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Ankara Moves Closer to Washington: How the Arab Spring Warmed U.S.-Turkish Relations

by Soner Cagaptay

U.S.-Turkish relations entered into a tumultuous period with the Iraq War in 2003. This difficult phase in bilateral ties appears to have ended with the beginning of the Arab Spring.

Until recently, disagreements on a number of issues — such as how to deal with Iran's nuclearization — undermined Washington's historical bond with Ankara.

Today, however, the United States and Turkey are closely cooperating, with President Barack Obama and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan having formed what is probably the strongest relationship between a U.S. president and a Turkish prime minister in decades. The shifting political winds across the Middle East are also bringing Turkey and the United States closer than they have been since their falling-out in 2003 over the Iraq war.

Washington Opens a Direct Line with Ankara

President Obama and Prime Minister Erdogan have developed a close relationship and this personal rapport is the foundation of the new U.S.-Turkish relationship. Until last year, Turkey's relationship with Washington was wavering: Ankara's Iran policy was oscillating, which often challenged Washington's efforts to impose internationally backed sanctions on Tehran.

In June 2010, for example, Turkey voted at the U.N. Security Council against a proposal for U.S.-imposed sanctions. For about two months, it looked as though this vote would sever U.S.-Turkish ties. But the straightforward conversation President Obama had with Prime Minister Erdogan on the sidelines of the Group of 20 summit in Toronto in July 2010 prevented that scenario.

The U.S. President chose to simply tell the Turkish prime minister how upsetting Turkey's U.N. vote had been to Washington. Such candor helped clear the air between the two. And Turkey's policy soon changed: Ankara stopped defending Tehran and began working more closely with Washington.

MES Notes

MES 2011-12 Lecture Series

Dr. Soner Cagaptay's article is based on his talk, entitled "Turkish Model: Turkey's Role in the Arab Spring," that he presented at the Marine Corps University on 12 January 2012 as part of the Middle East Studies' Lecture Series, "Orienting Our Sights on the Future: the Opportunities and Challenges of the Arab Revolts."

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Since then, the relationship has been on the upswing. The two leaders speak often — at least a dozen times in 2011 alone — and frequently agree on policy. Turkey's statements in support of the Arab Spring led President Obama to appreciate Turkey, a Muslim NATO member that uniquely satisfies Washington's quest to find powerful allies that have a majority-Muslim population and are happy to work with the United States.

Ankara Reconsiders its Middle East Policy after the Arab Spring

Whereas the personal relationship between President Obama and Prime Minister Erdogan helped prepare the hypothetical groundwork for rebuilding U.S.-Turkish ties, the Arab Spring has unexpectedly made this a reality by aligning U.S. and Turkish interests in the Middle East.

In 2002, when Turkey's newly elected Justice and Development Party (AKP), led by Mr. Erdogan, began a policy of rapprochement with the country's Middle Eastern neighbors, including Syria, the hope was that this would start integration between Turkey and its neighbors, creating something similar to the 1950s "Benelux" bloc of Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg. Ankara also hoped to benefit from this process by building soft power across the Muslim Middle East, in hope of rising up as a regional leader.

Until the Arab Spring, this policy seemed to be largely inconclusive because of the hard reality on the ground: Turkey's counterparts in rapprochement were not its neighboring peoples, but rather their undemocratic regimes.

Syria is a case in point: whereas Ankara hoped to reach out to the Syrian people, the Bashar al-Assad regime took advantage of its close ties with Turkey, a member of NATO, to gain legitimacy while oppressing its people.

The Arab Spring has ended the political mirage. Even though Ankara repeatedly asked President Assad to stop killing civilians, he chose to ignore these calls — demonstrating that there was never true rapprochement between Turkey and Syria, and that Ankara had been unsuccessful in establishing effective soft power over Damascus.

Subsequently, Ankara has slammed Assad, emerging instead as the chief regional opponent of his policies. This is Ankara's new policy toward the Arab Middle East: leading the world in dropping dictators in favor of the pro-democracy movements, from Egypt to Libya to Syria.

