



القصر الملكي بالعمان
1952 - 1953

THE ERDOĞAN EFFECT

Turkey, Egypt and the Future of the Middle East

By Nuh Yilmaz and Kadir Ustun

Turkey's foreign policy activism is drawing considerable attention these days, particularly because of the momentous transformation in the broader Middle East. The tour of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia in September underscored the rise of Turkey's involvement in the region—and of Ankara's potential to be a formidable and positive influence.

Erdoğan articulated Turkey's vision for a democratic Middle East. "The freedom message spreading from Tahrir Square has become a light of hope for all the oppressed through Tripoli, Damascus, and Sanaa," he told an audience at the Cairo Opera House. "Governments have to get their legitimacy from the people's will. This is the core of Turkey's politics in the region." Equally, Erdoğan's tour demonstrated Turkey's recognition of the regional shifts. He signaled that Israel will no longer be shielded from accountability by a strategic status quo that buffeted authoritarian Arab rulers like former President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt. Erdoğan's message to Israel emphasized human rights, democracy, and the rule of law as the true parameters of regional balance of power. "Israel must respect human rights and act as a normal country and then it will be liberated from its isolation," Erdoğan said.

Turkish democracy has matured and Ankara feels confident enough to present itself as an inspiration to the Middle East. Turkey's transformation from a staunchly secularist NATO ally under military tutelage to a democratic model did not occur overnight. Turkey, in fact, considered the Middle East as an unfamiliar and hostile region for much of its republican history. During the 1980s and especially in the 1990s, Turkey maintained a largely hostile and confrontational posture in its relations with many countries there. Turkey's conflict involving the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) overrode all other issues, and the Turkish state was

◁ Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan at the Ministry of Defense, Cairo, Sept. 13, 2011.
Amr Nabil/EPA/Corbis

suspicious of virtually all of its neighbors for supporting the PKK. Claiming to represent legitimate demands of the Kurdish people in Turkey, the PKK had launched an armed struggle against Turkish security forces in the 1980s. Regimes in Syria and Iraq allowed the PKK to base militants in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley (then under Syria's control) and in northern Iraq.

A sea change came, however, with the Turkish Parliament's "No" to allowing United States troops to stage an invasion of Iraq from Turkish military bases in 2003. Since then, Turkey adopted the so-called 'zero problems with neighbors' policy. This prioritized stability and peace in the region and had a proactive outlook as it sought to prevent conflicts as much as manage them in coordination with neighbors. Turkish officials became more confident after the capture of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan in 1999 and a general reduction of violence in the conflict with Kurdish militants. Therefore, Turkey would no longer define its foreign policy solely by terrorism concerns.

As it improved its relations with all of its neighbors, Turkey advocated political integration as well as free flow of goods and services in its neighborhood. This policy achieved concrete results in the form of increased and diversified economic relations, heightened diplomatic clout and political influence, closer coordination with neighbors on issues such as terrorism, mediation in international conflicts, and a broadly positive response to Turkish foreign policy. In implementing its neighborhood policy, Turkey advocated speaking to all sides, including groups such as the Islamist Palestinian movement Hamas. Seen as an honest broker, Turkey mediated between Israel and Syria, as well as between Iran and the international community in the nuclear issue. Turkey's diplomatic initiatives were never guaranteed success; but the new Turkish foreign policy was no longer a spectator to regional developments but a serious actor shaping and contributing to various difficult issues.

Some have argued that the Arab revolutions undermined Turkey's neighborhood policy, which to some extent was based on good relations with the region's authoritarian regimes. It has been charged that Turkey was not committed to democracy and simply pursued its interests. However, notwithstanding the fact that all countries were caught off guard by the Arab Spring, Turkey advocated a peaceful, and democratic, outcome. Ankara declined to support Mubarak, or President Bashar Al-Assad of Syria, or any of the authoritarian leaders; on the contrary, it called on them to either step down or undertake serious reforms immediately. Turkey avoided a totalistic approach as it distinguished between the different dynamics at work in each of the countries undergoing political upheaval.

The political transformation in the Middle East is part of the broader global transformation toward a multipolar world. Turkey has been pursuing a multidimensional foreign policy precisely because it sees the global order being reconfigured in the aftermath of

the Cold War. More specifically for the Middle East, however, the Arab regimes' claims to legitimacy in the name of protecting their people against "colonialist and imperialist" powers proved to be hollow. The new order in the region will require governments that enable the people to chart their own destinies. It will have to be based on participatory politics, democratic principles, and peace and stability. Turkey and Egypt are poised to become major actors in this new order. They will be competitors as well as collaborators, given their competing and complementary features and capabilities.

