

Unfinished Transitions: Challenges and Opportunities of the EU's and Turkey's Responses to the "Arab Spring"

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Arab Spring

EU-Turkey Engagement

Abstract

Both the EU and Turkey have so far failed to establish a firm strategic rationale for their support for democratic change in the neighborhood, often accepting the tenet that their "values" may continue to clash with – but in the new context will have to prevail over – their "interests". As the geopolitical implications of the Arab uprisings become clearer, the EU and Turkey should adopt a more lucid and nuanced approach to democracy and a more explicitly political response to the "Arab Spring" which could offer the basis for joint initiatives bearing positive implications on the future of the bilateral relationship between the EU and Turkey. The EU could decide to pursue a wide-ranging dialogue with Ankara on respective primary strategic interests in the MENA region, not as a substitute for or diversion from more delicate discussions on Turkey's EU membership, but as a test of their present degree of alignment and possibly a catalyst for a more constructive conversation on accession in future.

The so-called "Arab Spring" has forced the European Union (EU) and Turkey to update their approaches and policies to respond to the realities of a rapidly changing Southern Mediterranean region.¹ Accepting blame for their cozy relationships with authoritarian regimes in the past, both have declared their will to put their full weight behind democratic transitions.² But has their pro-democracy stance been accompanied by a thorough review of respective interests in the region? And may these similar orientations help the EU and Turkey find new ground for engagement, moving beyond the difficulties that have come to characterize their relationship in the context of the accession process?

This paper argues that both the EU and Turkey have so far failed to establish a firm strategic rationale for their support for democratic change, often accepting the tenet that their "values" may continue to clash with – but in the new context will have to prevail over – their "interests". As the geopolitical implications of the Arab uprisings become clearer, the EU and Turkey should adopt a more lucid and nuanced approach to democracy. They should put their interests first and recognize that the Arab transformation will elude the establishment of democratic governments in some contexts; that under some conditions democracy can be rightly seen as a strategic goal in itself thus overcoming the apparent tension between values and interests; and that democracy in the Arab world – as in other regions characterized by multiple internal cleavages – will bring stability and development only if it is associated with institutions that allow for broad-based participation and a culture that promotes pluralism.

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¹ "Arab uprisings" is a better term to describe developments that have taken place in the MENA region after revolts broke out in Tunisia and other countries in the winter of 2010-11. To the extent that the term "Arab Spring" has gained currency in Western commentariat to conceptualize these events, the term will be used here in quotation marks as a testament to the limits and biases of mainstream Western understanding of regional developments.

² The European Commission has widely publicized its new regional initiatives following the Arab uprisings. See "EU response to the Arab Spring" in the web portal of the Development and Cooperation Directorate General: http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/where/neighbourhood/arab_spring/index_en.htm.

A more explicitly political response to the “Arab Spring” could offer the basis for joint initiatives bearing positive implications on the future of the bilateral relationship between the EU and Turkey. The dialogue developed to date in frameworks such as the EU-Turkey “positive agenda”, launched in 2011 by the European Commission, has delivered limited results as foreign policy and membership-related issues have both been included in the mix from the start, without an overarching vision or theme to guide cooperation. This has partly defied the original goal of neutralizing reservations and vetoes that have plagued the formal EU accession process. Trying to de-politicize discussions with Turkey by turning attention away from the sensitive issues related to its final relationship with the EU is as alluring as it is unrealistic. Rather, the EU could decide to pursue a wide-ranging dialogue with Ankara on respective primary strategic interests in the MENA region, not as a substitute for or diversion from more delicate discussions on the Turkey-EU relationship in Europe, but as a test of their present degree of alignment and possibly a catalyst for a more constructive conversation on accession in future.

The immediate purpose of such dialogue would be to identify convergences and explore synergies on regional issues. In the process, however, this dialogue could also help ease or recast EU-accession related challenges. In particular, regional dialogue and cooperation could reveal to the EU that Turkey’s potentially more geopolitical approach to the Middle East can add to the development of the EU’s own strategy towards what is bound to remain a critical arena of international competition at its borders – and not just one of the EU’s “neighbourhoods”, as in a EU-centric, domesticated vision of Europe’s near abroad. This exchange on strategic perspectives and policies could also reveal to Turkey the benefits that would accrue to its regional influence if the EU continued to play an important role in the country’s political and economic development. The so-called EU “anchor” may not be indispensable, but can nonetheless be critical to help Turkey continue its democratization process and sustain its economic growth, both of which have been factors of its growing regional standing in recent years. Ankara could also come to realize that its regional outreach would be deeper if it could take full advantage of the more developed institutional instruments and operational tools that the EU has put in place over decades of engagement with its southern neighbours.

At a minimum, these complementarities between the EU and Turkey could help the two to address some of their most pressing foreign policy challenges more effectively. Possibly, they could also reinforce the view that deeper Turkish integration in the European space would serve both parties’ interests. Confirming Turkey’s path towards EU membership would help Turkey with its internal development and regional influence while making the EU stronger as an international actor.

The EU’s Response

The EU’s new regional initiatives emphasize stricter positive and negative “conditionality” as well as greater responsiveness to local demands, both as regards to financial aid, access to the EU market, and visa facilitation for MENA countries’ citizens.³

Notwithstanding initial disorientation and continuing cautiousness, the EU response has been significant both conceptually and in terms of new resources. The EU has managed to change its approach and mobilize new financial capabilities despite the fact that change in the Arab world has taken place at a time of financial turmoil and recessionary tendencies across Europe, and deep political-institutional crisis within the EU.

