

Challenges to Turkey's "Soft Power" in the Middle East

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TESEV's public opinion surveys in the Arab world that were conducted in 2009 and 2010 demonstrated that Turkey's attractiveness has been quite high in the region. This attractiveness is due to the perception of Turkish foreign policy; the view of Turkey's political and economic transformation as a success story; and Turkey's cultural products. These characteristics point to a possibility of Turkey's soft power in the region. The question remains, however, how Turkey exercises its soft power, an issue that has become all the more relevant as a result of the Arab Spring.

TURKEY'S ATTRACTIVENESS

Turkish foreign policy seems to constitute an important element of Turkey's attractiveness in the region. Some otherwise controversial policies of Turkey contributed its popularity among the public in the Arab world. The first turning point was Turkey's decision to not to support the US war effort in Iraq in 2003. This decision challenged the highly popular view of Turkey acting only through its alliance with the US in the region. Second, Turkey criticisms of Israel after the Gaza War further contributed to its popularity. Previously Turkish-Israeli cooperation was one of the major points of criticism of Turkey in the Arab world. However, the Turkish government became especially critical of Israeli policies after the Gaza War in 2008-2009. A major change in that policy was highly welcomed and made Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan especially popular in the region. In addition to these highly popular moves, the

general turn in Turkish foreign policy in the region has been appreciated. Turkey has been increasingly seen as playing constructive roles in the region, trying to turn its presence into a positive influence. The TESEV survey in 2010 demonstrated that 78 percent in the Arab world thinks that Turkey should play a mediatory role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The percentage is higher in Jordan, Syria and Palestine. Turkey has been able to increasingly develop better relations with its Middle Eastern neighbours and prioritized concepts such as dialogue, engagement and economic interdependence in its discourses towards the region. These new foreign policy initiatives were seen as having moral authority and reflecting legitimate power, thus increase Turkey's attractiveness in the Middle East.

In addition to Turkish foreign policy, the image of success Turkey has been able to portray has contributed to Turkey's appeal. Turkey's continuing political and economic transformation has been viewed quite positively in the region especially in a context in which the Arab countries were facing ever increasing problems of socio-economic stagnation and political authoritarianism. Specifically Turkey's political transformation provided an example mainly for the opposition forces in the Arab world in dealing with the questions of transition to a more accountable and representative form of governance. Among these questions there has been the issue of integration of some Islamist groups in the political system. This question has been relevant to both secular and Islamist

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opposition. The evolution of Turkish Islam and the coming of power of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi—hereafter AKP) was considered as an important example to examine. Thus, there has been a general interest in Turkey’s transformation and different actors in the Arab world drew their own lessons from that experience.

In addition to the Arab intellectual discussion at the public level in general there has been more interest in what Turkey represents. However, at the level of public opinion there is more confusion as to what the so-called Turkish model meant and how relevant it is to the experiences in different countries in the Arab world. TESEV polls show that Turkey is generally seen as a successful example of coherence of Islam and democracy. Yet interestingly Turkey’s “Muslim identity” is seen as a reason of both being a model or not for an important percentage of respondents especially in some countries. Therefore, for instance, those who see Turkey as a model think that its Muslim background is the most important factor in making Turkey a model in Egypt, whereas those who think that Turkey cannot be a model cite that Turkey is not Muslim enough as the second most important obstacle.

Turkey’s economic transformation and successes in becoming part of G-20 as one of the so-called “emerging economies” increased its attraction. The TESEV poll (2010) demonstrated that an overwhelming majority in Arab countries see Turkey as the second strongest economy in the region after Saudi Arabia and believe that ten years from now Turkey would be the strongest in economic terms. The positive economic image of Turkey therefore contributes its image of success.

The TESEV survey also finds support for Turkey’s EU accession process. In average more than half of those who were polled said that they support Turkey’s accession process and thought that this has positive repercussions for the region as a whole. Focus group interviews

and discussions with opinion makers corroborate this more strongly. Among opinion makers there is a belief that Turkey’s engagement with the EU will have positive effects mainly for two reasons: First, the continuation of the EU process would foster further democratization in Turkey, which would in turn increase the demonstration effect. Second, this process would help Turkey to play more constructive roles in the region and facilitate the creation of a more prosperous and peaceful Middle East.

Finally, in recent years Turkey has become a source of attraction because of its cultural products. Since 2004 Turkish TV series have become quite popular in the Arab world. 78 percent of the respondents said yes to the question of whether they have ever watched a Turkish TV series in the TESEV poll. The popularity of these series has led to an increase in the numbers of visitors to Turkey from the Arab countries. The increase in human-to-human interaction has facilitated learning from each other and started to shape images of the “other” in more positive ways.

