

The Impact of the “New” Zero Problems Policy and the Arab Spring on the Relations between Turkey and Lebanese Factions

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ABSTRACT *As the Arab Spring unfolds, a new power configuration is emerging in the Middle East. Turkey is at the center of the new setting, with a fully engaged leadership role that was adopted by the ruling AK Party. In the Levant area, Ankara’s influence is even greater due to Turkey’s full support of the Syrian opposition against the Syrian Baath regime. In this context, it becomes clear that the increasingly involved Turkish role in the region has direct and indirect effects on the stability of countries in the Levant, one of which is Lebanon.*

Up until the start of the Arab Spring, both local and foreign scholars put particular emphasis on certain aspects of the “zero problems” policy, such as win-win, regional stability and economic integration, in order to comprehend Turkey’s growing role in the Middle East. Those initial aspects of the “zero problems” policy, seemingly driven by a liberal stance, were based primarily on maximizing state level cooperation and, to a lesser extent, on limited calls for political and democratic reforms in the region by leading Turkish figures. However, popular demonstrations in the region against autocratic rulers and subsequent revolutions and count-

er-revolutions since 2011 have revealed the significant pitfalls of the earlier version of the “zero problems” policy, thereby forcing Turkey to reconsider and reformulate this vision. While various commentators have interpreted these modifications as a sign of Turkey’s departure from the “zero-problems” policy, this paper claims that such changes can be read as maintenance of an earlier version of the policy.

Soon after the start of the Arab Spring, Turkey faced a second and possibly more serious test for its modified “zero problems” policy: the revolutions in Bahrain and Syria, which are arguably based on supporting pop-

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ular movements as they began with calls for democratic and political reforms of autocratic regimes. This new conundrum put Turkey at the center of a regional dispute and led Ankara to adopting a selective policy towards popular movements, thus limiting its mediator and neutral role to some degree in certain countries, particularly in Lebanon. Turkey's decision to side with the influential Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Western states during the Syrian crisis caused the other camp – comprised of Russia, Iran and its Lebanese partner Hezbollah – to perceive Turkey's role negatively.¹ In light of this and after briefly presenting the earlier version of the “zero problems” policy as well as recent modifications, this paper attempts to answer rarely raised questions regarding Turkey's current foreign policy approach: Can this new vision be seen as a departure from the long-term “zero problems” policy or just a new dimension of it? To what extent have such changes to the “zero problems” policy affected the stability of countries in the region, especially Lebanon? And how is Turkey's new position or reformulation of its policy perceived among the leading factions in Lebanon?

“New” Dimension of the Zero Problems Policy: From State Level to Popular Movements?

Famous for his “zero problems” policy, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu envisioned a soft-power strategy for Turkey in 2002. This strategy relied on the establishment

of better relations with almost all actors in the region in order to achieve stability. The prediction was that a multidimensional relationship, cultural interaction and genuine dialogue with neighboring countries could generate stability and prosperity in the region. In this context, Turkey was involved to varying degrees in mediation efforts to achieve permanent peace between conflicting sides, such as Hamas and Fatah, as well as the between the Palestinians and the Israelis.

From a Turkish standpoint, an active and assertive role in the Middle East would increase its leverage in regional politics. However, such a strategy did not materialize precisely because such a role is largely based on interstate relations with little consideration of the type of regimes that Ankara dealt with. Although Turkey attempted to encourage certain regional countries to initiate reform and “put their home in order before other countries do so for them,” Ankara was not consistent in keeping human rights at the top of its foreign policy agenda. It was not until the advent of the Arab Spring that we saw a change in the Turkish position towards regimes in Syria, Egypt and Tunisia. To put it differently, it becomes clear that Turkey only dealt with human right issues if there were popular movements. Therefore, since such an active stance on human rights is not generally a fundamental aspect of Turkish foreign policy, Turkey turned a blind eye to some degree towards the repressive practices of Gulf Monarchies and continues to do so today.

In other words, while putting great importance on regional stability based on state-to-state relations, the earlier version of the “zero problems” policy (2002-2011) placed limited emphasis on democratic demands and popular grievances. Therefore, when such demands surfaced with the start of the unrest, Turkey, like the rest of the world, was caught off guard. The peoples of the region rose up against long-exercised social, economic and cultural repression by entrenched autocracies. While Turkey initially welcomed the popular demands and supported the people’s movement in Egypt, it showed some hesitation towards other movements in Yemen and the Gulf countries, especially Bahrain, due to the potential for conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia.² As emphasized, this dilemma created temporary confusion and resulted in a cautious approach in Ankara, which became obvious during the Libyan revolution when Turkey waited some time before endorsing it. As Ankara did not initially approve of the air strike and foreign interference in Libya, it maintained a hesitant stance on events in Libya for a short period, although it favored the revolutionary movement in the country. Yet, after the United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution, Turkey came around and fully supported NATO’s interference.

