

Making Sense of Turkish-EU Relations in the Aftermath of the Arab Spring

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About the Author



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Abstract

Both the EU's recognition of the importance of its value system and Turkey's rediscovery of its European component in its foreign policy identity have occurred during a period of radical transformation in the Mediterranean region. The Arab Spring has resulted in a process of renegotiation over territory, identity and governance which has eventually fostered the idea of a new regional political community. The EU is in an advantageous position now if it truly wants to build a political community eastwards and southwards. One logical move would be a renegotiation in the EU over Turkey's role in a new vision for the future of the EU. Turkey's European identity and policy style will continue to shape its own neighbourhood policy as it is at the centre of a new geopolitical thinking. Ankara sees itself as having an order-instituting role in its changing neighbourhood and is in a process of recalibrating its policies in this direction. The Turkish and EU models complement each other, and there is no possibility for any other model to compete with these perspectives in the foreseeable future.

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Brussels and Ankara were caught unprepared for the changes in their neighbourhood resulting from the popular uprisings in the Arab world. Equally unexpected was the long-term impact these changes have already had on the course of relations between Turkey and the EU. New dynamics are emerging which are creating a strong imperative for joint action to deal with common challenges in the post-Arab Spring political landscape. Turkey's active response has once again shifted the balance to the Western component of its foreign policy identity and thus represents a strong complementary position to the EU's. There is now a chance of refreshing Turkish-EU relations in the face of shared challenges arising from the Arab Spring.

Such a fresh approach requires an analysis of the role Europe has played in the genesis of Turkey's foreign policy. This is provided in the first section of this paper and is followed by an assessment of the Arab Spring as a political earthquake with implications beyond the immediate geographic neighbourhood, as well as of the current policies of Turkey and the EU in the region. The last section is devoted to a discussion of future courses of joint action by the EU and Turkey *vis-à-vis* the challenges and opportunities in the new political atmosphere of the post-Arab Spring era.

The EU/rope's Place in Turkey's Foreign Policy

For the last decade, Turkey has developed a new foreign policy which represents a considerable degree of discontinuity with its foreign policies in the former era. This is, first and foremost, the result of a transformation in the domestic landscape, but also of a new regional and international environment. The new geopolitical thinking is rooted in a self-confidence and a perception of Turkey as a country with multiple identities in

terms of regional belonging, with Turkey's European identity at the centre in historical and geographical terms. The intellectual architect of this perspective, Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoğlu, argues that "Turkey can generate new theses and find solutions in the Eastern platforms with a confident claim to its oriental identity. It can discuss the future of Europe in Western venues with its European perspective."¹

Turkey's ties to Europe go back to the interaction of the Ottoman state with its counterparts in Europe for more than 300 years. The critical period was the Ottoman state's transformation as a result of the European international environment in the second half of the 19th century,² an environment that was replicated after a short delay in the Ottoman state. The 1648 Westphalian order found its reflection in the Köprülü reforms, and the 1815 Congress of Vienna and the Napoleonic Wars led to the Imperial Edict of Reorganization (*Tanzimat*) in the Ottoman state. There was also a strong connection between the 1856 Paris Congress and the Imperial Edict of Reformation (*Islahat*). This interaction and connection occurred mainly in the areas of reforming domestic structures and foreign policy orientation.



The systemic change in Ottoman diplomacy came as a result of an international environment that forced the Ottoman state to be a part of the European order, instead of its previous role of challenging it.³ This was a critical period as the Ottoman state moved from reclaiming the empire to adopting a new survival strategy within the new state system in Europe. It was also the start of a tension in Turkish diplomacy as it aimed to reconcile its role in its cultural and historical hinterlands with the requirements of being part of the European order. According to Davutoğlu, this tension was reproduced in different contexts, but the essence was not substantially different.⁴

Turkey's Europeanization did not take shape only in terms of a harmonization of its foreign policy. There was a close connection

between the international situation and domestic political reforms. This has been an element of continuity, and changes in the international environment have led to new discussions for reforming the state apparatus and attempts to restructure Turkey.⁵ Turkey's EU process is an example of this, since it exemplifies how the EU is more than a foreign policy issue and has its expression in domestic political reforms and changes in state structure.

