

The 'Arab Spring' and the Rise of the 2.0 Version of Turkey's 'zero problems with neighbors' Policy

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Abstract

This brief seeks to explain the challenges facing Turkey's 'zero problems with neighbors' policy in the context of the developments associated with the 'Arab Spring.' How Turkey's foreign policy understanding will be affected by the tumultuous changes in the region, and how Turkey should cope with these changes require urgent answers. The main argument of the brief is that besides bringing challenges and risks, the recent upheavals in the Middle East simultaneously offer Turkey the opportunity to elevate its existing 'zpw'n' policy to a much higher level, the 2.0. version, in which normative and humanitarian considerations are likely to become more salient. Put another way, the years ahead will witness a 'democratic touch' in Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East, reflecting the spirit of Turkey's liberal democratization process already underway at home.

The 'Arab Spring' and the Rise of the 2.0 Version of Turkey's 'zero problems with neighbors' Policy

Tarık Oğuzlu

Turkey's 'zero problems with neighbors' policy (hereafter 'zpwn') has recently come under strong challenges in the context of the developments associated with the 'Arab Spring.' Many commentators have rushed to the conclusion that this policy will be difficult to pursue, as Turkey's relations with Syria, Iran and Israel have all soured somewhat during this period. The questions of how Turkey's foreign policy understanding will be affected by the tumultuous changes in the region, and how Turkey should cope with these changes require urgent answers.

This policy brief seeks to answer these questions by putting forward the argument that besides bringing challenges and risks, the recent upheavals in the Middle East simultaneously offer Turkey the opportunity to elevate its existing 'zpwn' policy to a much higher level, let's call it the 2.0. version, in which normative and humanitarian considerations are likely to become more salient. Put another way, the years ahead will witness a 'democratic touch' in Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East, reflecting the spirit of Turkey's liberal democratization process already underway at home.

The Background

When the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) came to power in late 2002, Turkey was in the midst of economic and political crises. Neither a prospering economy nor a significant level of liberal-democracy at home convinced Turkey's western partners that Turkey should be accepted as part of the West. At the

same time, the US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq transformed the Middle East into an ever more chaotic and instable region. Turkey was exposed to emerging security challenges in the wake of the regime change in Iraq, most notably the rising possibility of an independent Kurdish state, the PKK's increasing ability to use Northern Iraq as a sanctuary, and Iran's growing strategic influence across the entire region. Hence, the adoption of the 1.0. version of the 'zpwn' policy.¹

This policy aimed to create a new psychology at home for a new neighboring policy and minimize spill-over effect of regional problems to Turkey in its essence. Turkey's neighborhood was redefined as an area of opportunity and responsibility. In addition, this policy also helped to mitigate the negative consequences of the increasing instability in the region on Turkey's democratic consolidation, economic development, and territorial sovereignty by encouraging interdependent relations with neighboring countries.² Turkey's growing economic needs were decisive in this context. Attracting regional investors and guaranteeing market access to Turkish products shaped the direction of Turkish foreign policy practices to a significant extent. Turkey gradually evolved into a 'trading state,' leaving behind the old 'military state' identity.³ The internal character of regimes in the region did not constitute an obstacle to developing interdependent economic relations with them. However, the expectation was that the regional countries, i.e. Syria, would likely go through an internal transformation process as it improved relations with Turkey and gradually became reintegrated into the international system as a responsible stakeholder.

The questions of how Turkey's foreign policy understanding will be affected by the tumultuous changes in the region, and how Turkey should cope with these changes require urgent answers.

Turkey's Early Reactions to the Uprisings across the Region

Like many other regional and non-regional actors, Turkey was caught off guard when the revolts first began in Tunisia and then spread to Egypt and other countries. Turkey's reactions to the revolts in Tunisia and Egypt on the one hand, and Libya and Syria on the other appear to be different from each other. Turkish policy makers considered this situation as an opportunity to adopt a 'pro-democracy' approach toward these countries. Turkey's new policy line was a delicate one considering the fact that Ankara had been developing closer economic and political relations for some time with those countries, where sizeable numbers of Turkish people happened to live.