Syria was another example of Turkey’s initial reluctance to take sides. As is commonly known, Syrian-Turkish relations were growing on the cultural, political and economic level in previous years and were seen as a suc-

cess story of the earlier version of the “zero problems” policy. This situation led Turkey to wait and meet several times with Bashar al-Assad in order to push the regime towards demo-

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cratic change. However, the uprising and consequent internal warfare in Syria led Turkey to make a choice between the regime and the opposition movement. Eventually, Turkey increased its supported of the opposition movement. In other words, the earlier vision of the “zero problems” policy generally adopted a non-interference principle by giving due importance on the stability of state-to-state relations. This does not mean that Ankara did not draw attention to the democratic deficits of regional countries. Yet, it made these calls for democracy and reform without damaging relations with those nations. On the other hand, this version, aiming to improve relations with regional countries along with limited calls for reform, experienced several drawbacks and shortcomings on the onset of the Arab Spring.

As popular demonstrations driven by democratic demands spread across the region, maintaining close rela-



United States Secretary of State John Kerry meets with Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmed Davutoglu in Montreux, on January 22, 2014, on the sidelines of the so-called Geneva II conference peace talks.
AFP / Gary Cameron

tions with these authoritarian countries became largely impossible for Turkey. This new situation caused Turkey to revise and reform its long-term “zero problems” policy. Under those new circumstances, Turkey arguably had two choices: support the popular movements or continue with its policy of non-interference and state-to-state cooperation. The current version of the “zero problems” policy, which puts primary emphasis on democratic reforms and draws further attention to inequalities and injustices in the region, has considerably shaped Turkey’s latest policies and attitudes towards the region and popular movements. In this context, the trade-off made by Turkish policy makers to abandon autocratic regimes in favor of the popular movements seems to have worked at first when the dictators in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia were toppled. All in all, the unprecedented changes initiated by popular movements have influenced Turkish foreign policy, as it did with other Western countries, most notably the United States.

In a sense, despite several democratic shortcomings and limitations in the

domestic realm that limit pluralist democracy, such as flaws in judicial system, identity issues and maintenance of a 10% election threshold, the “new” version of the “zero problems” policy is certainly more aligned with the increasingly liberal and democratic discourse brought by the AK Party in 2002. Turkey has adopted a strong liberal emphasis in its foreign policy during the AK Party era, with a win-win, problem-solving and regional welfare approach. In light of this, Turkey added a necessary and neglected dimension to its liberal discourse by endorsing the popular uprisings in the region, assuming that the revolts would be fully successful and the affected countries would not slide back to autocracy. However, Turkey had serious difficulties in advancing such a “norm-based” aspect of the “zero problems” policy due to realpolitik considerations in regards to certain countries, such as Syria and Bahrain, which reflected the selective aspect of its current foreign policy stance.

In other words, Turkey has primarily supported the popular movements and established close relations with its key players in order to keep the re-

gional balance in its own favor, rather than offering absolute and unconditional support. Hence, it can be argued that Turkey's silent and hesitant position towards protesters that were dubbed "Shiites" by the GCC is an illustration of the selective aspect of the current version of the "zero problems" policy. Fearing an increasing Iranian influence in the region through what is viewed as a "Shia Spring," Turkey readjusted its policy by toning down the liberal discourse in its rhetoric with GCC countries. The inconsistency of such a selective stance has renewed debates related to the direction and orientation that Turkey is taking in the course of Arab Spring: Does Turkey unconditionally support all popular revolts in the region, or does it selectively choose the ones that help advance its regional agenda? The answer to this question is at the core of a major debate, fuelled by the transformation of the Syrian conflict into a sectarian civil war, which stimulated rising tensions between Sunnis and Shiites in the region. In this context, Turkey seems to be adopting a foreign policy that mixes moral and realpolitik considerations. However, Turkey's position regarding Syria puts it at odds with Russia, Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon.

While Turkey and some leading GCC countries have emphasized the necessity of military intervention in Syria, Russia, Iran and Hezbollah have made every effort to prevent any steps that could lead to the collapse of the Syrian regime. In this way, Turkey appears to be acting along the same lines as the Gulf monarchies in

opposition to Russia, Iran and Hezbollah. Therefore, Turkey has become a party to a wider regional dispute due to its very active and seemingly aggressive support of military intervention in Syria in consortium with GCC countries. This reality reflects the rising polarization and continued violence generated by the Syrian conflict. Such developments have limited Turkey's long-standing neutral and trustworthy position in the region. Beyond damaging its positive image, the situation in Syria has undermined Turkey's constructive and once seemingly non-sectarian role in Lebanese politics, which was perceived positively by almost all groups in this fragile and conflict-ridden country. Even worse, due to profound and irreconcilable differences over the Syrian conflict, bilateral relations between Turkey and some Lebanese groups, especially Hezbollah, came to a standstill and deteriorated. Predictably, such a deadlock between Turkey and influential Lebanese groups could have an adverse impact on an already fragile and divided domestic policy in Lebanon.