In this line of reasoning, Turkey has a well-established place in European history and its political, economic and social modernization has been guided by European-oriented ideas. The influence of the major transformations and developments in Europe on the late Ottoman elites and the founding fathers of modern Turkey is obvious as it shaped their revolutionary idea to create a modern nation-state. From Davutoğlu's perspective, Turkey is an integral part of Europe, and the next step in

The historical connection between European and Ottoman/Turkish history has left a permanent European trace in the style and preferences of Turkish foreign policy.

Turkey's transformation and modernization is its membership in the EU.⁶

The new geopolitical thinking has its own interpretation of Europe and the EU, and Turkey's place within this wider context.

Turkey is a European actor, and the EU is a project

developed within this geography in recent history. In this view, the EU's hesitancy to accept Turkey as a full member and the problems in the membership process have nothing to do with Turkey being an integral part of Europe, but is to a large extent due to the current political atmosphere and lack of vision in the EU leadership. Davutoğlu suggests a more dynamic and functional framework of relations with the EU, which will make Turkey a full member in due course and contribute to the EU's transformation into a more effective actor in world politics.⁷ He argues that Turkey offers something unique to the EU as it could give it an enlarged geopolitical imagination and staging, which will allow the EU to be a global player by consolidating Europe's multicultural characteristics and providing access to Asia.⁸ Turkish

policy makers' warm welcome of the establishment of a High Representative for foreign policy as a significant development for the EU's global role is a reflection of this perspective.⁹ Having a EU High Representative has increased the hope that the EU may assume a global role in world politics by organizing the capabilities of the member states and its institutional strength. Turkey's new geopolitical thinking also helps to engage in the future developments of the EU.

One needs to understand the role and impact of Europe in the genesis of Turkish foreign policy to make sense of Turkish policy makers' rediscovery of the West in certain periods. The same is also valid for not getting lost in the discussions of axis shifts in Turkish foreign policy. European modernity is an intrinsic character of Turkish politics. The historical connection between European and Ottoman/Turkish history has left a permanent European trace in the style and preferences of Turkish foreign policy. Following this line of reasoning, I underline that there is a limit to Turkey's distancing from the West, in particular at times of regional or systemic crisis that force Turkish policy makers to rethink the ethical and practical dimensions of Turkish foreign policy. The end of the Cold War and September 11 were previous tectonic shifts in the international order that made Turkey re-evaluate its policies in regional and international terms. The Arab Spring is the most recent shift that has had a transformative impact on Turkey, and has led Turkish foreign policy makers to rediscover the West in foreign policy at a time of critical change in its neighbourhood. The next section will discuss the impact of the Arab Spring in regional and international terms, and the relevance of the popular uprisings to Turkey and the EU.



The Impact of the Arab Spring

The Arab Spring has introduced ideas and agents that have transcended the domestic and international divide in a way

unseen in recent history. The Arab Spring is part of a larger transformation, which is not likely to end without a re-orientation of the political landscapes of the countries in the Middle East. It is, in this sense, a serious blow to the *status quo* in the Middle East, which was already outdated in a changing international environment. The inward-oriented regimes, which were resistant to international influences, have been removed, their places being taken by new variants of outward-looking regimes coming to power on a wave of calls for honour, liberty, freedom and good governance. The Arab Spring also challenged the survival strategies of authoritarian rule through regional and international balance-of-power strategies and the emulation of Asian developmental models. Since a critical mass of countries in the region has moved toward a new thinking of appreciating international norms and

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values, the region will likely be more welcoming to the imperatives of domestic and regional transformation in the short-to-medium run.