Neo-Ottomanism Versus the New Turkey

Turkey's special and complex relationship with the Middle East and North Africa is often underappreciated. Those who recognize it tend to avoid discussing it out of fear of raising the issue of "neo-Ottomanism." Although historiography in places like the Balkans and the Middle East have produced nationalist narratives under the broad theme of the 'Turkish yoke,' Turkey's ties with the Middle East cannot be reduced to Ottoman political rule over these lands. Ottomans and modern Turkey have shared institutional and legal commonalities as well as cultural affinities with the Middle East.

Over the course of the twentieth century, however, Turkey chose not to build on this past and pursued a relatively defensive foreign policy. Tying itself in with the Western security architecture, especially after World War II, Turkey aligned its foreign policy very closely with that of its Western allies. Turkish foreign policy was based on its commitment to countering the 'Communist threat' during the Cold War. Turkey relied on its strategic importance for international legitimacy and relevance. However, Turkey sacrificed democratization for the sake of security concerns in this period; the country's military tutelage regime helped ensure that Turkey retained its Western alliance at the expense of democracy at home.

The Turkish military was supported by the Western alliance even when it intervened in politics through coups d'état, which greatly hampered Turkish democracy. As a mere strategic asset to the Western alliance rather than an actor, Turkey did not try to devise its own foreign policy. Instead, it relied on the Western consensus and kept itself outside regional developments as an active player until the 2000s. The end of the Cold War made it clear that the country's strategic relevance could take it only so far, and it had to respond seriously to demands for freedoms, and advance democracy along with economic development at home. The military tutelage could no longer justify rule by pointing to the conflict with the PKK or 'foreign enemies providing safe havens for terrorists.' Turkey witnessed the rise of the middle class demanding more of a say in domestic and foreign policy issues, which had been monopolized by the military and civilian bureaucracies. This change resulted in a strong popular push for more democracy at home and a more 'dignified' foreign policy.

Turkey's adoption of a more proactive foreign policy was thus related to the democratic transformation within the country. Turkey proceeded to fill the vacuum in the Middle East created by the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Ankara's 'peace and stability' vision for the region was reflected in its efforts to broker a deal between Syria and Israel, its mediation efforts between various factions in Lebanon, its changed attitude toward Kurds in northern Iraq, and its involvement in negotiations to resolve the international dispute over Iran's nuclear program. Turkey made the determination that it was in its security and economic interest to advocate greater economic and political integration and oppose sanctions as well as conflicts in the Middle East.

Turkey's economic relations with the region have improved as a result of both the shifts in global economic trends and Turkey's new neighborhood policy. Yet, while better relations brought economic benefits, Turkey recognized that the political structures in place made good trade relations and regional integration difficult. In addition, ongoing conflicts in the region were an obstacle to any major improvement in the region's economic outlook.

It can be argued that Turkey's foreign policy activism in the Middle East contributed to the downfall of authoritarian regimes, by implicitly calling for the end of the 'Camp David order' and exposing repressive regimes that survived with the help of regional strategic arrangements related to the conflict with Israel. Turkey showed that it is possible to be democratic, have good relations with the West, and still stand up to unjust Israeli policies. Its 'dignified' stance was strengthened after the incident at the World Economic Forum meeting in Davos in 2009 in which Erdoğan stormed out of a discussion with Israeli President Shimon Peres about Israel's war against Hamas. Erdoğan's gesture, widely acclaimed on the Arab street, exposed and undermined Arab leaders who had acquiesced to Israeli policies and committed to the status quo.

If Turkey found itself increasingly unable to talk to the Arab regimes, it was able to speak to ordinary Arabs. This was not mere populism, as some critics have charged, but a sincere response to the yearning for dignity. As demonstrated by the enthusiastic welcome that Erdoğan received in Egypt in September, Turkey's stance has had a significant political impact across the Arab world. In the short and medium terms, Turkey's challenge will be to turn this positive outlook into concrete policies in bilateral relations in order to sustain a long-term collaboration toward a more democratic political order in the region.

The 'Camp David Order'

If one can speak about the 'old Turkey,' there is also an 'old Egypt.' The Mubarak government enjoyed a privileged position in the region as a facilitator of the 'Camp David order.' It aligned itself with Israel albeit in a 'cold peace' relationship, and,

in return, received close to \$2 billion annually in U.S. military and economic aid. Egypt supported the Arab world's normalization with Israel through the 'peace process' and reduced its regional ambition to supporting U.S. interests.

