Turkey and Iran: Discussing the future under the Impact of the Arab Spring

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Neither Turkish nor Iranian policy makers would have expected a radical transformation in their neighborhood that would have had a drastic impact on their relationship during the most recent period. Turkey and Brazil struck a Tehran deal with Iranian administration with a perspective to satisfy the international community’s concerns on nuclear issue in 2010. Turkey’s alternative approach to the Iranian nuclear issue was enough evidence for policy and academic circles in the West to argue that there was a shift of axis to the East. The Tehran deal turned out to be a failed roll of a dice that fell into deaf ears in Washington. (1) Turkey voted NO for the draft UN sanctions on Iran as non-permanent member of UN Security Council. These subsequent developments left a significant trace of suspicion in the capitals of the long-time allies and neighboring countries on Turkish-Iranian rapprochement. To the utmost shock of policy makers and analysts, however, the positive atmosphere left its place to the speculations of escalating tension on Syria conflict with Ankara and Tehran’s conflicting perspectives on regional issues in a short period of time.

One needs to analyze the reasons of change in these relations. Iran and Turkey both have strong state traditions. The analysis of change in the relations needs to focus on the domestic political landscapes of these two countries. In addition to internal affairs, the change is mainly due to the regional transformation under the prerogatives of Arab Spring. Transformation at regional level occurs through international diffusion vis-à-vis the attitudes of national administrations. The receptive or rejectionist approach of states set the rules of regional politics and alignments at time of emergence of a regional sense
of solidarity. Turkey and Iran developed their response in a manner to shape the region in line with their domestic preference of rule at home and its externalization to the regional order. An analysis of the future of the relations should take the order instituting roles of Iran and Turkey into consideration and build the scenarios for a perceptible future in relation to the transformative impact of the Arab Spring in the Middle East.

The Impact of the Arab Spring(2)
The Arab Spring encompassed ideas and agents that transcended the domestic and international divide in an unprecedented fashion in recent history. The space for independent domains in the Middle East exists no more. The popular uprisings in a number of Arab countries are part of a larger transformation that stretches from North Africa to inner Asia. This transformation is not likely to end without a reorientation of the political landscape of the countries in the near and Middle East. The Arab Spring also touches upon the search for new ethical perspectives in a changing international system, with the relative decline of former hegemonic powers and the rise of new countries. Since the Arab Spring has had an impact on both the regional and international levels, it requires an interlinked analysis.

It is, in this sense, a serious blow to the Middle East’s status quo, which was already outdated in a changing international environment. The former models of inward-oriented rulers, who were resistant to international influences, are giving way to new outward-looking leaders with a focus on honor, liberty, freedom, and good governance. The Arab Spring has also meant a challenge to the survival strategies of authoritarian rules through changes in regional power balances, international alliances, and an emulation of Asian developmentalist models. A new critical mass is likely to make more robust transformation possible from the middle-to-long term run.

The ideas that brought the Arab youth to the streets did not emanate from the works of a well-known Islamist or socialist thinker but were the universal values of honor, dignity, and freedom. It does not mean these writers did not have an impact, but they have not been a source of inspiration for the popular uprisings in Arab world.(3) The long-lasting stability of authoritarian rule has been largely replaced by a new balance in the region, with a renewed pattern of relationship with the outside world.

The Arab Spring is diffusing a set of norms that has started to change power, authority, and trans boundary loyalty patterns in the region. The experience of other countries that have undergone this kind of transformation is not necessarily helpful here. As Solingen put forward aptly, domestic structures and legacies may facilitate or block transnational diffusion.(4) Iran’s response, for example, has been to block the diffusion, which may
erode that government’s favored model of political survival. Iran’s strategy is to wage the struggle beyond its borders. Iranian policy in Syria is to build a firewall against the influence of Arab Spring. The Iranian establishment faces a crisis of major renovation and reform, which may not end without a systemic change in the Islamic Republic. A serious blow to Iran has been the loss of legitimacy in the Arab streets, which served as a provider of moral ground. The Iranian regime’s proclaimed “nativity” and “siding with the oppressed” left it to ally with ruthless dictators and seek refuge in Asian style authoritarianism. Iranian policy in Syria aims to preserve an inward-looking approach in the Middle East that is already disappearing.

The Iranian establishment tried to claim some success in the uprisings by framing it as an Islamic awakening. This is also an attempt to play to a domestic audience and preserve their hold on power at home. Their aim is simply regime maintenance and survival. Turkish policymakers, in contrast, extended immediate support to the popular uprisings in Syria and utilized alliances with NATO and the United States for security concerns.