In Libya it was initially difficult for Turkey to adopt the idea that the international community should get involved in Libya's internal affairs to help stop the atrocities committed by Qaddafi's loyalists. As the stalemate continued and the humanitarian costs of the attacks perpetrated by Qaddafi's henchmen increased, Turkey came much closer to the idea that NATO should play a more decisive role in the implementation of an international military operation. Later, Turkey participated to NATO-led operations (provided that Turkey's military contributions would be limited to providing humanitarian aid and overseeing implementation of the economic and military embargo put on Qaddafi's forces), while at the same time increasing contact with the representatives of the rebel forces, the Transitional National Council, based in Benghazi.

As for Syria, Turkey's main concern at the very beginning of the events was to make sure that Syria's internal crisis would not affect Turkey-Syria relations negatively. On the one hand, appearing too supportive of Assad might have cost Turkey a critical role to play in a post-Assad era, whereas on the other hand siding with

the opposition and incessantly pushing Assad for further reforms might have backfired were Assad to gain the upper hand.

Given such concerns, Turkey's initial reaction to the developments in Syria was 'prudent optimism' in the sense that it opted for an approach of engagement for creating a reform agenda. Turkey first preferred to give a chance to the incumbent Assad regime in the hope that Damascus would sooner or later meet the demands of the protestors if it wanted to survive. Drawing on the lessons learned in Iraq, Turkish rulers also cautioned that any outside military intervention in Syria might have negative consequences on regional peace and stability.⁴

Turkey's early reactions appear to have been shaped by the following assumptions: First, Ankara assumed that Assad still has a chance for a peaceful transformation at the initial stage despite the unbalanced nature of the relationship between the 'rulers' and the 'ruled.' Second, Ankara held that Assad had some liberal instincts and would be able to steer his country out of its authoritarian character during a long-term 'softening' process. That Assad had lived in the West for a long time and had promised a better future for his people when he became president back in 2000, appears to have led Turkey, among other countries, to adopt a much milder rhetoric than might otherwise have been warranted.⁵ Third, Turkish rulers seem to have believed that the close personal relations they had developed with Assad over the years would give them a psychological advantage as they counseled him to set in motion a reform process to heed the people's demands. However, as the events unfolded, it became increasingly clear that Assad was surrounded by more hawkish figures than himself who would dare risking everything to ensure the continuation of Baath rule in the country.

Turkey's growing engagement in the Middle East had also been informed by the inability of Arab countries, most notably Egypt, Syria and Iraq, to play leadership roles.

The rise of the 2.0. version of the ‘zpw’n’ approach

Turkey’s approach to the crisis in Syria has gradually become more ‘liberal, assertive, normative and humanitarian.’ First, the most imminent cause of this transformation appears to have been the continuing influx of Syrian people into Turkey and the kind of tragedy this has engendered. Accepting numerous Syrians has been a risky move on Turkey’s part, given Assad’s view of those refugees as insurgents, though their numbers are limited to date. Another risk would arise if Syria’s Kurds, who live alongside the border with Turkey, were to follow suit and thus put additional pressure on Turkey’s own Kurdish problem.⁶



Second, the strengthening of Turkey’s liberal democratic transformation at home since late 1990s seems to have increasingly led Turkish leaders to pay more attention to democracy in neighboring countries.⁷ As the crisis deteriorated in Syria, Turkish leaders made it clear that Turkey desires to see a more democratic, representative and plural order take root in the country. Only

such a course, Turkish statesmen have argued, could satisfy the protesters and lend credence to the legitimacy of the system left over from the Assad regime.⁸ In August 2011, Turkey’s Foreign Minister paid an official visit to Damascus to urge Assad once again to begin a long-term and credible democratization process without delay. However, when it became clear that Assad had no intention of meeting the people’s demands, Turkey’s hopes were dashed. Ankara’s official position today is that Turkey has no confidence in Assad.⁹ Turkey has also hosted several meetings of the Syrian opposition forces and encouraged them to organize themselves into a coherent entity. It is also worth mentioning that Turkey’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ahmet Davutoğlu, stated

that he would talk with the representatives of the opposition forces in Syria provided that they formed a single coherent entity. This talk between Davutoğlu and the members of the Syrian National Council took place in the mid of October.¹⁰