After Ankara concluded that dictators such as Libya's Muammar Qaddafi and Syria's Assad would fall — sooner or later — once they are challenged by the masses, Washington and Ankara began coordinating their policies on the Arab Spring.

Cooperation has been especially deep toward Syria. Turkey has emerged as the region's key opponent of the Assad regime's crackdown on demonstrators, which also is approved by Washington, which hopes for a "soft landing" in Syria — an end to Assad's rule without the country descending into chaos. Washington appreciates that Ankara is willing to bear the burden of policy toward Syria, from imposing sanctions against Assad to supporting the opposition, following a strategy led by Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu.

While Iran Drives Turkey Closer to Washington

The upswing in U.S.-Turkish ties is likely to last also because of increasing tensions between Ankara and Tehran.

In 2002, when Mr. Erdogan took office, Ankara decided to warm up its ties with Tehran. Then, with the start of the Iraq War in 2003, Turkey and Iran became, in a sense, friends. Alarmed by the U.S. military presence to its east in Afghanistan and to its west in Iraq, Tehran concluded that it needed to win its neighbor Turkey to break the grip of the U.S.-led ring of isolation forming around it. Iranian support for the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) ended the day U.S. troops started landing in Iraq.

Eight years later, Tehran is re-evaluating its strategic environment. With U.S. troops leaving Iraq and Iran gaining more influence there, Tehran feels that it can act differently towards Turkey.

What is more, Turkey's return as a major player in the Middle East has stirred competition with the region's other country seeking hegemony, Iran. A soft rivalry started between the two countries when they supported opposing factions in Iraq's 2010 elections. This struggle has given way to outright competition over Syria, with Tehran supporting and funding the Assad regime and Ankara supporting and hosting members of the opposition.

Turkey has emerged as the key opponent of the Syrian regime's crackdown. It has threatened action against Assad if the killing does not stop. In response, Damascus has decided to make things difficult for Turkey. U.S. and Turkish officials suggest that the Syrian regime might, once again, be allowing PKK activity in its territory.

Since Damascus is aware that it would likely face a Turkish invasion if it were to allow PKK attacks from its territory into Turkey, it has turned to its ally Tehran for assistance.

Tehran, already annoyed that Turkey is trying to diminish Iranian influence in Iraq, has been glad to help. Iran desperately needs to end Turkey's policy of confronting Assad. If not countered, this policy will usher in the end of the Assad regime in Syria, costing Iran its precious Levantine client state. Hence, Iran's age-old strategy against Turkey has been resuscitated: using the PKK to attack Ankara from another country in order to pressure Turkey.

Accordingly, since the beginning of summer 2010, the PKK has attacked Turkey from Iraq, killing almost 150 Turks as well as kidnapping dozens of people.

Thus forms the Middle Eastern "PKK circle": the more people Assad kills, the more hard-line Turkey's policies will become against Syria. This will, in turn, drive Iranian-Syrian action against Turkey through PKK attacks from Iraq.

Turkey, Iran and the Assad regime are locked in a power game over Syria's future. Either Ankara will win and Assad will fall, or Tehran will win and Ankara, hurt by PKK attacks, will quit and let Syria be.

In the long term, the Turkish-Iranian rivalry will bring Ankara closer to Washington, and perhaps even to Israel, or at least halt further deterioration of Turkish-Israeli ties.

Events in Iraq already provide the basis for further cooperation between Washington and Ankara. With the United States having withdrawn its troops from Iraq, Turkey and Iran will be competing economically and politically to gain influence in Iraq, and this issue is already bringing Ankara closer to Washington.

Accordingly, not a day goes by that yet another Iranian official threatens Turkey. Take for instance, Iranian supreme leader Khamenei's military adviser Major-General Yahya Rahim-Safavi's October 2010 warning: "Turkey must radically rethink its policies on Syria, the NATO missile shield and promoting Muslim secularism in the Arab world or face trouble from its own people and neighbors."

