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Bank, André

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## ***Turkey and the Arab Revolt: Rise or Decline in Regional Politics?***

André Bank

On 20 September 2011, at a meeting with U.S. President Barack Obama, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan called once again for an end to the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria. It was not until after the failure of the most recent Turkish mediation initiative on 9 August 2011 that Ankara began to officially call for regime change in Damascus.

### **Analysis**

The Arab revolt has been changing the regional order in the Middle East since the end of 2010 and, furthermore, has influenced the potential of individual states to move up or down the ladder in regional politics. Under the AKP administration of Prime Minister Erdoğan, Turkey presents itself on one hand as a role model for transitioning Arab countries, but on the other hand its regional policy is marked by inconsistencies.

- Turkey's Middle East policy under the AKP is dictated by two main sets of goals, one dealing with economic and trade expansion and the second with soft power generation. But as the first set of goals requires stability and necessitates cooperating with authoritarian regimes, while the second set of goals, manifested in Erdoğan's populist rhetoric, has continued to produce instability, the contradictory nature of those goals was evident even before 2011.
- At the beginning of the Arab revolt, the Turkish government advocated for an end to the Mubarak regime in Egypt. In regards to Libya, however, Ankara conducted itself quite a bit more carefully due to its close economic ties with Libya, the Turkish government distancing itself only over time from Qaddafi.
- Syria represents the biggest political challenge in the region for Turkey. With a two-pronged strategy of making direct offers to Assad while simultaneously courting parts of the opposition, Turkey was able to keep many different communication channels open with the country until August 2011.
- In the big picture, the alleged "skittishness" of Turkey's regional policy could also be viewed as a largely successful series of adaptations to the transformation processes brought about by the Arab revolt. Thanks to this pragmatism and Erdoğan's populism, Turkey will probably occupy a prominent position in the Middle East, at least for a short time.

*Keywords: Turkey, AKP, Middle East, foreign policy, regional order*

## The Rise of the AKP in Turkish Politics

Since the parliamentary elections of November 2002, Turkey has been led by the Justice and Development Party (AKP), conservative Islamist proponents of a free market. The AKP's latest success in the parliamentary elections of 12 June 2011 – in which the party, under the leadership of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, received 49.9 percent of the votes, its most successful turnout thus far – underscores the party's new-found hegemonic position in Turkish politics. The AKP's immense increase in power in the early 2000s accompanied the extensive fall from power of the Turkish military, which had in the two decades since the coup of 1980 to a large extent steered the political fate of the country (Jung 2011).

The growing influence and consolidation of the AKP can be explained, first, by the domestic political liberalizations, which from 2002 to 2005 were clearly made in the context of the prospect of Turkey's accession to the European Union. These liberalizations included extensive reforms that were carried out in various areas such as administrative practices, the justice system, the media, and within civil society organizations. Second, the AKP profited from the strong growth of the Turkish economy, which since 2002 (except for the worst years of the international financial crisis, 2008 and 2009) has achieved between 4 and 10 percent gains per annum and which made Turkey's accession to the G20 possible. Even though the benefits of the economic windfall continue to be distributed very unequally and the income gap between Turkey's rich and its poor has not shrunk under the AKP, Erdoğan and his party were able to gain political capital from the economic boom (Dağdas 2011). Furthermore, under the AKP, a new bourgeoisie, a number of whom are settled far from Istanbul – Turkey's traditional economic center – has gained economic and political influence. Most of these entrepreneurs, sometimes called "Anatolian Tigers," are members of the Independent Industrialists and Businessmen's Association (MÜSİAD).

Third, the AKP's foreign policy reorientation has contributed to its large domestic popularity. Traditionally, Turkish foreign policy has been characterized by a Western orientation deeply anchored in a Kemalist nation-building process. This Western orientation is evidenced by Turkey's membership in NATO (since 1952) as well as its decades-long ambition to join the European

Union. Even though this crux of Turkish foreign policy has so far remained intact throughout the 2000s, and will likely still be prominent in the coming years, a stronger "multidimensionality" (Kramer 2010) and a diversification of alliances outside the West is also characteristic for the "new Turkish foreign policy" under the AKP (Pope 2010). As a leitmotiv, we can apply the strategic "zero problems (with the neighbors)" doctrine preached by Ahmet Davutoğlu, the current foreign minister and previously Erdoğan's chief foreign policy consultant. According to Davutoğlu, instead of a cautious, reactive and from time to time suspicious approach to its regional environment, Turkey should negotiate proactively and look pragmatically for opportunities to solve conflicts and create cooperation. As a junction and a bridge between Western Europe, the Balkans, Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, Central Asia and the Middle East, Turkey might be virtually predestined to have such a foreign policy. The Middle East is the region in which Davutoğlu's doctrine, particularly in the AKP's second term of administration (since 2007), has been most comprehensively effectuated.