The most serious shortcoming so far is not what the EU has not been able to deliver. Even a more proactive and generous EU would

³ Envisaged “mobility partnerships” between the EU and individual Southern Mediterranean countries will target in particular students, high-skilled workers, and businessmen.

have hardly been able to address the needs of a region that remains largely underdeveloped. Rather, the problem has been that the EU’s response has been mainly “institutional”. At best, the EU has reacted like an international development organization revising its course of action in the face of sudden, large-scale change in one of the traditional areas of its operations. The EU has also largely limited itself to improving the existing approach, despite attempts made at questioning some of the assumptions that had guided past initiatives.⁴

The “political” response to the “Arab Spring” – the review of Europe’s interests and reformulation of the EU’s goals in light of new political realities and with a view to laying out a long-term strategy for the EU’s engagement in the region – has been confused and hesitant, overall very guarded. In any case, it has hardly lived up to the historical transformations underway in the Southern Mediterranean. As new Arab governments are voted in, not only new social and political contracts, but also new international balances are emerging across the region. Some have already talked about the decline of the “Camp David order” (Özhan 2011). The debate is open on whether Iran has become more isolated or, on the contrary, its position has grown stronger in the reshaped Middle East.

The protest against long-standing regimes has been accompanied by the outburst of civil conflicts in some contexts. As the case of Syria shows, domestic strife has the potential to spill over, triggering wider regional crises that directly or indirectly affect European security. Meanwhile, new players from Asia, and increasingly active actors from the Gulf, are said to be in the position to replace the influence of traditional actors from Europe and North America thanks to greater financial resources at their disposal, no strings attached, and less problematic legacies, or no track record at all, of economic and political engagement with the region.

The EU seems to be lagging behind in gauging the full *strategic* implications of ongoing domestic transformations sweeping across Arab societies. A distinct risk is a paradigm shift from “authoritarian stability” pursued in the past to a “pro-democracy stance” that is not informed by a lucid reassessment of European interests and ensuing policy approaches in the new context (Gause 2011).

Turkey’s Response

The Arab uprisings erupted at a time in which Turkey thought it had consolidated its regional power status. As a result political and economic transformation over the past twenty years and an increasingly proactive foreign policy, Turkey had become a source of attraction to opposition forces in the Arab world, while it deepened its relations with the regimes at the same time. In the wake of Arab uprisings this policy became unsustainable. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) government was forced to take sides.

After brief hesitation, the principles of the new policy started to take shape. Especially during the Egyptian uprising, the Turkish government began to clearly side with the Egyptian opposition. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was relatively quick to call on Hosni Mubarak to listen to the voice of the people and leave. On February 1, 2011 while addressing AKP parliamentary group Erdoğan said:

“Mubarak, we are human beings. We are not immortal [...] When we die the imam will not pray for the prime minister or for the president, but he will pray for a human being. It is up to you to deserve good prayers or curses. You should listen to the demands of the people and be conscious of the people and their rightful demands.”⁵

One day after the ouster of Mubarak, Erdoğan urged for free and fair

⁴ Some of the observations made in this paper about the EU’s response to the “Arab Spring” echo and further elaborate on arguments made by Kristina Kausch (Kausch 2012).

⁵ “Erdoğan Urges Mubarak to Heed People’s Call for Change”, in Today’s Zaman, 2 February 2011, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-234212-erdogan-urges-mubarak-to-heed-peoples-call-for-change.html>.

elections and a move to constitutional democracy in Egypt, “without allowing chaos, instability and especially provocation.”⁶ These two speeches, in fact, summed up the initial response of the AKP government to the Arab uprisings: to support the uprisings but anchor this support to the requirement of a “peaceful transition”. For his part, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu characterized the “Arab Spring” as “normalization of history” – an event that should have happened long before but for different reasons has been postponed. Yet, for him the “legitimate demands and expectations of the people” could no longer be left unanswered. As the uprisings expanded to other countries, however, the aim of a “peaceful transition” was increasingly seen as difficult to achieve. The policy of supporting opposition forces has been implemented with increased vigor since then, casting Turkey as an irresolutely pro-change, pro-democracy actor in the region.

Despite this increasingly vigorous reaction to the unfolding developments, Turkey has remained trapped in contradictions which are not too different from the ones characterizing the EU’s response. Ankara has embraced a pro-democracy approach which had received little emphasis during Turkey’s proactive Middle East policy of the 2000s. The new pro-democracy stance has, however, put Turkey in a very uncomfortable position in the Syrian case, where reconciling the support for the Syrian opposition with the principle of “peaceful transition” has proved particularly hard. On a different level and more seriously, the focus on democracy has exposed Turkey’s own democratic weaknesses, both when it comes to the democratic deficit that still characterizes its domestic political system pending further reform, and the still unaddressed demands of the Kurdish population and other minorities living in the country.

With the crisis in Syria, the “Arab Spring” arrived at Turkey’s doorstep, if not in Turkey itself, posing direct threats to the country’s security and raising significant policy challenges. The AKP’s policy of supporting the opposition movements against existing regimes remained unchanged, but hopes for an orderly transition soon faded. The AKP government has tried to use its contacts with the Muslim Brotherhood to facilitate political developments inside Syria. Foreign Minister Davutoğlu often repeated that he had several talks with Bashar al Assad, in which he urged the Syrian President to embark on reforms and even “presented [him] a road map” (Davutoğlu 2012). Faced with largely uncontrollable events, Ankara was later induced to resort to more coercive methods to cope with the new instability, such as through the imposition of an economic embargo, direct support for to the opposition, as well as using the threat and use of military force against the regime in Damascus. Together with Libya, where Ankara eventually backed the international military intervention, this represented a significant change in Turkey’s policy. In fact, the Arab uprisings may have triggered a shift in Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East from the use of soft to smart power. But this shift seemed to be dictated more by circumstance than strategic rethinking. In any event, it has not fully addressed the consequences for Turkey’s interests. Turkey’s new approach in open support for the Syrian opposition has not been framed as part of a broader strategic vision for the region.