For Turkish leadership, the regional transformation has been a clear warning that Turkey cannot manage a regional role without addressing its own democratic deficits at home. Their responses are clear indications of their domestic preferences. New administrations in the Middle East will be more sensitive to the Palestinian question and less friendly to Israeli and the U.S. policies. In addition, one may expect a stronger sense of Islamic solidarity. This situation is likely to put an end to the long-time Iranian domination of these areas and erode Tehran’s ability to project soft power in the region. It forces Turkey into a position of enriching its own aspects of soft power, i.e., democracy, and of building further capacity in foreign policy to address the complicated regional dynamics.

**Iran and Turkey: Three Scenarios for Future**

The Arab Spring seems to be leaving permanent scars on the course of domestic and foreign policies of Turkey and Iran. The relations between the two countries have always been complicated and multidimensional. There was also a domestic dimension, which made relations vulnerable to power struggles at home. Today, however, the situation is much different. Turkey and Iran face a critical period of transformation in their neighborhood, which forces policymakers into a difficult situation in terms of foreign policy choices and the structure of domestic landscapes. The rivalry in Syria is not similar to the earlier cycles of confrontation, which used to normalize after a period of tension. The current situation is more about domestic structures and survival strategies of political systems rather than specific interests in foreign policy. The attitudes of policymakers toward transnational diffusion of a new consciousness of solidarity and their
combination of foreign policy interests with domestic preferences will determine the future course of relations between Turkey and Iran.

The first scenario of relations involves a situation where Iran raises a firewall against the transformation of the region and diffusion of transnational norms at home, while Turkey supports the popular uprisings in the region and working on democratization at home. Iranian attitude would be to have a stronghold in Syria to set a firewall outside their homeland against the transformative impact of Arab Spring. Although one may not talk about a direct confrontation, in particular in Syria, there is a possible proxy struggle in Syria with serious implications for the domestic landscapes of Turkey and Iran. The adaptability-firewall dilemma would be a rule in regional politics in terms of two countries’ political strategies with possible negative impact on the relations in other fronts.

Turkey and Iran have a complicated and long-term relationship, full of cyclical patterns of ups and downs. Economic relations have an upward trend, despite the Iranian economy’s hardship under the negative influence of sanctions, largely due to Turkey’s purchase of oil and natural gas from Iran. Turkey continues to play a facilitator role in the Iranian nuclear issue. However, the diverging views on the transformation of the neighboring region, their tendency to present the changes as a sign of their strength in regional politics and engagement with opposing sides in Syria would likely to feed a certain degree of tension in the relations. The competing positions in Syria are the result of their struggle with the diffusion of a new set of norms and the region’s changing political atmosphere. Syria is both a firewall for Iran and a chance for Turkey to prove its adaptability to the new situation. The real battleground is their respective domestic landscapes, and their own challenge of transformation to good governance and societal rule. This delicate situation would make the administrations keep an eye on domestic and foreign policies of each other and attempt to pre-empt or respond to the policies which supposedly harm the interest of others.

The second scenario involves a situation where Iran raises a firewall at home on the one hand and supports the transformation of the region on the other hand, and while Turkey adopts the transformation at both regional and domestic levels. Iranian administration enjoyed substantial popular support in the Arab streets until the Arab Spring. The Islamic revolution relied on a rhetoric of siding with the oppressed masses and sided with Islamic groups in the Middle East. Iranian attitude towards Syrian crisis has considerably decreased support to and legitimacy of Iran in the region. Tehran may change position vis-a-vis Arab Spring to gain some credit back for its regional clout. Since the Iranian establishment relies on international legitimacy to preserve their rule
at home to a certain extent, Iranian leverage in regional politics is likely to help the preservation of regime’s legitimacy at home.

Iran’s favoring of transformation in the countries of Arab Spring could ease tension between Turkey and Iran in regional politics. One may still expect contending perspectives on the post-Arab Spring shape of the region in Tehran and Ankara. The sides would not want to strengthen their discourses of transformation in the region, though it will be for domestic consumption to a large extent. The chance for cooperation and a joint constructive role within a regional structure should not be ruled out in this scenario. Even in the absence of cooperation, the independent moves in support of popular uprisings would likely bring the two countries closer. The ease of tension would have a positive impact on the relations ranging from Turkey’s involvement in nuclear issue to economic relations. A similar approach to regional politics would also help contain a dangerous faultline, namely Shia-Sunni divide. Iranian cooperative attitude in facilitating change in Syria, even if not siding with the opposition, would end a Shia-Sunni rivalry in Syria. Other actors of the so-called sunni bloc, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, would find a wider room for maneuver in terms of adopting a friendlier attitude.