Noteworthy in this context is not that Turkish leaders have begun to call for more democracy; they have been doing that over the last decade on numerous occasions.¹¹ What is remarkable is that while Turkey adopted a liberal and humanitarian discourse, many other rising powers, such as Russia, China and Iran, have held strong reservations out of pragmatic concerns regarding the international isolation of Assad's regime through economic and military means.

Unlike other rising powers, Turkey seems to be more in tune with the changing notions of international legitimacy according to which legitimacy of rulers should first and foremost stem from their ability to meet the fundamental needs of their people and 'rulers' should be accountable to the 'ruled'. When there are clear breaches of human rights and rulers perpetuate them by their policies, the international community might get involved.¹² Despite the risk that this principle might be used instrumentally by western powers to masquerade selfish policies in other locations, from a Turkish perspective respecting the principle of non-interference with internal affairs of other states should not offer their rulers a license to kill their citizens.¹³

Third, Turkey's growing power capabilities measured in terms of hard (military and economic), and soft (regime character and the attractiveness of values) dimensions seem to have resulted in a more self-confident Turkey that now defines its national interests from a much broader perspective than has been the case in the past. As Turkey has grown in power over the last decade, it has simultaneously developed a much stronger interest in how things are run in the Middle East. In this sense, there is continuity between the 1.0. and 2.0. versions of the 'zpwn' policy. However, Turkey's sensitivities over the internal affairs of its neighbors have

increased as they have begun to affect Turkey's domestic and foreign policy interests more profoundly during the course of the developments associated with the 'Arab Spring.' The speech Prime Minister Erdoğan delivered after his party won the 2011 parliamentary elections overwhelmingly demonstrates this. In his speech, Erdoğan underlined that not only the Turkish people who voted for his party but also the people of neighboring countries would benefit from the AKP's victory.¹⁴

Fourth, the 2.0 version of the 'zpwn' policy seems also to have been influenced by the emerging realities in the Middle East.

The strengthening of Turkey's liberal democratic transformation at home seems to have led Turkish leaders to pay more attention to democracy in neighboring countries.

Apart from a number of the Gulf states, it is now going to be more difficult for regimes in the region to derive their legitimacy from repressive state institutions, dynastic claims, external protection, abundance of natural resources and theocratic

ideologies. In the midst of the democratic wave, the countries which have already proven themselves to be functioning democracies will likely appear as 'sources of inspiration.' Turkey's success in this regard will increasingly originate from the demonstrative impact of its advantages compared to other important actors in the region, such as Egypt and Iran. It seems that Iran's regional influence as well as the appeal of the so-called Iranian model will likely experience a negative turn, as more democratic regimes come to power in predominantly Sunni countries.

Fifth, the new version of the zero problems with neighbors has something to do with Turkey's relations with western actors as well. If Turkey helps create a particular environment in the Middle East in which liberal democracy can take root, this will not only bolster its hard and soft power capabilities but also ameliorate its tarnished relations with the West, most notably the

European Union. Contrary to the argument that there has been a continuing 'shift of axis' in Turkish foreign policy away from the west toward the east, the adoption of the 2.0. version of the 'zpw'n' policy should be seen as an indication of Turkey's ability to reconcile its widening foreign policy with its Euro-Atlantic orientation.¹⁵ As a case in point, Turkey's current position on Syria is nearly identical with those of the United States and the European Union.¹⁶