In fact, the alliances Turkey had built in the early years of the new millennium through engagement with countries often at odds with the West have now been compromised, calling for a review of Turkey’s overall strategic posture. Ankara has tried to reach out to the two countries that were staunch supporters of the Assad regime, namely Iran and Russia, with which it had cultivated close relationships in recent years. Russia continues to support a compromise solution with Bashar al Assad and Iran has agreed not to agree with Turkey on Syria, remaining committed to supporting the embattled regime, which remains its main proxy in the Arab world.

Common Issue for the EU and Turkey

Both the EU and Turkey have perceived the uprising through similar lenses and both are faced with challenging outcomes. Their responses to the “Arab Spring” have been based on the central premise that the transformation of the Arab world is towards more democratization and that they face a moral imperative to support this historic development. But both have had difficulties in understanding the complexities and specificities of this transformation, particularly as they relate to their interests. Indeed, what has been missing so far is an attempt to better define respective stakes in the new context and explore some of the complementarities that seem to characterize their presence in the region.

The “shift to democracy”

As other international actors, EU governments and institutions were found unprepared to face the sudden Arab uprisings of 2010-2011. However, it would be unfair to argue, as many have done, that the EU did not expect these developments at all and was soon to realize the complete failure of the policies it had pursued until that moment (Soler i Lecha and Viilup 2011).

Decades of engagement with governments and societies in the region had revealed to EU and international observers that long-term dynamics across Arab societies – a youth bulge without adequate employment opportunities; the spread of mass technologies creating new networks; the changing life styles of women; massive urbanization; deep economic imbalances; sclerotic political systems – had created a time bomb for ruling elites.⁷ Hence, well before the outbreak of the “Arab Spring”, the EU had committed significant resources to development aid, civil society support, as well as democratization, while collaborating (and often prioritizing engagement) with local political elites in the commercial and security fields.

The rapid fall of long-ruling authoritarian leaders in Tunisia and Egypt in the winter of 2011 led to trepidation and even excitement about prospects for political change after initial bewilderment. The term “Arab Spring” gained currency in the West as hope arose about a broad shift of the whole region to democracy. Later, when some of the “transitions” proved hard to complete, a more cautionary if not alarmist tale replaced trepidation. A growing number of observers warned that the “Arab Spring” could be followed by an “Arab Winter” of authoritarian restoration or Islamist hegemony (Totten 2012).

Having chosen democracy as the main reference and narrative of Arab events, the EU has interpreted developments in the past three years in terms of progress made towards that goal, or lack thereof. But what does the EU mean for and expect from “Arab democracy”?

While changes in the social basis of political power are indeed necessary in order to address some of the grievances of the Arab populations that took to the streets, democracy is just a system, among others, to manage conflict within society. It is the underlying social fabric and political values that fill the democratic system with content and should be at the centre of analysis. But evidence that this has been the case remains inconclusive.

Democracy, moreover, can take different forms, in a continuum from a majoritarian to a “liberal- pluralistic” type. Levels of actual participation and deliberative processes should be taken into consideration together with other criteria such as the organization of elections or the re-drafting of constitutions in a democratic direction. To the extent that more representative governance will favor the emergence of groups and leaders who can innovatively address underlying socioeconomic questions, democracy will be part of the solution. When elections allow different groups to orderly express their legitimate aspirations, democratic politics may lead not only to political development but also greater stability.

⁶ “Turkey’s Erdoğan Urges Free Elections in Egypt after Mubarak Quits”, in *TurkishPress.com*, 12 February 2011, <http://trkne.ws/364089>.

⁷ For an analysis of societal change in North Africa, see, among others, Merlini and Roy 2012.

However, demand for participation does not always and necessarily lead to democracy but could also result in the hegemony of majorities. As has already become clear, elections may create new challenges for local minorities, as the very process of counting heads for votes may highlight and harden sectarian, religious and ethnic divisions. These considerations could deflate the narrative about “the end of the Arab exceptionalism”, which is as superficial as it is Western-centric, shifting attention to the actual shaping of the new social contracts and political and institutional balances. Democracy should not be seen as a goal as such, especially if only vaguely defined. It can become an element of EU policy when it works as the enabler for more advanced domestic balances.

To be sure and to its credit, the EU is gradually focusing on these issues, for instance by insisting on a notion of political and economic development that incorporates the principle of inclusiveness. “Inclusiveness” is indeed the new catchphrase of many documents produced by international organizations operating in the region. But a certain fascination with “democracy”, broadly defined, seems to have permeated not only the rhetoric but also the approach of the EU. Some in the EU have presented this new approach almost as a “conversion to democracy”, as if the EU had had no interest in democratization of Arab societies before the uprisings, and as if democracy was now the be all and end all of EU policy. This risks transiting from one stereotype and prejudice – “Arabs do not do democracy” – to another superficial characterization – “time has come for Arab democracy”. In the process, less effort has been made to contextualize and historicize the most recent developments, as one of the cycles of Arab political and social development after decolonization. As Cesare Merlini argues in a recent book, “[The West] has tended to frame it in its own image and paradigms rather than in the context of changing local realities, using the post-cold war Eastern European transformation as a misleading precedent.” (Merlini 2012: 243)

A superficial focus on democracy has also led to a simplistic and in part inconsequential characterization, and even ranking, of different states depending on the will of local elites to modernize and reform. Among the “virtuous” countries, EU institutions have included Morocco, although reform efforts have been limited, top-down, and have not questioned the monarchic nature of the state. The view that the “stable Arab kingdoms” may be more capable than the “unstable dictatorships” (Egypt, Tunisia) to cope with the demand for change has taken hold among observers, who have easily embraced the notion that open political systems may develop in institutional contexts in which the monarchs remain actively engaged in politics. Another superficial division has been the one between status-quo oriented energy-rich countries such as Algeria and oil-poor countries which cannot stem revolutionary tendencies by subsidizing the population. Moving on, the less fractured North African countries have been pitted against the more internally divided countries of the Levant. Some have argued that North Africa, especially as Libya has rid itself from Gaddafi, can become a “democratic platform” for the Arab world (Aliboni et al. 2011).