The ideas that brought the Arab youth to the street did not emanate from the ideas of well-known Islamist thinkers but from their genuine search

for universal standards of honour, dignity and freedom. This does not mean that these Islamist writers did not have an impact on earlier generations, but they have not been a source of inspiration for the popular uprisings in the Arab world.¹⁰ These new dynamics and value systems are the ideational source of the transformation and likely to persist in the Middle East. The long-lasting stability in the region under the coercive design of authoritarian rulers will be replaced by a new balance in the region, with a renewed pattern of relationships with the outside world.

The international responses to the Arab Spring have also reignited the discussion on the ethical framework of the emerging international system. The so-called rising powers have adopted an isolationist or non-interventionist attitude toward the Arab Spring while trying to preserve their economic interests in the

region. Considering the disappointment of the masses with the West as it pursued long-term relations with the former authoritarian rulers in the Arab Spring countries, the behavior of the rising powers seems to perpetuate this pattern and has thus underlined the crisis of the international system; there seems to be no foreseeable prospect of change in the system with their inputs. In contrast, the Arab Spring is a possible tectonic shift in the international system as it touches upon this very fault-line.

Turkey's approach and rhetoric, in contrast, have differed from other newly rising states, specifically regarding the situation in Syria. China, Russia, India and Brazil, among others, have all expressed a certain level of distance from Turkish policy, if not outright opposition. Their non-interventionist and Western-sceptical attitudes depart from the perspective Turkish policy makers see as a basis for a new international order. As Kardaş argues: "Turkey conducts its Syria policy very much on the liberal principles that underpin the normative bases of the international order. More importantly, this development underscored not only Turkey's similarity to Western values but also its dissimilarity from potential contenders to the global order."¹¹

Turkey's geopolitical mindset was quick to adapt to the changing dynamics and position itself in a central role by contributing to the transformation in this region.

Coming back to the regional level, the Arab Spring, to a considerable extent, is a Mediterranean issue. The EU is the main stakeholder in the region considering the limited US role with its primary perspective on Israeli security and continuing attempt to save the alliance with Egypt. The EU's treatment of the Mediterranean has not been promising insofar as it continues to prioritize security, political and economic interests, let alone thinking of a geographical and historical continuity with its immediate neighbourhood. The EU should recognize that it has a certain stake in the success of the transformation in the Arab countries. As Scott underlines, the EU's neighbourhood policies mainly target the establishment of a political community.¹² In the end, the EU's treatment of its neighbouring regions has not produced much in the political, economic and security realms.

As one may witness from the range of engagements from the Mediterranean Dialogue to the Eastern Partnership, the EU's predetermined perspectives and policies have fallen short of creating a framework of dialogue and cooperation. Hollis questions the absence of the EU in the Arab Spring despite all these regional engagements and the EU's policies on the Middle East.¹³

The new regional realities in the post-Arab Spring environment have caught Turkish policy makers as unprepared as their European counterparts. However, Turkey's geopolitical mindset was quick to adapt to the changing dynamics and position itself in a central role by contributing to the transformation in this region. As an indicator of its active policy, Davutoğlu has visited Egypt ten times since 2011. Turkey can leverage its own political stability, economic development and soft power diplomacy, and



Turkey's popularity among the new political elites and the people is high and on the rise. This is advantageous for Europe, since the "MENA [Middle East and North Africa] region needs a 'native' stakeholder to soften ethnic, religious and sectarian cleavages, especially between Shias and Sunnis."¹⁴ This is a role for Turkey, and it has an additional potential of

bridging the emotional and material gap between the EU and the southern neighbourhood which had emerged from Europe's past negligence and mistakes in the region.

Turkey and the EU: Towards Progressive Geopolitics

The Arab Spring represents a chance to reclaim Western values in a way that accommodates differences and offers emancipation from oppression in a formerly authoritarian region. Before the Arab Spring, the so-called Asian model of development posed a serious challenge to the liberal European model in these countries. The comparative advantage of the Chinese model was its high rate of development at times of economic crisis in

Europe and its success in creating millions of jobs in light of high unemployment rates in Europe. It is within this framework that the rise of the Global South has been interpreted in reference to declining EU and US economic power and, to a lesser extent, weakening political influence.