Additional evidence of Turkey's Europeanization is the resemblance between Turkey's actions in the context of the 2.0. version of 'zpw'n' policy and the European Union's neighborhood policies. Similar to the discourse adopted by the EU that candidate states might one day join the EU and share the security and economic benefits of the EU integration process, provided that they successfully fulfill the membership criteria, Turkey is now applying the same mentality vis-à-vis Syria and other countries in the region. The discourse adopted by Turkish statesmen suggests that Turkey's neighbors need to transform in a way to respond to the societal demands and, most importantly, search for good governance if they want to earn Turkey's friendship and cooperation. This is not to say that Turkey projects its values onto others from a security prism. Rather, Turkish statesmen would increasingly find it morally wrong to develop relations with neighbors unless the latter were to transform themselves in the image of the norms and principles that appear to have been informing Turkey's internal transformation for so long. The transformative dimension of Turkey's foreign policy practices in the Middle East is very much European and this might further bring Turkey and the EU closer to each other.



Challenges and the way ahead

Even though the emergence of the Arab Spring seems to have facilitated the adoption of the 2.0. version of the 'zpwn' policy, this does not mean this foreign policy stance will be exempt from challenges and risks. The first challenge to mention in this context is that Turkish statesmen might increasingly find it difficult to strike an appropriate balance between the *Realpolitik* foreign policy mentality that favors developing strategic and economic cooperation with regimes irrespective of their internal characteristics and the moral politics foreign policy vision that sees Turkey's role in the region as the beacon and promoter of liberal democratic transformation.

The second challenge confronting Turkish leaders at this juncture, which is also very much related to the first, is that unless Turkey resolves its decades-long 'Kurdish problem' in a satisfactory manner, the possibility of the 2.0. version of the 'zpwn' policy being received warmly in the region will remain low. Stated somewhat differently, if Turkey can successfully resolve its own Kurdish problem to the satisfaction of its people, it could begin to act in a more assertive, self-confident and liberal manner in its region, as the 2.0. version of the 'zpwn' policy foresees. Recent history has shown that when Turkish leaders' attention is primarily focused on internal transformation, they tended to adopt a foreign policy strategy with a view to helping lessen the negative consequences of external developments on internal developments. Similarly, Turkey's maneuvering capability in the region, as well as its ability to influence the course of the developments to the south, will be constrained by the prolongation of the Kurdish issue at home, irrespective of the fact that the AK Party secured a third consecutive landslide victory in the latest parliamentary elections held in June 2012.

Third, Turkey's maneuvering capability in the region, to a certain degree, will depend on developing a partnership with Egypt to the west and developing a balanced relationship with Iran to

the east. Egypt's new government orchestrated the latest intra-Palestinian deal between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority based in the West Bank exemplifies the potential role this country may play in the region. Besides, Iran's response to the crisis in Syria, and possibly other places, in the name of preserving its pre-Arab Spring influence, might obstruct Turkey's ability to lead the liberal-democratic transformations in the region.

The fourth challenge, very much following on the logic of the previous one, is that the countries in the Middle East might feel uneasy about Turkey's growing emphasis on humanitarian concerns and the democracy deficit, and subsequently join forces in such a way as to counter-balance Turkey. Putting too much stress on moral issues and pursuing an ideational foreign policy could potentially backfire if Turkey's neighbors in the Middle East continue to read regional developments from a *Realpolitik* perspective and engage in defensive strategies vis-à-vis Turkey.

Turkey's neighbors need to transform in a liberal-democratic fashion if they want to earn Turkey's friendship and cooperation.

Fifth, Turkey's relations with Israel might be negatively affected by the rise of a new version of the 'zpwn' policy, as these two countries appear to have interpreted the Arab Spring differently. It appears that Turkey is now acting as a 'revisionist/aspirant' power whereas Israel remains a 'supporter of the status quo.' While Turkish rulers have mainly drawn positive lessons from recent events and concluded that Turkey's power of attraction stands to radically increase in the post-Arab Spring era, Israeli leaders have adopted a negative stance and concluded that Israel's siege mentality would likely ossify if popular uprisings across the region, most importantly in Egypt and Syria, brought anti-Israeli circles to power, notably the so-called 'Islamists.'