Ultimately, however, Egypt had to punch below its weight in foreign policy. Its investment in the regional order for the sake of security, combined with its unresponsiveness to the demands of Egyptians for greater political freedom and economic opportunity, resulted in a loss of credibility and prestige for Mubarak's regime domestically, regionally, and internationally. It tried to survive its legitimacy crisis through a moderate authoritarianism, and by oppressing Islamist movements and other opposition groups. But the January 25 revolution made it clear that this strategic arrangement was not sustainable.

A significant aspect of Mubarak's problem was that Egypt's regional role became over-leveraged in the Palestinian issue. On one hand, Egypt defended Palestinian rights, and coordinated peace efforts with Israel especially after the Madrid Conference in 1991. However, following the outbreak of the second intifada in 2000, Egypt failed to side with Palestinians as a whole, and instead sided with Fatah leaders Yasser Arafat and, later, Mahmoud Abbas, at the expense of Fatah's Islamist opposition. Mubarak defined Egypt's regional role as maintaining the 'Camp David order': legitimizing Israel's security needs, and supporting solutions accepted by Fatah without offending Israel.

Mubarak's partisan approach turned out to have negative consequences for Egypt and his regime. His collaboration in the isolation of Gaza, after Hamas won the elections in January 2006, had a negative effect on Egypt's image in the eyes of the Palestinians in general. Egypt thus found itself at odds with both the Hamas administration in Gaza and with Turkey on issues including the closure of the Egyptian-Gazan border. Undermined by Turkey's support for the Palestinians and Erdoğan's criticism of Israel's 'Operation Cast Lead' against Gaza in 2008, Egypt faced a deepening legitimacy crisis with respect to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The 'old Egypt' also enjoyed strategic importance arising from the Suez Canal and its geographical location between the continents of Asia, Africa and Europe. The passage from the Mediterranean Sea to the Indian Ocean is critical for the navigation of warships as well as transit of oil and gas tankers. The canal provided the Atlantic alliance access to the Gulf and secured energy routes for Europe. Egypt indirectly contributed to the stability of global energy prices at the expense of Russian monopoly of energy resources by ensuring the diversity of energy supply routes. Egypt has also long influenced African politics and Nile Basin geopolitics and assumed a key role in inner parts of Africa.

In ideological terms, Mubarak's Egypt also attempted to be a bulwark against political Islam. Through Al-Azhar, one of the oldest centers of Islamic teaching, it

sought to have a moderate influence on religious thinking throughout the Muslim world. At the same time, Mubarak sought to contain Islamist political movements through repression. In the ‘war on terrorism’ after the September 11, 2001, attacks, Egypt played an instrumental part in intelligence operations, especially considering that many Egyptian citizens held important positions in Al-Qaeda. In his regime’s struggle against the Muslim Brotherhood (a leading Egyptian opposition group) Mubarak benefited from the global paranoia about Islamic extremism.

The ‘New Egypt’

There are three scenarios for the political evolution of the ‘new Egypt.’ The least probable one is the occurrence of a military coup with a minor modification of the old order under Mubarak. It is important to bear in mind that as long as the military is involved in politics, there will always be a case for such a scenario. Nevertheless, domestic, regional, and global conditions, and the persistence of Egypt’s January 25 protest movement, make a complete military takeover in Egypt something that would be very difficult to achieve. From its perspective, the Egyptian military would be understandably reluctant to assume responsibility for the country’s ongoing economic failures.

The most likely scenario, at least for an extended transitional period, may be the establishment of a regime of military tutelage. Officers will hold political and military powers overseeing a civil technocratic government. Veto mechanisms would be established, where the civilian initiative is kept in check by institutions controlled by the military. This, of course, would restrict freedoms in daily life and generally hamper civilian authority. Such an arrangement kept Turkey anchored in the Atlantic alliance during the Cold War era but it proved unresponsive to the social, economic, and political realities of the ‘new Turkey.’ In the case of Egypt, military tutelage would effectively mean continuation of the ‘Camp David order’ domestically. Though a very possible scenario, the Egyptian military would have to convince Islamists and liberals that it was in the interests of the country.

The most desirable yet most difficult scenario is the creation of a democracy. Egypt would delegate authority to civilian actors and create a democratic constitution. Old elites would be withdrawn from politics. Even assuming success, it will take at least a few years before democracy takes hold and Egypt can reassert itself as a major regional player.

