

# The Arab Spring and Turkey: The Camp David Order vs. the New Middle East

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## ABSTRACT

*Over the past decade, Turkey has been experiencing a decisive transition that North Africa and the Middle East only recently have begun to feel. It will be misleading to interpret the changes in the Arab world as unique and isolated developments taking place in each country, on a case by case basis. "The Camp David Order," that took shape after 1978, based on Western support for authoritarian Arab leaders, has dominated Middle Eastern affairs for the last three decades. The US invasion of Iraq intentionally or unintentionally shook up the status quo of the regional order. Turkey has been seen as a success story for those countries suffering from a lack of democratization, economic development and a more equitable distribution of income, while enduring a "Cold Peace" with Israel. Just as Turkey had a role in the transformation of the Arab world, the Arab world will also play a significant role in the formation of the "New Turkey." Turkey will remain an actor helping to build this new democratic and more prosperous regional order, as long as it deploys its comparative, historical, and strategic advantages.*

On January 14, 2011, Ben Ali fled Tunisia after 23 years in power, signaling the end of the distorted regional order in the Middle East and North Africa. Demonstrations, which broke out after 26 year-old street vendor Mohammed Buazizi set himself on fire, have turned into a wave of change spreading from Yemen to Syria. Over the past decade, Turkey has been experiencing a decisive transition that the North Africa and Middle East only recently has begun to feel. Turkey's September 12, 2010 referendum on partial constitutional amendments has become a milestone for the structural changes that was triggered by the 2007 national elections. While Turkey was going through a genuine debate on the "New Turkey" following the historic referendum, which put an end to the tutelage system, it now has engaged in yet another transformative debate on the emergence of the New Middle East.

The last decade in Turkey has witnessed transformations in several areas, laying the

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ground for discussions summarized as New Turkey, and has become a successful example of transition from an old order to a new one. On the domestic front, Turkey has accomplished significant improvements with regard to democratization. On the international front, Turkey has become more capable of taking independent initiatives, come ever closer to EU membership, redefined its relations with the Arab world, and made positive contributions towards the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. These were the achievements that triggered a debate on a New Turkey at home and abroad. The Arab Spring has shown that the transformation Turkey has been going through is also needed in much of the Arab world, which was still reminiscent of the old Turkey.

### **The Arab Spring**

It will be misleading to interpret the changes in the Arab world as single and isolated developments taking place in each and every country. What is at stake is a region where the defining features of regional countries, ranging from their names to their borders, were determined by Western powers after World War I. The regional order established following bloody interventions has been in place since then. After Israel was established in 1948 in the wake of World War II, the post-World War I arrangements were restructured in the Middle East. This revised post-World War II order was later replaced by the “Camp David Order” that took shape after 1978. This new arrangement, based on Western support for authoritarian Arab leaders, has dominated Middle Eastern affairs for the last three decades. This status quo positioned Israel at the center of regional relations, and in subsequent years has enabled regional dictators to rule with an iron fist.

This order has been characterized by two significant features which were meant to maintain regional stability. On the one hand, America situated itself between Israel and the Arab countries to protect the former from the latter. On the other hand, local dictators positioned themselves between America and the Arab peoples in order to resolve any complaint and possible threat to the Camp David Order. This unsustainable arrangement came to an end following the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The US invasion intentionally or unintentionally agitated the dynamics of the regional order and status quo. In other words, in the post-9/11 era, reactionary neo-con policies led to the fall of Saddam, which, in effect, triggered a political tsunami whose true implications will be observed in the coming years.

Surely, it would be wrong to consider the occupation of Iraq as the sole mover of political and social mobilization in the Arab world. Even if Saddam had not

been overthrown, the dictatorships in the Arab world would not have continued for long to rule at the expense of popular demands. The extreme inequalities in the distribution of income, lack of democratic expression channels, governments turned into family and party dictatorships, and the continued occupation

by Israel created unbearable pressure on the Arabs. The two slogans of the Arab Spring, “bread, freedom and dignity” and “the people demand the fall/change of the order”, were sufficient to indicate how much the people demanded change. The established order was already having difficulty maintaining stability. The Arab people were quite aware of the reasons behind their suffering and they said that it was not only governments that encroached on their democratic rights, which was reflected in their slogan: “the people demand the fall of *the order*.” The order here does not simply refer to a single government in isolation from other experiences in the region. It must be understood as a broader term, referring to the established order in the region, and, as dictators in the Arab world fall one after another, the new regional order is in the making.

