region.

And now is, how will that transform? I think the key issue here is going to be the economy. Why people voted for the Turkish prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, is because of the economy, not ideology or because of religion or lifestyle issues, although these are key cleavages in Turkish politics, but because of the economy. The Turkish economy has been doing well. Poverty in Turkey has been going down. Jobs, non-agricultural jobs have been going up. So that's why they voted for him. Similarly, the Brotherhood in Egypt will be decided on the economy. And if you look at the Brotherhood's vote, actually from the parliamentary elections that took place in Egypt last year and today, they actually went down 50 percent because the people, the Egyptians, perceive that the Brotherhood did not deliver. And the key criteria is the economy. That's what will judge the future of Islamist politics and other politicians, whether left, right or centre, in the region.

The third point to look at is how the Arabs and the Turks are not really that much excited about Syria. If you compare to how Arabs were in the 1980s over Afghanistan, for example, when you had Afghan conflict, over Iraq in the 1990s, over Lebanon in the '80s and '90s, and the Iraq war in 2003 onwards – in Syria actually you find that there's not that much excitement, despite the media coverage on all the pan-Arab TV stations, whether Al Arabiyya, Al Jazeera, Sky News Arabia, BBC Arabic, et cetera. You don't see that kind of excitement as much. I think Arabs have become exhausted by these

continuous conflicts for the last 30, 40 years. And much more now the focus is internal: economy – what can the government do for my, for the economy, bread and butter issues, health, education, social security. Now, these are the key concerns for Arabs and Turks. And what you will see is that there's not that much excitement. Neither are Turks, even the Turkish public, by and large is not in favour of any kind of military intervention by the Turkish military into Syria. And that is because now the key focus is internal. And that's what the Arab Spring was all about.

Lale Kemal:

Do you mind if I make a comment on Mr Fadi's comments? Do I have the right to do that very briefly?

Sir David Logan:

Well, I'd prefer – very briefly, Lale.

Lale Kemal:

Mr Hakura made some strong comments on Turkish internal politics, but I hate to admit that he made some miscalculations. Firstly, de-militarisation in any country which has a history of five military coups of different sorts will be inevitable. Take Spain as an example. The democratic civilian control of the armed forces in Spain has been a paradigm case in the world. And it has taken ages, more than 10, 20 years, to install – to put the military under the civilian control of the Spanish governments. Now – so polarisation is inevitable in any country if you have such a strong military influence and history. Very briefly, the second point is – no, no, promise! Promise! – your second point that a majority of Turks voted for Erdoğan because of the economy is again not correct, in the sense that in the 12 September referendum in 2010, Turkish voters voted 58 percent for the constitutional changes. The majority of those changes involved democratic steps.