These and other notions have been later put to test as local developments have taken different turns. The victory of Islamists in several of the post-uprisings elections in 2011-2012, including in countries considered as more “advanced” in terms of democratic preconditions as Tunisia, has engendered very cautious reactions and fed skepticism. Some have accepted the victory of the Brotherhood in Egypt and other contexts as almost inherent to the emergence of democracy in predominantly Muslim societies. Others have argued that the coming hegemony of Islamist groups is on the contrary deleterious as democratization will be undermined by groups that do not value pluralism, will not respect minorities, and might never come to accept a separation between religion and state. Very few outside expert circles have bothered to look at the social forces supporting the rising religious and political elites: are Islamist parties and movements truly part of the future of these societies or are they already a residual political force that had ascended in the second half of the last century to be then repressed, neutralized, or sometimes co-opted by the regimes? Do they represent the emerging economic constituencies?

A problematic approach to democracy has also characterized Turkey's response to Arab developments. Unlike the EU, Turkey is a newcomer to democracy promotion. Indeed, since the end of the Cold War, Turkish governments have very timidly raised the issue of democratization abroad, for instance as regards the transition countries in the post-Soviet space in the early 1990s. Yet this discourse mainly remained haphazard and never turned into policy. When the AKP came to power in 2002, the government initially emphasized its identity as a democratizing force not only in domestic politics, but also in its international posture. As a party with roots in the Islamist movement of Turkey that now defined itself as a conservative democratic party, its identity bode well in the post-9/11 international context. At the same time, Turkey also emphasized other drivers of its regional engagement. The AKP embraced Turkey's Ottoman past, attracted accusations of neo-Ottomanism, and redefined its relations with the Middle East and the Muslim world, emphasizing the Islamic aspects of Turkey's identity and its willingness to adopt a more conciliatory approach than European and transatlantic partners towards problematic regimes such as Iran and Syria, or groups supporting violence such as Hamas.

The first AKP government (2002-2007) put some emphasis on democratization in its foreign policy approach to the Middle East. Prime Minister Erdoğan and then-Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül were outspoken concerning the need for political reform in the Muslim world. In their speeches, delivered to both Western and regional audiences, they emphasized themes such as the compatibility of Islam and democracy, and the importance of good governance, transparency, accountability, respect for human rights, and integration with the rest of the international community. Within this context, Prime Minister Erdoğan also participated in the G8 meeting in Sea Island Georgia in June 2004 on the Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative (BMENA). As one of the BMENA countries, Turkey became a partner, with Italy and Yemen, in the Democracy Assistance Dialogue (DAD) program, which was designed to integrate civil society concerns into governmental discussions on reform. Within that context Turkey focused on the issue of gender (TESEV 2009).

The second AKP government (2007-2011), however, largely dropped this discourse in its relations with Arab/Islamic countries. Turkey had by now developed close ties with the regimes in the region and preferred to avoid undermining them by drawing attention to their lack of democratic credentials. The AKP government found itself confronted with the same dilemma faced by other promoters of democracy in the Middle East, such as the EU. Like them, it opted for a pragmatic approach focused on the advancement of national interests defined mainly as the cultivation of economic ties and the expansion of political clout through diplomacy. In response to criticisms, the government argued that it subscribed to a long term strategy of slow transformation. Political and economic engagement with these countries would help this transformation. Davutoğlu, with respect to Syria, explained this policy: “We invested in the Syrian people, not in individuals. No matter how long this very difficult transition process will last, that investment is an investment that is profitable, the one who invests in the people never loses.”⁸

Prominent elements of the AKP's foreign policy in these years were the growing contacts and dialogue among state officials as well as civil society. Young diplomats, journalists, and academics from the region were invited to Turkey not only for meetings but also training programs, where they were hosted for long periods of time to observe the workings of their Turkish counterparts, conduct interviews, and attend lectures. In addition, visas were lifted with Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Yemen and Libya. This facilitated an increase in tourism between Turkey and the Arab countries. Similarly, the popularity of Turkish soap operas in the Arab world contributed to increasing interest in Turkey. The image of Turkey in these TV series, a blend of

8 Ahmet Davutoğlu, *2012'de Türk Dış Politikası ve Gelecek Ufku* (Turkish Foreign Policy in 2012 and the Future Horizon), Speech at the Institute of Strategic Thinking, Ankara, 27 December 2012, http://www.mfa.gov.tr/disisleri-bakani-sayin-ahmet-davutoglu_nun-stratejik-dusunce-arastirma-vakfi_nin_2012_de-turk-dis-politikasi-ve-gelecek-ufku_k.tr.mfa. For a report of the meeting see <http://www.sde.org.tr/en/news/2047/turkish-foreign-policy-and-its-horizon-of-the-future-in-2012.aspx>.

tradition and modernity, contributed to the appeal of the “Turkish model”. Turkey was seen as “a modernizing one, but at the same time does not give up traditional social values and keeps the social base and the political structure in some kind of harmony.”⁹

Finally, the economic bureaucracy, Turkish businesses, and business associations played an important role in engaging the Arab world economically and transferring their experiences. The Undersecretariat for Foreign Trade has been engaged with its counterparts in the Arab countries, particularly Egypt, Syria and Iraq, in the implementation of bilateral economic agreements. Through these engagements, Turkey’s experience in transition to free a market economy was shared. Similarly Turkish business associations, such as the Turkish Foreign Economic Relations Board (DEIK) and the Turkish Union of Chambers (TOBB), became active in the Arab countries and engaged in joint business activities.

Thus, the AKP government began to argue that although Turkey had put aside the explicit promotion of democracy, it adopted indirect democratization via engaging these countries economically and opening up its borders allowing people to move freely. The skeptics, however, pointing to the AKP government’s close relations with countries like Omar Al-Bashir’s Sudan, questioned the government’s sincerity. Furthermore, some argued that by engaging such regimes as the Syrian one, Turkey had helped them to consolidate power.