Israel’s insistence on keeping with the status quo and aggressive policy has encouraged Turkey to repair its relations with the Arab world in a short period of time

### **The Effect of Turkey on the Arab Spring**

Turkey rejected participating in Iraq’s invasion, a trigger for the Arab Spring, and thus it had already taken the first constructive step after decades of silence in its foreign policy. Right before the occupation of Iraq, Turkey intensified its relations with neighboring countries so that the cost of the invasion would not increase. Turkey maintained close relations with the Arab world under the framework of its “zero problems with neighbors” policy after 2002.

Relations with the region have been multi-faceted, encompassing diplomatic, economic and civil society dimensions since 2002. Turkey actively and positively participated in the resolution and discussion of major issues in the Arab world, reacted to Israel after its attack on Lebanon, was directly involved in the Palestinian issue, and facilitated proxy talks between Israel and Syria. In addition, Turkey’s sharp and clear reaction to Israel’s attack on Gaza improved its image in Arab world, which was further boosted with Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s outburst at Davos. Israel’s May 2010 attack on the *Mavi Marmara*, an international humanitarian aid ship on its way to Gaza, which resulted in the deaths of one US and eight Turkish citizens, brought the Turkish-Arab relations to “a different” level.



Photo: AA, Salih Zeki Fazlıoğlu

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Israel's insistence on keeping with the status quo and aggressive policy has encouraged Turkey to repair its relations with the Arab world in a short period of time. Turkey has turned into a country which confronted Israel not only for its attack against Turkish citizens but also for its occupation of Arab lands and violence against the Palestinians. Accordingly, Turkish-Arab relations have transformed dramatically. In the same vein, Turkey voted against the UN Security Council sanctions resolution against Iran, a non-Arab country, as a member of the Security Council, and thus the perception of Turkey as a country "that resists external impositions" gained strength.

To understand the impact of Turkey in the making of the Arab Spring one may look at the background in which the above mentioned slogans, "bread, freedom

and dignity” and “the people demand the fall of the order”, emerged. Turkey has been seen as a success story for those countries suffering from a lack of democratization, economic development and distribution of income, and despised and oppressed by Israel. These two slogans opened avenues of understanding to see and compare the Turkish experience with “economic development, democratization and resisting external impositions” and “questioning global and regional order”: Turkey has become the largest economy of the region although it does not enjoy any oil revenue, it has taken structural steps towards democratization, it has clearly showed its reaction to Israel when necessary, and it has established relations with the West without letting others oppress its people. People who want to change towards a model based on Turkey enthusiastically welcomed Prime Minister Erdoğan, openly asking him to fill the political vacuum after the Arab revolutions.

The Arab image in Turkish society is in a process of dramatic transformation and re-imagination

### **The Effect of the Arab Spring on Turkey**

We must also dwell on the ignored effects of the Arab Spring on Turkey. Just as Turkey had a role in the transformation of the Arab world, the Arab world will also play a significant role in the formation of the New Turkey.<sup>1</sup> First of all, Turkey’s relations with the countries affected by the Arab Spring have increased tremendously recently. There has been an intensive interaction between public officials, NGOs, universities, businessmen, and ordinary people. As such, Turkish intellectuals, NGOs, and the media did not have difficulty in finding local information sources with regard to the social dynamics shaping the Arab Spring.

As a result, while the Middle East was not at all included in the agenda of the old Turkey, it started to be treated as almost a “domestic issue” for the New Turkey. Even the Turkish media, which had difficulties in getting rid of the habits of the old Turkey in terms of both its ideological orientation and quality of journalism, has quickly begun to adapt to the new situation. Even though the media, state institutions, NGOs, and universities still have not overcome their mixed feelings created by the adoption of the Latin alphabet in lieu of the Arabic one, they are being reintroduced to the Arabic language. As an illustrative example, Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan and Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoğlu talked to Libyans and Egyptians in Arabic in Tahrir and Martyr Squares. Unlike the affect this would have had in the old Turkey, this time the Turkish media did not

have any ultra-secularist reaction against the Turkish leaders' use of Arabic, and instead, watched the direct impact with envy.