## Turkey's Middle East Policy

Within the context of the "zero problems" doctrine, two dominant, transnational features of Turkey's Middle East policy are:

- geo-economic ambitions, economic relationships, and
- the non-material interest in the generation of soft power – in other words, the creation of ideological support for Turkish policy in the Middle East (Altunışık 2008; Pope 2010).

The geo-economic driving forces of Turkey's Middle East policy can be illustrated by the significantly increased volumes of capital expenditures and trade that have occurred under the AKP government, as well as by the diversity of Turkish business partners in the region.

Energy cooperation and especially the availability of reliable and cheap natural gas and oil played an important role in Turkey's relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran. In turn, Turkish companies in Iran were active in the areas of construction and infrastructure. This interweaving of foreign trade policy also explains why the Turk-

ish government – despite differing ideological orientations – welcomed the controversial June 2009 re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, and why Turkey voted against a tightening of the sanctions against Iran that was being called for by Western nations in the U.N. Security Council, in which Turkey had a seat as a non-permanent member in 2009 and 2010.

In Kurdish-dominated northern Iraq, Anatolian companies with close ties to the AKP administration are so financially active that any closing of the border on the part of Turkey would cause substantial economic turbulence in that area, which is controlled by the Kurdistan Democratic Party under Massoud Barzani. Similar to the economic cooperation Turkey developed with Iran was that which it formed with Libya under Muammar Qaddafi: Turkey imported Libyan oil, and Turkish construction, tourism, energy and retail businesses were active in Libya. In each of the years 2008 and 2009, the volume of bilateral trade amounted to nearly 10 billion USD (Mattes 2011: 243f.).

The rapprochement between the AKP administration and Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad, was also largely economically motivated. In light of the years-long animosity between Turkey and Syria, which nearly escalated into war in 1998, the formation of "brotherly relations" between Ankara and Damascus through a diversity of collaborative projects – a high point of this being the joint cabinet meetings in 2010 – is particularly remarkable. In its relations with Syria, Turkey had capital expenditures and trade close to the border in its field of view. But Turkey also strove to develop a new transit route, which would run primarily through Jordan and Iraq and carry domestic products into the financially strong Gulf states. Another development to come out of the new economic relationship was Turkey's 2009 dissolving of visa restrictions for Syrian citizens: by the end of 2010, approximately 60,000 Syrians were visiting Turkey monthly.

Along with geo-economic interests, the formation of soft power in the Middle East is also a main feature of Turkey's regional policy. Prime Minister Erdoğan, Foreign Minister Davutoğlu and President Abdullah Gül (also from the AKP) used primarily two tactics: For one thing, they continuously promoted, however subtly, a "Turkish model" for the Middle East in their political speeches and statements. This model includes – with varying degrees of emphasis – elements of pluralism

and party-based democracy, a successful economy, religious and cultural authenticity, and a relatively independent foreign policy, all of which amounts to a self-description of the AKP administration.

The administration also developed a strong anti-Israel, pro-Palestine rhetoric after the start of the war in Gaza on 27 December 2008, rhetoric which at times came off as clearly populist. The reason for such rhetoric was the visible irritation on the part of Ankara, which, despite the intensive mediations it had been conducting between Israel and Syria since May 2008, got no advance notice from Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's administration about the imminent war in the Gaza Strip. Ankara was also visibly jarred by the way Israel conducted the war, which led to the deaths of 1,300 civilians, almost all of whom were Palestinians. At the meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos at the end of January 2009, Prime Minister Erdoğan turned openly against Israel's president, Shimon Peres, for the first time. The worsening of Turkish-Israeli relations reached a new low with the Gaza flotilla affair at the end of May/beginning of June 2010: After Israeli commandos boarded the Turkish ship *Mavi Marmara*, an aid convoy, in the Eastern Mediterranean and ended up killing eight Turks and an American-Turkish dual citizen, the conflict between Turkey and Israel escalated to a previously unprecedented level. While the Israeli side insisted that the Gaza aid flotilla was illegal, that its forces were provoked, and that the commandos acted essentially defensively, the Turkish side demanded both a legal investigation of the Israeli military's intervention in international waters and a comprehensive apology from Israel. Turkey's obdurate positions regarding the Gaza aid flotilla also hindered every attempt at a rapprochement between Turkey and Israel after the summer of 2010.