Such threats have driven, at least in part, Ankara's 2011 decision to take part in NATO's missile defense project. In fact, this decision can be seen as the sharpest Turkish rebuke to Iran over the past decade.

Today's Middle East-oriented Turkey, anchored in NATO, is a greater threat to Iranian interests than the merely pro-Western Turkey of the past. Accordingly, there is a chance that Iran might become even more aggressive towards Ankara. Some analysts suggest that the Iran's Quds Force, the special-operations unit of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, might be connecting with the PKK in northern Iraq to target Turkey and also the Iraqi Kurds.

MES Co-hosts Afghanistan Negotiations Simulation

On 12 December 2011, the Minerva Initiative and Middle East Studies at MCU, in collaboration with the Public International Law and Policy Group, a non-profit organization based in Washington, D.C., conducted a simulation exercise on the reconciliation efforts in Afghanistan. Participants included military professionals, U.S. government civilians, and the representatives from the private section and brought together a wide range of experience. This event explored ways through simulated negotiations to craft an end to the conflict in Afghanistan.

Looking Forward

There are still some tensions between Washington and Ankara, including the future of Turkish-Israeli relations. However when a flotilla sailed from Turkey to Gaza in early November 2011, the White House asked Ankara to allow no Turks on board the ships, in order to avoid a repeat of the May 2010 incident in which nine Turks on Gaza-bound ships were killed by the Israelis. Ankara obliged, and a crisis was averted.

Nonetheless, there is hope for the future of the Turkish-Israeli relationship. Just as Israel appears keen to find a way to build bridges with Ankara, Turkey, too, would be well served to repair its relationship with Israel. Ankara is currently enjoying increased power in the Middle East. To maximize its influence in the region, though, Turkey will need good ties with all the states in the region, including Israel. This means moving past the 2010 flotilla incident to rebuild these relations.

What is more, both Turkey and Israel face a new and challenging regional landscape. Consequently, both countries would be well served to focus on pressing security issues, rather than devoting precious resources to confronting each other.

Israel's current security situation is a prime example of why it should not wish to add another state — especially one as powerful as Turkey — to its "watch list." Iran poses the most serious challenge to Israel by marching toward a nuclear weapons program. In addition, Iran can mobilize Hezbollah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and other radical terror groups to target Israel and the peace process with the Palestinians. Israel also faces new security challenges, such as the Arab Spring's historic transformation of its neighbors. Not only has Egypt become a bigger concern for Israel than in the past, but Israel must also devote resources to watching Syria if and when President Bashar al-Assad falls.

Turkey also stands to benefit from improved relations with Israel. Until recently, Ankara's policy of "zero problems with neighbors" yielded positive results in the Middle East: Turkey's relations with Iran improved and Ankara and Syria became close allies. Turkey also pacified the terror attacks of the PKK, and even mediated peace between Israel and Syria.

Now, Turkey's problems with its neighbors have resurfaced. Ankara's opposition to the Assad regime's crackdown on demonstrators has earned Damascus' hostility once again, and has placed it on a collision course with Tehran, which defends Assad's crackdown. Turkish-Iranian competition, which began with Tehran and Ankara's support of opposing factions in Iraqi elections, will be further exacerbated if Syria descends into even greater chaos. Signs are emerging that Iran may even resort to its past policy of using the PKK against Turkey.

Given the new environment in the Middle East, Israel appears to be thinking of restoring ties with Turkey, and analysts suggest that Ankara seems interested in doing the same. This time, though, the Turkish-Israeli relationship might have a different foundation: whereas Turkey and Israel allied in the past because they needed the other's friendship, they must now ally because they do not need the other's enmity. Fortunately, a solid foundation for renewed relations already exists: despite their political differences, trade between the two countries is booming, having risen by over 30 percent in 2011, and there are reports of back-room diplomacy already happening.

After a decade of discord with the United States, Turkey's ties with Washington have improved significantly over the course 2011. While the Obama-Erdogan relationship has established a new foundation for U.S.-Turkish ties, it appears that the two countries will be bound by common interests in the Middle East even after these leaders leave office.

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