To gain a better sense of the implication of this development, we can compare it with the reaction of the Turkish media, the Turkish Armed Forces and the civilian bureaucracy towards former Prime Minister Erbakan's government visit to Islamic countries in 1996. The reaction to Erbakan's visit was so strongly negative that it was used as an excuse for the infamous military intervention of February 28, 1997. We can observe a stark contrast with the reaction toward Erdoğan's Arab Spring tour in September 2011. While Erdoğan was accompanied by the current generals from the Turkish Armed Forces, Erbakan was the very target of the military. Further to that we witness a visible decline in the impact of the orientalist tendencies in the perception of the relationship with the Arab world in the media.

Turkey has refreshed its social and historical memory of each and every country that experienced change and revolution. The Arab image in Turkish society is in a process of dramatic transformation and re-imagination. Accordingly, a different image is set to replace what has been presented as "the Arab image" or "the Arab world" during the period of the radical modernization in the early Republican era. In the following years, we will probably see that the Turkish social imagination will refresh its memory, coming to erase the negative legacy created by the radical secular modernization.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, thanks to the Arab Spring, a Turkish state capable of talking with the Arab world for the first time in its modern history has emerged. The bureaucracy of the New Turkey tries to keep up with this new period in an impatient and sometimes inexperienced way, but has acted self-confidently in adapting to the developments in the Arab world. It has tried to meet the demands for intensive training and transfer of Turkish know-how to the Arab world, notably in the countries undergoing change. This period of accelerated intensive interaction will impact Turkey's institutional structure. At the very least, this development will increase the need for Arabic-speaking personnel as different official institutions began to establish offices in Arab countries and pay regular visits. In brief, the Arab Spring is poised to spark an unexpected adjustment and transformation in Turkish bureaucracy.

While seeking to tackle with the challenges of covering the Arab Spring, the Turkish media has tried to remedy its lack of capacity in dealing with the Arab world. The debate on its lack of capacity in the end has turned into a debate on

Turkish modernization's glaring neglect of Arab affairs. It has been too long since Turkey omitted the Arab world, the Arabic language, and the political and social movements in the Arab world. The embarrassment of following the developments in a capital only a couple of hours away from a Western news agency has forced the Turkish media to change its practices. For example, recently, state television has started broadcasting in Arabic. Arab intellectuals living in Turkey have become subject of rising interest and begun to have more opportunities to appear in the Turkish media. Following the growing visibility of Turkish foreign policy in recent years, the media has tried to increase its journalistic capacity with regard to the Arab world, but it realized its deficiency, which became even more evident during the Arab Spring. Similarly, universities, NGOs and research institutions took the first steps towards building close relations with the Arab world, while academic gatherings, common broadcasts, and forums followed one after another.

The US and Turkey have overlapping concerns and interests in the Middle East. However, it would be too simplistic to expect that the two countries will adopt the same or parallel approaches

In the last few years, Arab intellectuals, academics and journalists have participated in activities in Turkey more than ever before in the history of the Republic. To be more precise, it will be sufficient enough to recall that Al Jazeera, which is regarded as a significant actor of the Arab Spring, will start to broadcast in Turkish in the next few months. Similar to Al Jazeera Turk, this journal, *Insight Turkey*, will also be published in Arabic in coming months. In addition to media interactions, political movements are also seeking to settle in Turkey. The Syrian opposition movement, for example, has held various meetings in Turkey and already formed a common front uniting all groups opposing the Assad's regime. This is the first time that Arab opposition groups are declaring Turkey as a home for their diasporas. Interestingly, this development has already been digested by Turkish society not only as an "ordinary development" but also as a "responsibility of Turkey."

### **The Future of the Arab Spring and Turkey**

Turkey is so involved in developments in the Middle East that it cannot be a mere spectator to what is currently taking place. The Turkish attitude towards the Arab Spring is also under some criticism, such as that Turkey's importance will diminish through emergence of the new democratic actors in the region, such as new Egypt. Those who consider the Turkish experiences as a "fall" while

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the Arab world experiences a “spring” either have no clue about the “winter” in Turkey or think that spring comes with a single flower. Turkey has experienced both a multi-party system and a tutelary regime, which is currently being adopted by Egypt, during the last 50-60 years. While Turkey tries to overcome its own remnants of “winter”, the Arab world is

about to revive. If we judge based on the experience of Turkey, those seeking to initiate social and political change in the Arab world will first fight a power struggle within their countries and then will confront the regional order. In brief, a harsh winter is ahead of the whole region.