Turkey's Role in Lebanon: Stabilizing or Destabilizing?

Following Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri's assassination in 2005, the vertical schism between the March 8th alliance (Hezbollah and allies) and the March 14th alliance (Pro-Western parties) has widened. Their views on matters of national security, political representation and foreign intervention have rarely been reconcilable.

Both accuse one another of holding a foreign agenda and not prioritizing the nation's interests. Their differences are also observable in their approach towards both the Arab Spring and Turkey's role in it. Additionally, the exposure of the Levant to regional instabilities was attested by the weak and confused position of the Lebanese government.

Due to these reasons, the Lebanese government adopted a "disassociation" policy to alienate itself from the events in Syria. It stayed neutral in the UN and Arab League meetings regarding the Syrian crisis. However, the political, historical, geographical, social and economic connections between the two countries limited the policy to the state level. In response to the challenges presented by the crisis in Syria, the parties in Lebanon have revived the "militias' foreign policies," which describes the state of affairs following the state's collapse during the civil war (1975-1990) when militias drafted their own foreign policy.

In light of this conflicting divide in the Lebanese political and religious landscape, Turkey's current role and its recent "zero problems" approach are either viewed favorably or extremely negatively. The supporters of Turkey's role in Lebanon are of two kinds. The first, which includes most of the March 14th alliance, views Turkey as an ally of the U.S. and Saudi Arabia and a counterforce for Iran's influence in Lebanon.³ They view the Arab Spring as an extension to the Cedar Revolution that was initiated back in 2005 in Lebanon. However,

their take on the revolutions in different countries varied according to the position of each regime towards Lebanon's internal conflict. For example, while they viewed Mubarak's toppling as a loss, they fully backed the opposition in Syria against the Assad regime, which they loathe.

The future movement (Tayyar Al Mustaqbal), the leading Sunni party in Lebanon led by Rafiq Hariri's son Saad, has engaged in an effort to support the Syrian opposition through the Turkish-Syrian border. Okab Saker, a Lebanese MP, was accused of coordinating weapons distribution to the Free Syrian Army (FSA) from Istanbul.⁴ The other groups within this category The other mostly comprises Islamist factions such as the Al Jama'a Al Islamiya (Muslim Brotherhood) and some Salafist factions in Lebanon that perceive the Turkish role from a sectarian perspective to some degree. They look at the AK Party as the grandsons of the Ottomans that will bring back the Caliphate, end the "injustices" inflicted upon the Sunnis, and regain the community's dignity.

On the other end of the spectrum, the allies of Iran and Syria in Lebanon view Turkey's role suspiciously, to say the least. Those suspicions have increased with the Syrian crisis. According to them, Turkey, an ally of the U.S. and the Israelis, had redeemed itself following the position Ankara took against Israel regarding the Palestinian cause. This image began to improve following the Mavi Marmara incident and the altercation between Israel and Turkey.⁵ Howev-

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er, with the start of the Syrian crisis, Turkey’s credit gradually lost value among the March 8th street. Turkey’s decision to side with the U.S., Israel and the GCC against the Assad regime, viewed by the March 8th group as the last country standing against the “American-Zionist” project in the region, puts Ankara at odds with many Lebanese factions that support the “resistance,” namely Hezbollah.

The tense relationship between the March 8th alliance and Turkey worsened when a Syrian opposition faction that was stationed a few kilometers from the Turkish border kidnapped 11 Lebanese Shia pilgrims returning from pilgrimage shrines in Iraq and Iran. The families of those kidnapped accused Turkey of being involved in the affair. A streak of protests back in the summer of 2012 resulted in the kidnapping of Syrians and a Turkish truck driver to trade for the Lebanese hostages. The Lebanese army soon ended the unrest

and the Turkish hostage was released. Although Turkey has much sway over the Syrian opposition, Ankara denied any involvement in the affair but mediated the release of one of the hostages last August. The crisis went on until two decisive events happened: first, two Turkish pilots were kidnapped by a group that associated itself with the families of the Lebanese pilgrims, which many believe received help from Hezbollah; and second, in the context of the infighting within the Syrian opposition, Islamic extremists groups were closing down on the militia holding the hostages next to the Turkish border. In order to avoid further escalation, Turkey, Qatar and Lebanon managed to reach a deal through mediators, resulting in the release of all hostages unharmed.