In a wider regional context of the Middle East, Turkey's decidedly pro-Palestine stance entailed that it distance itself from Egypt under Hosni Mubarak, and that it also reject his pro-West and pro-Israel attitudes regarding the Gaza Strip and the party that has been in power there since 2007, Hamas. Turkey played a more moderate tune in respect to the governments of Jordan and Saudi Arabia, which are perceived as just as pro-West; particularly with respect to Saudi Arabia, economic considerations once again played a central role.

The geo-economic features as well as the non-material features of the AKP's foreign policy vis-à-vis the Middle East can be widely seen as successfully initiated. The anti-Israel and pro-Palestine rhetoric as well as the suggestion of a "Turkish model" for the Middle East were, according to opinion polls, endorsed by wide swaths of the various Arab populations; for a majority of them, Prime Minister Erdoğan even represented the most well-liked politician in the world in 2010. But the seemingly successful Turkish Middle East policy under the AKP cannot hide the fundamental conflict of interests between its geo-economic and non-material goals: On the one hand, Turkish interests in economic cooperation, trade and investments in the Middle East call for a stable surrounding political environment and a pragmatic collaboration with authoritarian regimes, whether they be in Iran, northern Iraq, Libya, Syria or Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, because of the populist generation of soft power, the status quo in the Middle East – especially regarding the Israel-Palestine conflict – is being called into question. This basic contradiction led, among other things, to the AKP administration discontinuation of the propagation of its "Turkish model," beyond its economic components, to its important trade partners Iran, Libya and Syria. That move evinces the pragmatism of the AKP's Middle East policy. The worsening of Turkish-Israeli relations since 2009 shows, however, that the policy of "zero problems" with the neighbors does not always work, and sometimes displays wishful thinking on the part of Turkey rather than regional political realities.

### **Turkey and the Upheavals in North Africa**

On the eve of the Arab revolt of 2011, Turkey under the leadership of the AKP demonstrated defining characteristics of a regional power in the Middle East – namely, successful economic diversification; cooperative relations with the influential countries of Iran, Saudi Arabia and Syria; and the support of a wide section of the Arab populace. In the face of the huge changes that emanated from North Africa and have been shaping the whole region since 2011, Turkey risked losing political influence. How did the Turkish government react to the upheavals in the most crucial Arab states?

Like most other administrations, Ankara was caught off-guard by the rapid political dynamics that have been playing out since January 2011. The AKP government initially temporized the developments in Tunisia: Because its own economic interests were not really entangled with the tiny North African country, Turkey generally spoke out on the side of political reforms and finding the least violent solution possible to the conflict between the regime and the protest movement. After President Ben Ali fled surprisingly quickly into exile in Saudi Arabia on 14 January 2011, the Turkish government immediately declared its support for the Tunisian transitional government.

Similarly, in the case of Egypt, Turkey avoided aligning itself with one side or the other in the initial days of the mass protests in order to avoid getting stuck in a position too early, which in light of the very strained Turkish-Egyptian relations could have easily occurred. After the escalation in violence between the Mubarak regime's forces and the demonstrators in Cairo's Tahrir Square at the end of January 2011, Prime Minister Erdoğan reacted on 1 February 2011 by holding a speech, which was widely watched and broadcast live in the Arab world, before an assembly of his party's parliamentarians. While the U.S. President Barack Obama was almost at the same time calling for moderation on both sides, Erdoğan positioned himself firmly on the side of the protestors. Although he did not specifically call for Mubarak to step down, his statements, directly addressed at the Egyptian president, could be interpreted as a demand for Mubarak to bow out of Egyptian politics. Erdoğan's speech was widely lauded by many Arabs, as he was the first leader of an important country who had spoken out on behalf of the protest movement. After Mubarak stepped down on 11 February 2011 and the ruling military council took over power, the Turkish government was successful at keeping open various channels of communication with the most important actors in post-Mubarak Egyptian politics.