After the Arab uprisings the relevance of the “Turkish model” for transition countries started to be debated again, both in these countries and elsewhere. Prime Minister Erdoğan argued that “with its democracy, strong economy and its peaceful and active policies on global issues, Turkey is a model for all peoples who work to protect their countries and future. Turkey is a source of inspiration for peoples who start off to build a country where they can look to the future with confidence.”¹⁰ The meaning of the Turkish model differed depending on the context in which it was raised. For instance, right after the ousting of Mubarak, the Turkish model was discussed in the context of civil-military relations in Egypt. Particularly those who were concerned about the mounting Islamist power, viewed the Turkish historical experience in civil-military relations as a useful model. However, this understanding of the Turkish model was not promoted by the AKP government as it operated to curb the role of the Turkish army. Among others, it is precisely this aspect of the AKP that raised interest amongst Islamists in the Arab world, some of which came to view the AKP, rather than Turkey as such, as a model. Overall the meaning of the Turkish model has narrowed after the Arab uprisings. With the “Arab Spring” in fact, the Turkish model has been largely reduced to the AKP model and at most the model of Turkey as a country combining Islam and democracy. Muslim Brotherhood groups in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Syria began to use the AKP model also to give messages of moderation to domestic and international audiences. On its side, the AKP government began to use its ties with these movements to exert influence over their transformation. As Islamist groups emerged as the most organized force in transition countries, the AKP presented these ties as an invaluable asset of Turkish foreign policy.

However, the Arab transitions also exposed the limits of Turkey’s model. First, the Turkish model used to mean different things to different people prior to the uprisings, but has now been subsumed exclusively into the AKP experience and the transformation of political Islam. Such a shift in the understanding of the Turkish model alienated Islamists and non-Islamists alike. Secular forces have been critical of the AKP’s perceived support for Islamists, viewing Turkey as an actor playing into the sectarian dynamics of the region. Islamists have also raised eyebrows at Turkish interventions. During his “Arab Spring” tour to Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, Prime Minister Erdoğan openly declared that

while he was a devout Muslim, the state should be secular, triggering acute criticism in Egypt. The deputy leader of the Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice Party, Essam al-Arian, said: “We welcome Turkey and we welcome Erdoğan as a prominent leader but we do not think that he or his country alone should be leading the region or drawing up its future.”¹¹ In a later visit in November 2012, Egyptian President Mursi staged a reception for Erdoğan that clearly aimed at keeping the profiles of the two leaders separate, despite cordiality.

In the long run also the evolution of Turkey’s own transformation may limit the positive influence of the Turkish model. Especially in the last two years, the AKP government has been criticized for slowing down the political reform process and becoming authoritarian. Political stability – the AKP has won three consecutive general elections and with ever greater margins since 2002 – has led to rivalries within the government camp, a marked toning down of initial reformist impulses, and extensive spoils to control the various branches of the public administration and government. For Turkey, the Arab transitions had finally provided an opportunity to prove the relevance of its own experience in a regional context. But its current exclusive engagement with Islamist movements, and, above all, the regression of its own democratization, is casting great shadows over Turkey’s contribution to a democratic and peaceful Middle East.

A tension between values and interests?

One of the underlying assumptions of the recent “shift to democracy” is that a tension exists between “values” and “interests” in the EU’s and Turkey’s foreign policies. The tension is both real and artificial. European countries – especially the southern EU members – have since long pursued interests other than democracy in the Arab neighbourhood, among which the cultivation of economic interests, the protection of vital energy supplies, the management of migration across the Mediterranean sea; cooperation on security matters, especially the fight against terrorism, and engagement with selected countries such as Jordan, Morocco, the Gulf monarchies on the Arab-Israeli conflict, nuclear anti-proliferation, and the containment of Iran’s strategic ambitions.¹²

Before the “Arab Spring”, democracy was seen as something desirable given the lamentable state of Arab societies under oppressive regimes, but democracy promotion, implying the eventual fall of existing regimes, was viewed with caution. Commercial, energy, and security cooperation required deep engagement with ruling elites (Emerson and Youngs 2009). With the perceived shift of the region to democracy, the EU declared that it will now try to align its policies to the values it aims to promote. EU Commissioner Stefan Füle candidly admitted that “we are continuously struggling to keep our values and interests as close as possible in dealing with Southern neighbourhood. It is clear that we cannot return to the old days of complacency towards authoritarian regimes” (Füle 2012). This is as laudable as it is problematic.

Democracy promotion can only be part of a strategy if it is anchored in an understanding of interests. The right question to ask is whether more democratic forms of government will help Arab societies become more stable and prosperous, and therefore more attractive partners for Europe. In those contexts in which the answer is “yes”, then democracy can be seen not only as a value but as a strategic interest in itself (Youngs 2004). EU countries – and EU institutions in particular – risk instead to focus on democracy as a new moral imperative, only to sideline this once again when other strategic interests are at stake.¹³ The so-called “more for more” approach proposed by the EU

¹¹ “Egypt’s Islamists Warn Turkish PM over Regional Role”, in *Egypt Independent*, 14 September 2011, <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/en/node/495611>.

¹² Aliboni et al. 2011. See also, the European Security Strategy: “Our task is to promote a ring of well governed countries to the East of the European Union and on the borders of the Mediterranean with whom we can enjoy close and cooperative relations” (no reference to democracy). EU Council 2003: 8.

¹³ For a (timid) attempt to place democracy support within a deeper strategic understanding of democratization as a factor for regional stability, see Ashton 2012.

⁹ Comment by Sreeram Chaulia cited in “Turkey good model for emerging Arab world democracies-analyst”, in *RT News*, 16 February 2011, <http://rt.com/news/libya-unrest-sreeram-chaulia>.

¹⁰ “Turkey: Source for Inspiration for Arabs-Erdoğan”, in *Trend*, 1 March 2011, <http://en.trend.az/regions/met/turkey/1837617.html>.