Turkey will remain an actor helping to build the order as long as it deploys its comparative, historical and strategic advantages in constructive politics. Turkey has become an interesting dynamic factor for not only the powers in its region but also for the American and European actors. Faced with the legitimate demands of Turkey, the actors in the region are feeling more pressure to make a choice between the status quo and change. Similarly, global actors are also feeling similar pressure to make that choice because of Turkey’s irrefutable objections over Israel and its rightful arguments that the regional order will never be the same. Whichever they choose, the result will be for the benefit of Turkey. If they choose the status quo Turkey will become much more legitimate as a democratic power, compared to the rest of the region. If they choose change, then Turkey will be proven correct in its diagnosis of the fundamental problem in the region. The US and Turkey have overlapping concerns and interests in the Middle East. However, it would be too simplistic to expect that the two countries will adopt the same or parallel approaches. For instance, while the US would prefer a manageable and controlled change in the region, Turkey knows quite well that a successful transition requires a more fundamental structural change in the Camp David Order.

The increasing role of Turkey was directly witnessed at the latest UN General Assembly meeting in New York. While it was no surprise that the Arab Spring was at the top of the official and unofficial agenda at the UN, the recent visit of Prime Minister Erdoğan to Egypt, Libya and Tunisia enabled Turkey to synchronize its foreign policy agenda to the world’s political agenda. This synchronization and the impact of his visit to the region led Erdoğan to become the center of attention. Furthermore, the references to Somalia in his speech, deep and direct involve-

ment with Syria, and the recognition of the Palestinian state enhanced such profile. Turkey had already put the issue of the Palestinian state's recognition on its agenda and had taken diplomatic steps in that direction. Moreover just couple of weeks before the annual UN meeting, Turkey was involved with the UN because of the Palmer report. Thus it was able to bring the massacre on the *Mavi Marmara* to the world agenda. Even if the serious results expected from the UN meetings are not forthcoming, Turkey succeeded in setting its agenda on its own and aligning it with that of the world.

### **Zero Problems and Problems of Neighbors**

Foreign policy pays regard to long-term and macro-goals to a large extent. During certain periods and conditions, it focuses on short- or medium-term interests. Usually, dynamic methods are employed for current specific problems while principles are more static. In this vein, especially after the start of tensions between Turkey and Syria, it was argued that the “zero-problem with neighbors” policy had collapsed. Such an attitude, which interprets the “zero-problem policy” as an algebraic argument, confuses the expected “goal” with the “methods” to be employed in order to reach that goal. They fail to understand that considering the “zero-problem policy” as an algebraic argument is as absurd as declaring the end of “history and politics.” “Zero problems” is an “expectation” for reaching an idealized goal while negative and positive foreign policy relations, which tend to change from time to time, are the dynamic “steps to be taken” towards reaching this goal. Therefore, the recent problems with Syria do not require a questioning of the general direction of Turkish foreign policy but indicate that Turkey must revise its methods. If the “zero problems policy” had not been employed recently, Turkey today would not benefit from the Arab Spring. The Baathist regime in Syria especially failed to take advantage of intensive commercial, intellectual, cultural, and touristic relations between the peoples of the two countries and turn these into the building blocks of a smooth transition out of the crisis. Thanks to the relaxation and abolishment of the visa regime, millions of Syrians and Turks started to improve their commercial relations in just a few years. Even the effect of this interaction in Syria was sufficient enough for the anti-Baathist opposition groups to choose Turkey. If Turkey had not adopted the “zero-problems with neighbors” policy, today we would not see a Turkey able to give support to and receive support from the Arab Spring in such a legitimate and natural way.

As long as Turkey clearly and sincerely supports change in the Arab world and sides with the people of the region, external actors will realize that confronting Turkey means confronting the demands of the people in the region. This will be

not only a great opportunity for Turkey but also the beginning of a challenging process. Turkey will be an actor that assists in forming a new order in the region as long as it improves its “zero problem with neighbors” policy and starts building the capacity for managing the “problems of neighbors” in this period.

### Endnotes

1. Cemal Haşimi “Yeni Türkiye ve Arap Devrimleri Birbirini Besliyor”, (New Turkey and Arab Revolutions Reinforce Each Other) *Sabah*, September 24, 2011.
2. Talip Küçükcan, “Arap Image in Turkey”, *SETA Report*, (Ankara, 2010), <http://setav.org/public/HaberDetay.aspx?Dil=tr&hid=35087&q=arab-image-in-turkey>