Similarly, while Turkey argues for a new order based on the active agency and responsibility of regional actors and thinks that

Israel's security can only be achieved through the normalization of relations with its 'enemies,' Israel seems very much in favor of the idea that the United States continue to act as the guardian of Israel's territorial security. In addition, while Turkey sees the declaration of a sovereign Palestinian state inside the United Nations as a way to escape the current stalemate in the peace process, Israel tends to interpret Turkey's active lobbying efforts on behalf of the Palestinians' UN campaign as a particular Turkish move to punish Israel for its intransigence on the 'apology' issue.¹⁷ It is a great irony that Turkey, a country whose western credentials have come under strong challenges in recent years, appears to have taken the lead in the promotion of western-friendly liberal democratic norms in the Middle East, whereas Israel, a country that owes its existence to western powers and has long been seen as the true defender of western security interests in this area, seems to side against this stream.

Finally, the burden on Turkey, as well as other actors in the region, to contribute to the resolution of the Middle Eastern problems will likely increase as the United States has already decided to scale down its military presence in the region and the Israeli-Palestinian peace process seems to be going nowhere.

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Faced with such challenges, Turkish leaders would do well to benefit from Turkey's EU accession process. Simply stated, Turkey should value the continuation of the accession process with the European Union, despite the recent rise in 'Turkey-skeptic' and 'Euro-skeptic' feelings in Europe and Turkey respectively.

For Turkey's liberal democratic messages to be received positively in the Middle East, the accession process with the EU had better continue. After all, one of the most significant sources of Turkey's rising 'power of attraction' in its neighborhood is Turkey's

transformation in tandem with the EU accession process and Turkey's prospective membership in the EU. Majorities in Middle Eastern countries appear to take a 'Europeanizing' Turkey as a more legitimate source of inspiration than a Turkey that turns its face away from Europe and boasts of its own growing power capabilities. In this sense, Turkey had better lead by example for contributing to the positive developments in the region. What is, however, unthinkable is that Turkish leaders could remain indifferent to the internal characteristics of states with which Turkey would like to cooperate.

Endnotes

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- 11 For example see Abdullah Gul's speech delivered on the occasion of International Conference of Islamic Civil Society Organizations, In Search of a New Vision in a Changing World, held on 1 May 2005 in Istanbul, at <http://nawaat.org/portail/2005/05/29/the-need-for-reform-in-the-islamic-world-and-the-role-of-civil-society/> [last visited 10 January 2012].
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- 13 "Esad İdrakten Yoksun", *Yeni Safak*, 1 December 2011.
- 14 For the speech, <http://www.akparti.org.tr/site/haberler/basbakan-erdoganin-12-haziran-gecesi-yaptigi-konusmanin-tam-metni/8520> [last visited 22 December 2011]; Foreign Minister Davutoğlu also mentioned about these points in his speech he delivered on the occasion of the 4th Ambassadors Conference held in Ankara on December 23, 2011.
- 15 Tarık Oğuzlu, "Turkey and Europeanization of Foreign Policy", *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 125, No. 4 (Winter 2010-2011), pp. 657-683.
- 16 Emiliano Alessandri, "Turkey and the West Address the Arab Spring", *German Marshall Fund Analysis*, 8 June 2011.
- 17 Turkey demands a formal apology from the Israeli government concerning the killing of eight Turkish citizens by Israeli soldiers in a raid aboard the Mavi Marmara ship on 31 May 2010. Turkey asks Israel to formally apologize to Turkey, pay compensation to the families of the victims and end the embargo on Gaza. However, Israel refuses to take these actions.

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 will cover 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.