Commission and endorsed by the EU Council in 2011 has crystallized the notion that the EU will engage more with those countries which make greater efforts towards democracy (EU Commission 2011). This slogan is however already revealing its first flaws. How to justify the continuing energy relationship between several EU countries and Algeria or the Gulf monarchies, which have so far proved unwilling to budge on meaningful reform? The only way out seems to be – just like in the past – to silently keep pursuing economic and security interests irrespective of the progress made in democratization. As in the past, the “less for less” will be much harder to implement than the “more for more”, except for blatant cases of defiance, such as EU sanctions readily adopted against Syria.

The focus on democracy only as a value is also problematic because more democratic regimes may be less prone to deliver some of the goods that the EU countries value. This goes beyond the foreign policy orientations of newly elected Islamist parties, which could become “revisionist” on critical issues such as Israel or the fight against terrorist groups. What is perceived as soft security priorities can also be part of the new EU dilemma on democracy. For instance, can new, more democratic, Arab regimes help the EU contain migration to Europe while they are expected to be more responsive to the demands of their own peoples which ask for greater freedom of movement? (Tocci and Cassarino 2011).

Like the EU, Turkey is also facing a dilemma between values and interests. As a country that developed very close relations with some of these regimes and also became an inspiration to most of the opposition, Turkey had difficulty in reconciling values and interests. The Libyan crisis first exposed Turkey’s dilemmas. Libya has been economically important for Turkey both as a source of crude oil as well as for the construction contracts of Turkish businesses which amounted to approximately USD 20 billion. These interests made it difficult for the AKP government to respond clearly to the crisis. Eventually, the government chose to side with the opposition in Libya, but only after successfully evacuating the over 25,000 Turkish citizens from the country.

This uncertainty about where priorities lies – in interests or values – , and what is the relationship between them, has also been reflected in public statements. In the early months of the “Arab Spring”, Foreign Minister Davutoğlu argued that Turkish foreign policy is grounded on both values and interests and that there was no incompatibility between them insofar as the prevalence of democracy would ultimately strengthen stability, allowing Turkey to establish closer ties with its democratic neighbours:

“Turkish foreign policy is guided by our democratic values as well as our interests. [...] Turkey has always been encouraging the administrations to address the legitimate expectations of their people and undertake the necessary reforms. However, now, given the home-grown and irreversible march toward more democracy in the region, Turkey has stepped up its efforts to support this process.”(Davutoğlu 2012)

The Syrian crisis challenged this rosy picture. Turkey’s stand against the Syrian regime compromised all its past political, social and economic investments in the country. Economic relations were cut, with significant impact on the bordering towns in Turkey. Crucial security cooperation against the PKK ended and al Assad’s regime resumed its support for the PKK. As a result, Turkey has witnessed the escalation of PKK attacks with casualties recorded almost every day. The recasting of the Syrian crisis along sectarian lines has also started taking its toll internally in Turkey. Turkey’s Alawites, mainly living in the neighbouring areas of Syria, feel uncomfortable with the staunch anti-Assad stance of the government. In addition to the dangers of a civil war next door and internal reverberations of a larger sectarian strife, Turkey could also be dragged into the conflict. This danger became clear after a mortar shell attack in a residential district in southeastern Turkey, Akçakale, killed five civilians. In response, Turkey attacked targets in Syria and the possibility of a cross-border escalation became more likely. Finally, Turkey’s open support for the anti-regime

forces has put the government in direct clash with the international supporters of the Syrian regime. Turkey’s relations with Iran have deteriorated, undermining one of the pillars of the AKP’s Middle Eastern engagement. Similarly, Turkey’s support for the opposition has created tensions with Russia. Possibilities of a tenuous relationship between the two countries became clear, when Ankara forced down a passenger jet en route from Moscow to Syria, allegedly carrying military equipment and ammunition.

These developments have led to intense debates within Turkey. Several public opinion polls showed little support for Ankara’s Syria policy, even among AKP supporters.¹⁴ The policy has been criticized also by the opposition parties, as well as many opinion makers. In responding to these criticisms, Foreign Minister Davutoğlu has accused critics of basing their perspective solely on interests (rather than values). In a recent interview he said that as an ethical neighbour: “we had to stand by the Syrian people. We stand by the oppressed and on the side of the consciousness of humanity”, almost implying that this must hold true even if it comes at great cost for other interests.¹⁵

Overall, like the EU, also Turkey has failed to establish a strong strategic rationale for its support to democratic change. A “balance between freedom and security” is now emphasized and, not unlike in the EU, democracy is seen as part of a revamped value-based foreign policy that may sometimes clash with “national interests”. Talk of an “axis of democracy” is heard in reference to the relationship between Turkey and post-Mubarak Egypt, despite anticipations that a less ossified Egypt may soon rise as a new pole in the region, alternative to Turkey’s. Yet, especially the complexities in the Syrian case, highlight the limitations of a rather abstract and monolithic foreign policy discourse centred solely on values.

Strategic Corrections and the Future of EU-Turkey Engagement

The EU has lacked a “strategic outlook” on the Mediterranean probably since European countries ceased to be colonial powers. While strategic choices after WWII were increasingly made by the US, for Europe, the “neighbourhood approach” gradually emerged as a substitute for a strategic vision. The neighbourhood approach has been very problematic and should be re-thought in light of recent developments. First, it has reinforced an EU-centric vision of the world, which divides countries along concentric circles drawn around Brussels, and ranks them according to levels of alignment with EU policies and laws. The Mediterranean is instead an increasingly global space, where a growing number of regional and external actors operate along multiple trajectories of engagement (Menon and Wimbush 2010). The transformations brought about by the “Arab Spring” have not only differentiated the region more, but have opened up the prospect for greater influence of players from the Gulf, the East, and the South. Emerging economies from Asia and Latin America will rise in importance as Western actors have fewer resources to mobilize. Strategically, the increasing engagement of actors that never fully left the scene such as Russia or that have recently stepped up their presence such as China could also challenge the EU’s position in the region. Putting the EU at the centre is also problematic because it assumes that Arab societies want to emulate the EU model. The EU remains a critical market for Arab countries and an important cultural reference, but Arab societies are all too aware of the European crisis and the challenges it poses to the European integration.