The popular uprisings have set an opposite trend to the expansion of the Asian developmental model in the wider Middle East, putting the ethical framework of this model on the defence. Perthes argues that “Europe’s interest in the success of these transformations is hardly smaller than it was 20 years ago in Eastern Europe.”¹⁵ There is a historic opportunity for the EU to undertake a role of appreciating and supporting popular demands for universal rights and good governance in a critical neighbourhood. The EU has a chance to regain the moral high ground in international politics through a new response to the uprisings on the Arab street.

The EU’s relations with the Global South are more complicated than the US’s for several reasons, most importantly the different perspectives of the member states regarding the rising powers. These diverse relations challenge multilateralism, to which the EU has committed as a guiding principle in its European Security Strategy. The EU used to have different levels of involvement in multilateral organizations. The challenging task has been to expand this multilateralism through a new framework of relations with the rising powers at a time when it has been losing legitimacy and credibility in a changing international system. The Arab Spring provides the EU with an opportunity for a new start in relations with the Global South. The EU’s active involvement with the new regimes and actors in the Mediterranean and the Middle East would give it new legitimacy and refresh its own confidence in its relations with the Global South. The EU’s multilateralism was designed as a pragmatic strategy to foster its international role despite its lack of great power capabilities. Now that there has been a renewed attention to the EU’s value system in the form of a search for universal rights and good governance in the post-Arab Spring political environment, the EU has a chance to regain parts of its soft power.

The political uprisings are an indigenous development that has occurred without international engagements. The new proud

political elites will be highly selective in their early international dealings. To some extent, they may even have a tendency to refuse contributions from abroad. However, they will certainly do better with outside support. The EU, on the one hand, has a portfolio of well-prepared suggestions, ranging from labour laws to minority rights, and resources for providing incentives for improvements on a wide range of vital areas. Turkey, on the other hand, has already started to contribute to the internal transformation of these states. It is logical that Turkey and the EU should cooperate in order to prevent a delivery gap, which would only delay the required assistance to the new governments in the post-Arab Spring countries.

A promising development is the emergence of a regional political community under the transformative impact of the Arab Spring. The characteristics of this political community

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are that political rights and freedoms are given priority, and that there is an attempt to reconcile authentic values with universal forms of government and legitimate representation. This mirrors the EU's proclaimed foreign policy agenda of the past two

decades in its surrounding regions. The EU's relations with this political community will depend on the EU's commitment to and involvement in its formation. The transformation processes these countries are currently passing through are challenging and the EU has the resources and capabilities to contribute to smoother transitions in its southern neighbourhood. Turkey's new geopolitical orientation offers a strategic asset to the EU as Turkey has extensive reach and access to the new political elites and people in this region. Combined with the EU's connection to civil society, Turkey and the EU would have access to a large audience and ensure that the uprisings result in smooth democratic transitions. Furthermore, Turkey itself is an example for the new administrations which shows that the demands for good governance may lead to better political and economic environments in their countries.

Such EU-Turkey cooperation is not only necessary due to the Arab Spring, but the very same event has also made it more likely. Ankara has discovered the limitations of distancing itself from the West when facing the Arab Spring. Turkey's commitment to the EU will continue since being European is part of Turkey's broader identity. The EU's cooperation and coordination with Turkey would offer a substantial contribution to the regional transformation and secure a formative place for Brussels in the future of this new political community.