In the third scenario, Iran and Turkey both favor the adaptability of transnational norms at home and support transformation in the region. Iranian regime’s attempt to reform itself would have substantial influence on Turkish-Iranian relations, creating a suitable domestic environment. There may be several drives to remove a firewall against transnational diffusion in Iran, i.e. side effects of a grand bargain between Tehran and Washington on nuclear issues, the rise of popular discontent in Iran and Iranian regime’s own calculation of strategic interests. Iranian regime might want to make sure that a change in domestic priorities and political rule would not determine their position. However, no one can guarantee the limits of change and where the societal demands would be satisfied. However, the Iranian regime faces an increasing challenge of economic sanctions, international isolation and regional legitimacy. The critical threshold is likely to occur between the Iranian regime buying domestic legitimacy and the challenge to reform to the regime itself.

A wider acceptance of reform in Iran would make foreign policy more supportive of the transformation in the region. This would be a welcomed development in Iran since the chance for cooperation will substantially increase. There will be more room to maneuver for joint action between Ankara and Tehran. Since Iranian soft power is in decline, Iran may also need such a cooperative mode of relationship with Turkey. Moreover, an Iranian input for change in Arab countries is likely to integrate Shia communities in other countries in a more confident manner. Although an active Iranian role in integrating Shia
communities into regional transformation will ease the sectarian tension, it may not be a welcome development for some quarters, due to two reasons. One reason is Iran’s regaining of Iranian soft power in the region. This will be more of a concern if the situation with Israel and nuclear issue still remain as a concern in the international circles. A second reason would be the rising Iranian capability to influence Shia communities in a number of Arab countries, which are resistant to Arab Spring.

Turkish attitude toward the Iranian position in regional politics would be in association with Ankara’s overall views on regional transformation. Turkey supports the societal demands of people, favors regional stability and aims to ease sectarian tension. Turkey would welcome policies in this line of thought, and raise objection to those policies that may be harmful to its objectives. A similar domestic orientation and shared perspective in regional issues would certainly contribute to a better understanding of policy perspectives. However, it does not mean an end of tension in bilateral relations. A certain level of tension, though substantially lesser in this scenario, is likely to persist if one considers the comprehensive and diversified nature of Turkish-Iranian relations.

Conclusion
The Arab Spring poses a fundamental challenge to both Turkey and Iran. These two countries are influential regional actors, which would like to have lasting impact on the status quo and play determinant roles at time of structural change in their region. Turkish-Iranian relations are important in terms of the structure of regional order. Turkey and Iran have always had a certain degree of tension in bilateral relations and regional issues. The rise of recent tension due to different views on Syria resembles the cyclical turns in the relations in earlier decades.

The difference in the current tension is the fact that both administrations face pressure to change their domestic landscape in order to pursue a more regional role. The Turkish government initiated a peace process to solve the Kurdish problem at home, indicating a clear change of mindset towards regional policies. Turkish politicians have a new perspective that they cannot play an order-creating role in their neighborhood if they do not solve their own problems at home. Iranian administration blocks the pressure of change and raises firewalls inside and outside Iran. The dynamic of change in the region is the collective consciousness of solidarity for good governance, universal rights and freedom.

A new political community is emerging in the Middle East and North Africa. Turkey and Iran are two possible leading countries of the new regional structure. The political elites face a process of rethinking and renegotiation at home and a recalibration of foreign
policies. The attitudes may change depending on the calculations in this process. There are a number of possible scenarios of Turkish-Iranian relations. No matter which scenario prevails in the bilateral relations, there will be strong implications for the regional political structure. There is a chance for constructive involvement in shaping the regional order, which faces strong transformative impact of the Arab Spring. Iran and Turkey are not immune to the new forces of change in political thinking and policy priorities just as the rest of region. Their difference is the fact that they have the capabilities to influence the ethical framework and geopolitical alignments of the region. They sit on the regional political and sectarian fault lines with abilities to ease tensions originating from them. This is a difficult time for policy makers in Iran and Turkey with a responsibility not only to their own people but also to the wider region. It is a matter of time to see how they will shape their bilateral relations with a long lasting impact on regional politics.

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2) This part is a summary of an extensive discussion on the same issue in my previous paper. See, Bülent Aras, (2013), ‘Turkey and Iran: Facing Arab Spring,’ GMF On Turkey (March).

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