What has been missing, therefore, is a European view of an ever more global Mediterranean space which is growing more interdependent, but also more plural, and which features political trends that do not necessarily converge with the West’s. The EU has done much in terms

¹⁴ See, for instance, periodic polls conducted by the Centre for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies (EDAM): http://www.edam.org.tr/eng/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=140&Itemid=203.

¹⁵ Interview with Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu (in Turkish), *CNN Türk*, 25 November 2012, <http://video.cnnturk.com/2012/haber/11/25/ahmet-davutoglu-roportajinin-tamami>.

of its “institutional response”, deploying new resources for assistance and new frameworks for cooperation. It has done much less at a time of deep internal crisis to understand the strategic and security implications of its changing neighbourhood: a “political” response. The latter would start with European interests, not local demands; would distinguish between countries and groups that the EU believes are critical to the protection of its interests in the region from those which are not; would support democratic development with its full weight when this would seem to promote greater stability, faster economic and social development, and deeper engagement with EU actors while accepting – and being ready to publicly acknowledge – that in some cases this logic may prove less compelling, thus requiring policies that do not take the establishment of a democracy as a strategic objective.

A clear illustration of this trend has been the EU’s fairly strong influence over smaller countries like Tunisia, in which the internal situation is perhaps less intricate, and which economically can be seen as a satellite of the European Union market. By contrast, a lack of adequate instruments, and insufficient political influence, have defined the EU’s engagement in countries like Egypt, which for reasons of size, internal composition and historical position, would be key to the emergence of a new regional order. Egypt has been very reluctant to accept any “conditionality” from the EU (and the IMF for that matter). Recent agreements between the EU and Egypt concerning aid are as important in themselves as they unfortunately appear futile. The game over what type of Egypt will emerge from the ruins of the Mubarak regime will be played between internal groups with some external influence from the Gulf and the US, the EU not even receiving a mention among Egypt’s international references for its constitution-making process.

The lack of an adequate strategic perspective also applies to the re-assessment of Turkey-EU relations in the light of the “Arab Spring.” Absorbed by the question of “how to help”, the EU and several EU governments have seen a value in closer coordination with Turkey in the common Arab neighbourhood (Tocci et al. 2011). Never fully sharing America’s past concerns about Turkey’s dealignment from the West, Turkey is seen by the EU as a model that can be emulated by emerging regimes; as an engine for growth for local economies; and as a rising regional actor that can help Europe and the US advance common positions thanks to its closeness to some of the local players and societies (Füle 2011).

Indeed, attention in recent years has shifted from Turkey as an EU candidate country, to Turkey as a necessary regional partner. Even the more limited goal of a regional strategic partnership, however, has proved elusive so far. Reservations remain among EU members about Ankara’s formal involvement in EU foreign policy mechanisms. Such involvement could directly or indirectly impinge on the currently stalled EU accession process, whose progress some EU members continue to resist (Tocci 2012). Moreover, some EU countries continue to see Turkey as a competitor in the region in terms of economic and political influence. This is true for France, even under the new leadership of President Francois Hollande. But it is also true for traditional friends like Italy, in contexts like Libya, where high-value energy contracts are up for grabs in the post-Gaddafi era (Alessandri 2011). In the case of Syria, Turkey has been seen both as a critical proxy for the EU and the West but also as a non-European country to be kept at arm’s length from critical EU decisions such as sanctions. Overall, the EU has hoped to take advantage of Turkey’s foreign policy activism in the MENA region in order to add dynamism and resources to its own initiatives at a time of tight budgets and internal crisis. Turkish policies in the mid to late 2000s such as the lifting of visas with several neighbouring countries, and visions such as a free trade zone with Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan seemed to confirm that Ankara was interested in channeling its activism into concrete regional initiatives and frameworks. The principle of “zero problems with neighbours” promoted by Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoğlu clearly served Turkey’s ambition to revive regional influence in former Ottoman possessions. The same principle, however, was also seen by many in the EU as supporting an approach

similar to the EU’s vision of a ring of stable and peaceful states around its borders (EU Council 2003).

This Turkish “neighbourhood” approach, however, was never formalized, let alone institutionalized, in the way the EU’s approach was. In this sense, and quite understandably, Ankara’s approach to the region remains the one typical of a nation state. Moreover, the Mediterranean was never the main focus or reference of Turkish foreign policy (Tocci, Altunisik and Kirişçi 2011). To the extent that the notion of a “Mediterranean” is entrenched in the EU’s vision of its near abroad, Turkey never felt it needed to develop a Mediterranean approach. Turkey has rather conceived of itself as lying at the crossroads of different regions – the Balkans, Central Asia, the Caucasus and the Black Sea, as well as the Middle East and Asia – being therefore much more than a Mediterranean country. The Turkish Foreign Minister has not hidden his preference for other competing notions; defining as “Afro-Eurasia” the area where Turkey’s interests are concentrated and its historical legacies are stronger (Davutoğlu 2009).

This pattern of close but not perfectly aligned orientations and policies should be taken as an opportunity, not as a challenge to bilateral cooperation. If the EU is to emerge as a strong regional actor, it has to deeply revise its neighbourhood approach and add more strategy – a transition that would be helped by greater cooperation with Turkey. Turkey, for its part, has to realize that a shift to democracy that does not rest on strategic considerations may be counterproductive. Ankara has also an interest in strengthening its democratic credentials if it wants to project its influence – a process that may be facilitated by EU-inspired reforms.