A democratic or semidemocratic Egypt may herald important shifts. Egypt will likely adopt a tougher posture toward Israel due to popular pressure that came to a head in September. Israeli forces in pursuit of terrorists entered the Sinai and killed Egyptian security personnel, prompting the interim Egyptian government to withdraw

Egypt's ambassador from Israel. Later, protesters stormed the Israeli embassy in Cairo, effectively forcing Israeli diplomats to flee the country. The incidents led Egyptians to criticize the peace treaty with Israel, which Prime Minister Essam Sharaf publicly described as "not sacred" and open to modification. A democratic Egypt that includes Muslim Brotherhood participation in the parliament and government may pursue the normalization of relations with Hamas and put an end to the isolation of Gaza.

In that vein, Egypt can play a positive role in integrating Islamist movements into the political structures in the region. Participation of Islamist parties in Egypt's democracy can provide a model of greater diversity within Islamist movements, whose previous exclusion from official politics encouraged reactionary and sometimes extreme behavior on the part of a minority of Islamists. If Islamism is normalized, nascent Islamist administrations in the region will not feel marginalized and can pursue politics democratically. That may encourage the emergence of more independent, democratic Arab countries.

A democratic Egypt may also influence the evolution of a new Arab nationalism—one that is more moderate and substantive than the more reactionary variety rooted in the pan-Arabism of the 1960s. Arab nationalism can become a more authentic expression once it is stripped of its authoritarian character. The involvement of Islamists will help ensure that any nationalistic revival does not turn into anti-Iranianism or anti-Turkism.

Iran's influence in the region will be affected by a new balance of power. Iran has posed a challenge to the status quo by championing the cause of the Palestinians. But being a Shiite-dominated country lacking Turkey's democratic credentials has limited its leverage. The emergence of a more democratic region with a Sunni majority will require Iran to revise its regional policies. In contrast with Turkey's nonsectarian approach, Iran may move toward exploiting sectarian differences. Egypt, hopefully, will resist attempts to forge sectarian alliances such as those supported by the Gulf countries. If the Muslim Brotherhood participates in government and controls its Salafist wing, the anti-Iranian bloc in the Arab world will likely lose strength. Such a change will leave Saudi Arabia more isolated. The so-called 'Sunni crescent plan,' supported by Gulf countries and the U.S., which aims to contain Iran through the forging of a sectarian bloc, may be rendered meaningless. In that case, struggles in the region would reflect competing national interests rather than potentially destructive sectarian bigotry.

Forging a Democratic Middle East

During his visit to Cairo in September, Egyptians gave the Turkish prime minister a hero's welcome. Indeed, some held up signs reading: "If Erdoğan had been our

leader, we would have liberated our Jerusalem.” While Erdoğan’s Arab tour promoted Turkey’s aspiration to contribute to the democratic transformation in the Middle East, it also reflected Ankara’s vision of an integrated region opposed to national, religious, and sectarian divisions.

In Egypt, democracy is by far the most desirable scenario for Turkey. Indeed, Ankara must assume an active role and share its experience in evolving from the tutelary regime to a democratic one. Turkey can help Egypt, given its extensive experience in transition to civilian rule, managing civil–military relations and its long history with a multiparty political system, conducting free and fair elections, and constitution-making.

Concerning strategic interests, Turkey would like to see an Egypt that pays serious attention to people’s demands, promotes the rule of law, recognizes the representation of all political actors, and solves its regional legitimacy problem. An economically powerful and democratic partner in the Middle East would fit Turkey’s foreign policy priorities, which promote regional economic and political integration as well as freedom of movement. Turkey’s own domestic political transformation led to the expansion of its presence in the region. A similar outcome for Egypt would be the most desirable for Turkey, despite the unavoidable areas of possible competition.

Turkey’s regional standing will be directly affected by the developments in Egypt. An authoritarian Egypt will continue to be a source of harm for the region: normalization of Islamist movements would be delayed; the deadlock in the Palestinian issue would continue; and sectarian conflicts may emerge and threaten the regional peace and stability. However, if Egypt moves toward becoming a true democracy, it will undergo radical changes for the better in its domestic political life and foreign policy.

A democratic Egypt will limit Turkey’s influence and popularity on the Arab street, but the two countries would have opportunities and shared responsibilities. They are the region’s two largest key Sunni powers, comparable in size, historical experience, and strategic importance. They will have to lead the wider region toward freer and more democratic structures. And they will also have to shoulder the burden of managing the conflicts. A promising sign of potential cooperation was their work together in the Palestinian reconciliation agreement between Fatah and Hamas in May. Relations between Turkey and Mubarak’s regime had been strained after the Hamas leader’s visit to Turkey amid Egypt’s general discomfort with Turkey’s proactive foreign policy in the Middle East.

