
The Arab Spring Effect on Turkey's Role, Decision-Making and Foreign Policy

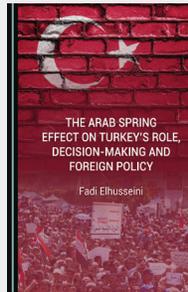
By Fadi Elhusseini

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Fadi Elhusseini, Senior Fellow at the Centre on Governance at the University of Ottawa, provides a much needed perspective for Turkish foreign policy's transformation in the last decade, specifically in relation to the Arab Spring phenomenon. In this book, changes in Turkey's shifting policies and key concepts from soft power to strategic depth to entrepreneurial foreign policy are explained, to a major extent, by an examination of Turkey's reactions towards the recent revolutions, counter-revolutions and movements in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. While Elhusseini does not ignore Turkey's domestic conditions and the role of the ruling AK Party in creating a novel approach towards the region, the author argues that the developments within MENA were the dominant causes for Turkey to redefine its relationship with the countries of the region and to redevelop its world view.

Another major argument that Elhusseini puts forth toward the end of the book comes as a prescription to highlight the accumulated successes of Turkey's foreign policy, such as Turkey's comparative advantage over other countries in reaching the MENA region due to its location, history and religion. Historically, the Ottoman Empire's rule over the Arab world in the last 400 years of the Empire left many cultural artifacts in the shape of mosques, baths, and monuments;



these artifacts have no doubt left a cultural heritage which still contributes to the development of the region's culture today. This factor renders Turkey's soft power in MENA different from that of other countries that also have soft power claims, a specific argument that is also shared by İbrahim Kalın, the

Turkish Presidential Press Secretary. Another advantage Turkey enjoys is its diplomatic power. The author cites a few studies regarding Turkey's diplomatic communication capabilities and access into the region and concludes that although Turkey is not powerful enough to be considered a "central country" (p. 63), Turkey is better off compared to other countries in the region which aspire to be regional powers, especially as its diplomatic missions help bridge its differences with its Arab neighbors.

That said, the author also recognizes some of the domestic and external challenges that can have a negative impact on Turkey's foreign policy capabilities. Regarding the domestic ones, Elhusseini lists Turkey's economic conditions, terrorism, and the future of the decision making structure within the government as well as the AK Party. In terms of foreign factors and challenges, the author highlights Turkey's relationship with other regional powers like Iran, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, Turkey's concordance with major powers like the U.S., Russia and the EU, and finally the

prospect of sectarian crises that can further destabilize the region.

One critical point to be mentioned about the book would be on Chapter Three. The author lists the results of annual surveys regarding Arab perceptions towards the countries of the region by the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV) for the years 2009, 2011, 2012 and 2014. The survey that the author discusses in this chapter asks questions to assess Turkey's status as a favorable country in the region, the positive impact of the country on the Arab Spring, its influence in regional politics, a normative assessment whether Turkey should play a bigger role in the region, and an assessment of its mediation power in regard to the Arab world; the study surveyed participants from Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia. Overall, Turkey's favorability in the region remained high until 2011, when it stagnated between 75-80 percent and subsequently decreased to 59 percent. The number of people who agreed with the statement that Turkey should play a bigger role in the region was 71 percent in 2009, which decreased to 60 percent in 2013. A similar theme can be observed in the number of people who favored Turkey's mediation of conflicts in the region. The author offers succinct arguments regarding the causes of this trend which boil down to Turkey transitioning its foreign policy from one based

on pragmatism, self/national interest, and realpolitik to one based on idealism, ethics, and values, sometimes mixing both but still leaning toward the latter. However, country-specific analyses may expose continuing trends of favoring Turkey as a foreign actor alongside declining trends towards Turkey among other Arab nationals. For instance, in the case of a study conducted by Zogby Research (Middle East 2016: Current conditions & the road ahead), favorable attitudes towards Turkey among Egyptian nationals echo TESEV's findings which present a decline in favorable attitudes toward Turkey. On the other hand, among Lebanese and Jordanian participants of the survey, a favorable attitude towards Turkey is maintained from 2012 to 2015 and 2016, and even increases albeit marginally. Therefore to reiterate, a more extensive assessment for some cases could benefit the main arguments of the book in upcoming editions.

Overall, Fadi Elhousseini's book provides a systemic view of Turkey's foreign policy and the regional interplay between the actors in the MENA region with a grand claim of the Arab Spring being one of the main shaping forces behind Turkey's changing approach towards the region. The book provides concise analyses of a number of topics related to Turkey; therefore it serves the purpose of a good entry level book for policy audiences that are interested in Turkey.