Turkey’s shift as a pro-democracy actor has been welcomed in Western capitals. But while talk of Turkey as a model for the “Arab Spring” has spread, Turkey-watchers in Europe have noted worrying signs in Turkish domestic politics. Turkey currently has an exceptionally high number of imprisoned journalists. Attempts to rewrite the 1982 Constitution have failed to bear fruit so far. Protracted domestic political stability has brought with it a concentration of power and weakening checks and balances, if not soft authoritarian tendencies, by a small circle of relevant players under the charismatic leadership of Prime Minister Erdoğan. Initiatives towards minorities – starting with the Kurds – have stalled, and are badly needed to stem the recrudescence of Kurdish independentism reignited by instability in Iraq and Syria. Media freedom has become an increasingly serious problem. The risk that Turkey will not fully democratize is real. Although these problems have been included in the European Commission’s latest Progress Report, European countries and institutions have not made the link yet between Turkey’s domestic de-democratization and its waning appeal in the neighbourhood (EU Commission 2012).

What the EU could now do is to accept to work more closely with Turkey in the region, by pursuing common diplomatic initiatives as well as developing joint concrete projects on the ground. This engagement with Ankara would benefit from Turkey’s more strategic approach to the region, which is now being revised. As Turkey reassesses its role given current challenges, convergence with the EU could be found on a vision of the MENA region that avoids putting either the EU or Turkey at the centre. Rather, thanks to its historical legacies, cultural affinities, and growing economic ties with many of the region’s players both in the Levant, Gulf and North Africa, Turkey could help the EU develop a common vision of a global Mediterranean, ever more connected to neighbouring regions, in which the EU’s and Turkey’s influence would be measured not so much in terms of alignment of these regions with the European (or Turkish) space, but with the ability to protect and project the interests and values that both Turkey and the EU share, from economic openness to political development, despite the growing diversity and multipolarity of the region.

While pursuing this more strategic dialogue, the EU could recast its vision of a “Turkish model” as an experience in the making, still incomplete and benefiting from the EU for its full realization. Instead

of presenting Turkey as a success story that can be emulated by Arab partners, the EU should link its ever more realistic assessment of the challenges still facing Turkey with its use of the Turkish experience in the MENA region. After all, as polls suggest, Turkey's attractiveness in the Arab world has had much to do with it being a candidate member of the EU rather than being a former imperial entity in those areas. Put in this context, the incompleteness of the Turkish model would not be a problem or a contradiction, but it could be seen as a dynamic element as Arab countries would be arguably encouraged and inspired by Turkey's future achievements and could learn not from successes but also from its failures.

Coordination is not impossible. A clear element of Turkey's response to the Arab uprisings has been an attempt to act in coalitions. One of the early by-products of Arab spring has been an improvement of American-Turkish relations, which were scarred in the previous period due to a crisis in Israeli-Turkish relations and Turkey's attempts to engage Iran. The Arab uprisings and increasing instability in the region has led a rapprochement with Washington. The Obama administration, which adopted a policy of relying on allies first in dealing with regional crises, found in Ankara an important partner. For the AKP government, the Arab uprisings provided an opportunity to mend fences. Although initial attempts to create close cooperation between the EU and Turkey in dealing with the challenges of the Arab uprisings did not bear fruit, Ankara began to work closely with some EU members, particularly Great Britain and France in the Syrian crisis. Despite having a problematic relationship with France under Sarkozy and despite initial reservations, Paris and Ankara were both active members of an international diplomatic effort that aimed to bypass the Russian and Chinese vetoes in the UN Security Council, the so-called "Friends of Syria". The group so far has held several meetings with the participation of nearly 100 countries. Although these meetings have had limited success so far, they point to Turkey's eagerness to act multilaterally.

But Ankara's response to the "Arab Spring" so far has been largely reactive, and failed to identify a long term strategy where a real harmony between the promotion of values and interests could be achieved. Similar to the EU, Turkey has overestimated the drive towards democracy in the region, while underestimating domestic and regional complexities. Especially the case of Syria has revealed Turkey's

limitations. The AKP government's engagement strategy failed in Syria when Turkey realized that it did not have any leverage over the al Assad regime. Furthermore, the Syrian regime changed the nature of the conflict into a civil war and branded Turkey as a country interfering in its internal affairs. Turkey suddenly found itself surrounded by conflict and hostility. The AKP, which criticized the Kemalists for not understanding the Middle East, may have overestimated its own knowledge of the region clouded by an overblown understanding of Turkey's place in it. Recent developments in Turkey have also demonstrated that the continuing appeal of the so-called Turkish model depends on Turkey's own political and economic transformation.

All these challenges, if and when appreciated, could induce Turkey to reengage with the EU. Responsibility for the current state of EU-Turkey relations partly lies with the EU, partly with Turkey. Although Turkey seems to be cooperating with individual EU countries, the EU as an actor has lost its importance for the government. The frustration with the ever-dragging accession process coupled with a view of EU in crisis have fueled disinterest in the EU. More significantly, the self-confident AKP government now tends to underestimate the positive value of its engagement with the EU for its Middle East policy. The EU would not only strengthen Turkey's image in the region. It would also provide Turkey with highly developed and institutionalized instruments to deal with some of the most pressing regional challenges, from economic development to political transitions, which call for financial instruments, multilateral initiatives, and standardized procedures.

The basic deal that the EU and Turkey should agree upon is a common quest for greater political influence in the region through stronger bilateral engagement. Turkey would provide the EU with the extra strategic outreach, while receiving EU resources and instruments for its regional initiatives that, as a nation state, however dynamic and powerful, Turkey cannot have. This joint strategic engagement in the region would not constitute a short cut to membership for Turkey. It would also not be a substitute for membership as the supporters of the privileged partnership would like. More limitedly but no less critically, this dialogue could help the two verify their long-term domestic and foreign policy preferences, thus helping them indirectly figure out the future content of the relationship between them.

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