The outcome of the current upheavals will help determine the future of Turkey–Egypt relations. As both Turkey and Egypt seek to resolve the crisis in their differing capacities, their cooperation and competition will be determined, to a large extent,

by how Egypt emerges out of its own domestic political turmoil. Turkey's foreign policy activism, which has already deeply affected the region, and Egypt's new foreign policy orientation, influenced by and responsive to the demands of its domestic public opinion, will together play a crucial role in shaping the new regional political order.

If Egypt moves toward a truly civilian democracy, Turkey's gains in the region will become permanent and its role will increase. If Egypt comes out of the current turmoil as an economically and politically strong actor, competition will likely occur but this will empower both countries. If Egypt goes toward a tutelage system, Turkey as the only consolidated democracy would gain ground at Egypt's expense. The military in Egypt would be preoccupied trying to balance Islamist and liberal forces, which would diminish Egypt's potential to be a leader in the region.

A relatively weak Egypt would make Turkey's job more difficult, even if Ankara's prestige would remain high. Turkey may not find a partner to share its role in terms of regional policies and region-based approaches. The Middle East would waste time with short-term crisis management instead of constructing a truly new regional order. The urgent need for developing human resources, capacity building, and creating sustainable development projects would be delayed. Turkey constitutes an example of civilian power pushing back the influence of the military to consolidate its democratic institutions. As such, Ankara must oppose arguments that it is too early to establish full democracy in Egypt. Turkey's democratization was hampered by such arguments, which delayed civilianization of Turkish democracy.

When it comes to construction of a new regional order, as an economic and democratic power, Turkey has a lot to offer. Turkey is in many ways ahead of Egypt in what it can contribute to the shaping of the new Middle East. Turkey's challenge, however, is to institutionalize its regional gains and invest in sustaining its commitment to the region. The worst thing for Turkey would be to appear as a force that cannot deliver. Given the high expectations from Turkey among the Arab public and the intellectuals, Turkey will be held to a bigger test. In contrast, expectations from Egypt will be quite modest, and any step Egypt takes in the right direction will be considered positive.

This is where cooperation can come: Turkey and Egypt have the ability to fill the gaps left by one another. Egypt may not be able to confront Israeli policies directly, but Turkey can do that. Egypt also cannot promote democratic transitions around the Middle East as effectively as Turkey can. Turkey's intense pressure on the Al-Assad regime in Damascus, in the form of harboring opposition groups and military defectors, conducting border exercises, and threatening sanctions, is a clear example of this. Both Egypt and Turkey will be at odds with the Gulf powers who are neither en route to a democratic transition nor eager to take risks in the Palestinian issue.

Those countries may become increasingly alienated from the region if Turkey–Egypt cooperation increases. This will be exacerbated if the U.S. (as the closest ally of the Gulf powers) becomes less inclined to support the authoritarian Gulf regimes.

Egypt has an advantage over Turkey in the regional leadership position as an Arab nation. But given the high diversity in the Middle East in terms of ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity, Turkey has an advantage as it can speak to a variety of actors from different ethnicities (Iraqi Kurds) and sectarian groups (Iraqi Shiites, Lebanese Christians). Egypt's importance will be most apparent in the Arab–Israeli 'peace process,' which Turkey considers the single most important regional issue in the Middle East.

Because of its increasingly independent stance on foreign policy issues, Turkey has gained the trust of Arab populations and showed that Arab regimes were not only dysfunctional but also inept in constructing true solutions to regional problems. Turkey will need to build on this reputation while Egypt will have to earn it. Egypt may feel forced to distance itself from the U.S. policies in order to do that, while Turkey does not have to prove its independent approach by distancing itself from the West. Egypt must be careful not to fall into determining its policies based on anti-Islamist, anti-Shiite, anti-West, or anti-Israel frameworks. A proactive as opposed to reactionary Egypt, and a more democratic, independent Egypt, will prove to be a robust force.

The Arab revolutions have presented the Middle East with a historic opportunity for a more democratic and dignified future. Egypt's evolution into a stable democracy will be crucial for the structural transformation of the region. If the new Egypt seizes this opportunity without reverting to a pseudo-democracy for piecemeal strategic arrangements as it did in the past, the prospect of the emergence of a new Middle East may turn into reality. The greatest challenge for Turkey during this period is to help create the new language and terms of discourse. Turkey must not watch but manage this process, as it did during the uprisings in Egypt, Libya, and Syria. If Turkey can remain involved and relevant in the medium term, then it may help the Arab momentum to create a truly new regional order.