Hezbollah’s direct involvement in the Syrian conflict for more over a year could either complicate or mend Lebanese-Turkish relations based on future developments. Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah’s Secretary-General, explained that the opposition and the “Takfiris” (Islamic anathematizers) have not hidden their intentions to destroy his party ever since the crisis started. They have attacked the shrines of Shia religious figures, fired missiles at Hezbollah stronghold towns alongside the border, and claimed to be supported by the U.S. and their allies in the region, partially Turkey, but most importantly Israel, Hezbollah’s arch-enemy. Needless to say, this deepened the divide between the influential Lebanese actor and the Turkish government. However, things seem to be changing.

Turkey should primarily reassess its regional policy and attempt to understand the concerns of each actor by playing a more moderate and favorable role in regional crises

Hezbollah's intervention in the Syrian conflict allowed the Syrian regime to go on the offensive. Combined with new developments such as extremist group infighting and the cooperation between the Syrian Army and the FSA against extremists groups, this might prove in Turkey's favor. The victory of extremist Islamic groups, with many foreign fighters supported by Saudi Arabia, in toppling the Ba'ath regime is neither in the interest of Turkey nor Lebanon because no one wants a failed "Islamic" state as a neighbor. These developments will be conducive for most countries involved in the Syrian crisis to change their positions. Turkey might have to take a step back and reassess their policy towards Syria in order to formulate a peaceful solution that amalgamates realpolitik and normative dimensions. In other words, Turkey should support a solution that weakens the extremist factions in favor of the moderate Syrians, while bringing together all conflicting groups, including regime and the opposition, as part of the solution.

Such a solution does not necessarily mean sacrificing the public's welfare. On the contrary, it reinforces

it by putting a stop to a bloody conflict and, more importantly, by preventing Al-Qaeda affiliated terrorist groups, such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and the Nusra Front, from gaining power – a scenario whereby human rights and freedoms would definitely be undermined. Due to all the above-mentioned considerations, we may see Turkey cooperating with all regional players including Iran, Lebanon and Hezbollah. This will mean moving away from taking sides in Lebanese politics. Furthermore, we might see a Turkish foreign policy shift in order to keep a balanced position with all factions including the March 8th alliance.

Prospects and Challenges: Emphasis on Stability and Democracy Across the Region

The complicated history of Lebanon is something that an increasingly involved Turkish foreign policy needs to understand if they want to see further advancement of their agenda in the Arab world. For example, Hezbollah, a Lebanese and regional player, has a strong presence in the Levant as showcased in Syria. This Islamist party has an important role to play in the Arab-Israeli conflict that is essential to the stability of the region. Israeli threats of waging a war against Lebanon could materialize in the future based on the history of the conflict; one of the things that might limit the effects of such a war is an active and trusted mediator, a role that Turkey can play. Moreover, Pro-Western Leb-

anese parties are dependent on Saudi Arabia and consequently align their policies with the monarchy. Turkey's favorable position within the March 14th street can be built upon to create an alternative for their politicians, one that does not require them to support extremism for political gain.

All in all, due to such divisions and fragile situations both throughout the region and Lebanon, Turkey needs to show considerable attention towards increasingly volatile regional developments. Therefore, if Turkey's foreign policy is to remain efficient, it should consider re-establishing diplomatic channels with all regional actors and an unselective support of rightful demands. This will allow the alleviation of sectarian fears and hostility in the region, especially in Lebanon. In another sense, Turkey needs to harmonize some practical parameters of the earlier version of the "zero problems" policy, such as the role of mediator and multidimensional diplomacy, with the new regional landscape by placing more emphasis on the public's democratic demands. Such actions could have positive results both for the region and Lebanon in improving democratic initiatives and political stability. To this end, Turkey needs to conduct a balanced and careful diplomacy between regional countries, which are divided by the Arab Spring, in order to serve as a mediator between the two camps. Turkey should primarily reassess its regional policy and attempt to understand the concerns of each actor by playing a more moderate and favorable role in regional crises. ■

Endnotes

1. For a better understanding of prominent actor's tendencies during Arab Spring see, Şaban Kardaş, "Turkey and Arab Spring: Transformations in Turkey's Middle East Policy," *Caspian Report*, (2013), pp. 120-122; Muriel Asseburg, "Syria's Civil War: Geopolitical Implications and Scenarios," *European Institute of Mediterranean*, (2013), pp. 14-16; Katerina Dalacoura, "The Arab Uprisings Two Years on; Ideology, Sectarianism and the Changing Balance of Power in the Middle East," *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 15, No. 1, (2013), pp. 83-85.
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