Though the Turkish government openly called for the Mubarak regime to come to an end relatively early on, it reacted to the violence in Libya much more cautiously (cf. Faath 2011: 7f.). Ankara spoke out on behalf of a violence-free resolution to the conflict between the Qaddafi regime and the primarily eastern Libyan rebels and once again offered to mediate. Unlike in Tunisia, in Libya, central economic and security interests

of Turkey were being touched upon: because of the tight ties with Tripoli, 30,000 Turkish citizens were working in Libya at the time of the escalation of violence (February 2011), primarily in the construction sector. The AKP determined it was necessary to secure the evacuation of Turkish citizens, a procedure that ended successfully in mid-March 2011. Despite the quick escalation of violence between Libyan government troops and the oppositional rebels, Ankara initially avoided distancing itself too decisively from revolutionary leader Qaddafi. Nevertheless, Ankara continuously pleaded with the Libyan ruler for a comprehensive ceasefire. The Turkish position was widely criticized (although Ankara had previously been well thought of by the Arab public) because it showed itself to be rather superficially oriented to its own nationalistic interests rather than the goals of the protest movements.

The flexible, at times mutable, "middle" position of Turkey became further evident in its stance regarding U.N. security resolution 1973 of 17 March 2011, which provided for a no-fly zone over Libya for the protection of the civilians: Even when Ankara voiced its skepticism of the overreaching NATO mandate ("U.N.-mandated regime change"), as a NATO member, Turkey eventually voted for the resolution, in contrast to Germany, Brazil and India. After various Turkish mediation attempts failed, Erdoğan publicly and directly called for Qaddafi to step down at the beginning of May 2011. The main driver of this change in tack was probably the tipping of the scales undoubtedly in favor of the rebels and the Transitional National Council, due to the massive NATO intervention. After the electoral victory of the AKP in the parliamentary elections of 12 June 2011, Turkey recognized the Transitional National Council as the legitimate representative of the Libyan people. After NATO-supported rebels captured Tripoli at the end of August 2011, signifying the end of the Qaddafi regime, Turkey was among the first states to reopen its embassy in Tripoli, and it encouraged an immediate resumption of economic relations – now with the Transitional National Council as the Libyan counterpart.

## Turkey and the Revolt in Syria

Syria represents the greatest foreign policy challenge for Turkey in the context of the Arab revolt of 2011. Due to the 850-kilometer-long border and the formation of "brotherly relations" between the two countries, which was based on the aforementioned collaborations of previous years, every new transformation in Syria has direct and multifaceted implications for Turkey's domestic policy. Kurdish political activism provides one example: Recently, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) carried out more attacks in Turkey. The PKK also recently shifted one of its refuges to a Kurdish area of northeast Syria. Second, especially close relations evolved in 2009 between the regions along the border (around Gaziantep and Antakya on the Turkish side and near Aleppo on the Syrian side) due to the increased trade levels and the new freedom that Syrians had to enter Turkey without a visa. Third, Turkey's ruling AKP has close contacts with the Syrian opposition and particularly with the equally conservative Sunni Muslim Brotherhood, which was heavily persecuted by the Ba'hist regime under President Hafiz and which continues to be persecuted today by President Assad.

As the deaths of three youths involved in the mass protests occurred on 18 March 2011 in the southern Syrian provincial town of Daraa – the mass protests having been violently repressed by Syrian security forces – Turkey found itself in a dilemma: Due to the strategic relations and Turkey's interest in a stable neighbor country, Ankara could neither distance itself too far from President Assad nor risk being perceived as being too close to Assad's authoritarian regime, lest it risk failing in its goal of generating soft power among the Arab populations. With that in mind, the AKP government followed a two-pronged strategy in regards to the protests in Syria (which in just a few days had expanded from Daraa to Latakia in the west, Dair az-Zwar in the northeast, and Homs and Hama in central Syria, and with that basically every part of the country except the urban centers of Damascus and Aleppo):

Turkey publicly called for restraint with respect to Assad's handling of the protestors, and it demanded and the implementation of extensive political reforms. The Turkish government voiced this position before Assad's first speech of 30 March 2011 (an address that dashed the hopes

of many Syrians for reform) and regularly reiterated it afterward. By August 2011, Foreign Minister Davutoğlu had already traveled more than ten times to Syria in order to engage in direct talks with the powers that be in Damascus.