Conclusion

Both the EU's recognition of the importance of its value system and Turkey's rediscovery of its European component in its foreign policy identity have occurred during a period of radical transformation in the Mediterranean region. The Arab Spring has resulted in a process of renegotiation over territory, identity and governance which has eventually fostered the idea of a new regional political community, which has prepared the ground for a redefinition of "wider Europe". This is indeed an opportunity for a long-lasting constructive involvement of the EU in its southern neighbourhood. Hollis argues that what the EU has done so far has not been encouraging for the Arab Spring countries since Brussels has acted against its own values for the sake of political, economic and security interests and invested in the *status quo* in this geography.¹⁶ This is a correct analysis when examining EU policies and its regional engagement. But was the EU alone in treating this region with a double standard? Obviously not. Although an assessment of past policies do not present a good picture, from a policy oriented perspective, the EU still may play a constructive role with a future oriented vision.

The EU needs to shift to a new geopolitical mindset in order to put an end to its former short-sighted policies in the region.

The EU needs to shift to a new geopolitical mindset in order to put an end to its former short-sighted policies in the region. The political earthquake in the Mediterranean has created an opportunity for an enlarged European political community to

the east and the south. Brussels should have a future vision for this new political community. Such a community would make sense only if it has clearly determined values combined with a fuzzy territorial understanding. The popular uprisings, the emergence of new leaders and mass political participation are all signs of the emergence of a robust civilian sphere and a new sense of regional solidarity. It is time to combine Islamic philosopher Ibn Khaldun's *ta'asub*, the collective conscience of solidarity based on universal values and good governance, and the EU's sense of community to form a wider political community.

The crucial issue is to be aware of the ongoing radical transformation, which will go beyond the current geographic reach of the Arab Spring, and also recognize that the EU is in an advantageous position if it truly wants to build a political community



eastwards and southwards. One logical move would be a renegotiation in the EU over Turkey's role in a new vision for the future of the EU. Turkey's European identity and policy style will continue to shape its own neighbourhood policy as it is at the centre of a new geopolitical thinking. Ankara sees itself as having an order-instituting role in its changing

neighbourhood and is in a process of recalibrating its policies in this direction. The Turkish and EU models complement each other, and there is no possibility for any other model to compete with these perspectives in the foreseeable future. For anyone who wants the EU to have a greater role in regional and international politics, the critical group whose calculations should change is European policy makers. They should recognize the potential of the emerging political community in the south, value Turkey's new geopolitical mindset, and have a future vision of a Europe that incorporates these assets. The implications of such a global player would be substantial for two premises of the international system: its ethical structure and the nature of multilateralism. Time will tell if policy makers will grasp this opportunity for progressive geopolitics in the Mediterranean and beyond.

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About SAM

Center for Strategic Research of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey (SAM) is a think-tank and a research center which is chartered by law and has been active since May 1995. SAM was established as a consultative body to provide Turkish Foreign Policy decision makers with scholarly and scientific assessments of relevant issues, and reviews Turkish foreign policy with a futuristic perspective.

SAM conducts research, organizes scholarly events relevant to the ever expanding spectrum of Turkish Foreign Policy in cooperation with both Turkish and foreign academicians, its counterparts from around the world as well as various universities and government agencies. SAM provides consultancy to the foreign ministry departments as well as some other state institutions in foreign policy issues while also establishing regional think-tank networks.

In addition to its role of generating up-to-date information, reliable data and insightful analysis as a think-tank, SAM functions as a forum for candid debate and discussion for anyone who is interested in both local and global foreign policy issues. Increasingly, SAM has become a center of attraction since it successfully brings scholars and policy makers together for exchange of ideas in panels, in-house meetings, seminars and training programs for young diplomats.

SAM has a widening range of publications. Along with its traditional publication, Perceptions, which is a quarterly English language journal that hosts distinguished Turkish and international scholars within its pages, SAM recently initiated Vision Papers which expresses the views of H.E. Prof. Dr. Ahmet Davutođlu, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey, and SAM Papers that covers the current debates of foreign policy by various scholars.

With its commitment to contribution to the body of knowledge and constructive debate particularly in Turkish Foreign Policy, SAM will continue to serve as an indispensable think-tank and research center given its role promoting interaction and mutual benefits among the MFA, NGOs, other think-tanks and the broader scientific community and hence strengthen the human and intellectual capital of Turkey.