However, Turkey had also begun to court the Syrian opposition early on. As early as 1 April 2011 – not even two weeks after the protests began in Daraa – leaders of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood held a press conference in Istanbul, which although the Turkish government did not host, could not have occurred without at least the tacit acceptance of the government. In the period following that, as both the intensity of the protests and the regime's repression of them increased, Turkey became the central meeting and coordination point for the Syrian opposition. More than half of the big conferences held by the Syrian opposition in 2011 took place in Turkey: Elements of the opposition met on 26 April in Istanbul, on 2 June in Antalya, on 16 July back in Istanbul, in mid-August again in Istanbul, at the end of August in Ankara, and on 15 September once again in Istanbul. Even if the specific forms of networking and personal connections between the AKP administration and the Syrian opposition remain unclear, it is safe to assume that the AKP could strongly influence the Syrian opposition.

When the Syrian regime's troops marched into the northern Syrian provincial town of Jisr ash-Shughur and violently crushed the uprising there at the beginning of June 2011, nearly 10,000 Syrians fled en masse over the border to Turkey. This led Prime Minister Erdoğan to criticize the Syrian regime in a way he never had before. The fear of a mass exodus from and a de-stabilization of neighboring areas were not the only factors to play a decisive role in Turkey's decision to criticize the Syrian regime in this way: If we take a closer look at the time frame, we can also explain Erdoğan's reaction by acknowledging that the AKP administration wanted to distance itself further from the Assad regime in the run up to the parliamentary elections of 12 June 2011 in order to please the Turkish people, who largely sympathized with the Syrian protest movement. After their electoral victory, the AKP administration seemed to once again immediately tolerate the repression of the protests – it hoped that the repression would help re-stabilize Syria and bring about gradual reforms there. Ankara began to break away more when in July 2011 the Syrian regime noticeably descend-

ed further into isolation on an international level, and particularly on a regional level (Qatar, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia all cut off relations with Syria). At the beginning of Ramadan on 9 August 2011, Foreign Minister Davutoğlu again traveled to Damascus to prevail upon President Assad to take a more moderate stance. After that mediation initiative failed, Ankara officially began to call for regime change in Damascus – a position that Prime Minister Erdoğan underscored at an informal meeting with U.S. President Obama on the periphery of a convening of the U.N. general assembly in New York on 20 September 2011.

### **Regional Rise or Decline?**

As the reactions to the political upheavals in North Africa and the conflict in Syria show, Turkish foreign policy in the context of the Arab revolt of 2011 is characterized by frequent changes of position: While on one hand, Erdoğan's AKP advocated relatively early on for the end of the Mubarak regime, it behaved quite a bit more cautiously in regards to Libya out of geo-economic concerns. The Turkish government backed away from Qaddafi bit by bit so that in the near future it could play a prominent role in Libya's transformation process, a fact underscored by Erdoğan's closely observed state visit to Tripoli in mid-September 2011. Due to its multifaceted economic and security interests in Syria, Turkey held to their pragmatic "middle" position between the Assad regime and the opposition. In this, the AKP government succeeded, as by August 2011 they were the only country to have held multiple channels of communication open in Syria. At the moment that the isolation of Assad's regime became perfectly clear, Ankara washed its hands of Damascus. Even though Turkey is officially calling for an end to Assad's regime in Syria, it is operating cautiously out of concern for the further possible de-stabilizing effects his downfall could have.

In the end, the purported "skittishness" of Turkish foreign policy under the AKP can be considered a series of successful policy adjustments to the transformation processes in North Africa and the Middle East that have been ongoing since the beginning of 2011. Although Ankara potentially has a lot to lose in the Arab revolt, after three-quarters of a year, it can claim to have

climbed up the regional ladder, as states such as Iran, Saudi Arabia and Israel have clearly profited less, and the situation in Egypt is not yet stable. Even though Turkish regional policy is in no way free of contradictions, its dominant pragmatism and proactive commitment in various regional arenas definitely contributed to its current prominent position. Additionally, Erdoğan's populist remarks, which since the summer of 2011 have become more and more anti-Israel and pro-Palestine (contributing to the goal of generating soft power), are being positively responded to by the currently strongly mobilized Arab public. This mix of pragmatism and populism could, at least in the short term, secure a vanguard position for Turkey in the Middle East.

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## ■ The Author

André Bank is a research fellow at the GIGA Institute of Middle East Studies. His research focuses on authoritarianism and political transformation, war and peace processes, as well as regional order in the Middle East.

E-mail: <bank@giga-hamburg.de>; Website: <<http://staff.en.giga-hamburg.de/bank>>

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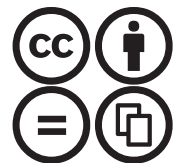
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