CHALLENGES

Although Turkey’s attractiveness in the region has increased in recent years, the extent to which this has turned to influence has limitations. On the one hand, it is clear that Turkey’s increasing attractiveness has opened the way for Turkey’s acceptance as an important actor in the Middle East both inside and outside of the region. This has provided opportunities for improving relations with the countries in the region, for Turkey’s mediation efforts in conflicts, and for expansion of economic ties and tourism. On the other hand, however, Turkey’s exercise of soft power has limitations especially in a region characterized by fragmentation and conflict. Turkish foreign policy has had to face difficulties in mediation efforts and saw limitations to its influence compared to other regional actors from time to time. Turkey encountered serious difficulties in its mediation efforts in Lebanon, with Hamas, and with Iran in addition to

challenges to its influence in Iraq. Therefore, as long as the region continues to be dominated by hard power, the policy of soft power has its limitations. In addition to the existing constraints, the current Arab uprisings further complicated the scene for Turkey and presented more complex challenges.

THE ARAB SPRING AND TURKEY

Today the Arab world is going through a historic transformation. On the one hand, the Arab uprisings clearly demonstrated that the existing status quo is unsustainable. On the other hand, the future of these developments is uncertain and at least for now in many places they have resulted in increasing instability.

These developments in the Arab world have created significant challenges for Turkey's foreign policy in the region. Turkey has developed a quite active foreign policy towards the region in recent years and thus has invested politically and economically in the Middle East. This meant that in a way Turkey has invested in the status quo. Developing ever closer ties with the region mainly meant establishing closer relations with the regimes. Turkey's deepening political, security and economic relations with the regional countries created challenges for Turkey's response to the uprisings. These limitations explain Turkey's relatively late response and cautiousness towards the Arab Spring. Overall Turkey is concerned about the instability in the region that would also jeopardize its interests. In particular, Ankara seems to be worrying about countries where Turkey's presence has been considerable. The Libyan case demonstrated these dichotomies. Libya has been economically important for Turkey both as a source of crude oil as well as for the construction contracts of Turkish businesses which amounted to approximately 20 billion USD. The current situation in Libya puts the future of these investments in risk and means that Turkey is enduring a significant economic loss. The instability and later intervention in Libya also created problems for

about 25,000 Turkish citizens working in Libya and most of them had to be evacuated. Thus, Turkey's response becomes more complex as Turkey's interests are at stake.

The events in Syria provide a case in point. Turkish-Syrian relations have been improving tremendously since October 1998, a time when they almost went to war. The two countries have been successful in establishing close relations in security, political and economic fields. Close relations reached a new height in the last few years with developments such as the establishment of a High Level Strategic Cooperation Council that entails joint cabinet meetings, the lifting of visa requirements as well as plans to establish a free trade zone in the Levant to expand an already existing one between Syria and Turkey. Although the improvement of relations to this extent has benefitted both sides, the recent uprising in different parts of Syria and the response of the regime towards it have put Turkish policy to the test. Turkey is clearly concerned about the possibility of a chaos and/or a civil war in Syria. Turkey's fears include the possibility of a refugee flow, economic losses, and strategic implications particularly as regards to the Kurdish issue. Thus, Turkey wants stability in its neighborhood but at the same time sees that the window of opportunity for Bashar to make reforms is closing very fast. The decision to host three meetings of the Syrian opposition in Turkey, albeit by a business association close to the government, MUSIAD, shows that Ankara is also preparing for a regime change scenario. In either case developments in Syria will continue to pose significant challenges to meticulously crafted Turkish-Syrian relations.

What complicates Turkey's position in addition to its ties with the regimes is that over the years it has also managed to increase its attractiveness with the population. Thus, there are also expectations from Turkey on the part of the opposition in these countries. When at times Turkey seemed to be supporting the regimes, it was highly criticized by the opposition that had

high expectations. This occurred in Libya when initially Turkey criticized the outside military intervention and was thus perceived as being supportive of the Qaddafi regime.

The challenge for Turkey now is to balance its interests with principled foreign policy that favours democratic transitions in these countries. Especially in the first part of the 2000s Turkey had a vocal democracy promotion agenda. Both Prime Minister Erdogan and then-Foreign Minister Gul have been raising the issue of the necessity of reform in the Arab/Islamic world in different forums. However, in recent years active democracy promotion was replaced by an approach that was less vocal and instead stressed long-term transformation through engagement and opening up. It was hoped that through engaging the countries in the region in political and economic terms, Turkey can play an important role in facilitating peaceful change. Yet this policy may no longer be tenable in many parts of the Middle East.

In short, the Arab Spring presents significant challenges to Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East. Increasingly Turkey also realizes that the status quo is no longer sustainable. Thus, it is trying to find a way in which the

transformation can take place. Clearly a peaceful and controlled transition is the best option for Turkey. For that reason Ankara is trying to cultivate relations with new actors in the Middle East without losing sight of the old ones. If the regimes evolve into more representative and accountable forms as a result of the Arab Spring, this in the long run is in the interest of Turkey. Such a Middle East would be more responsive to Turkey's vision of the Middle East that is based on engagement, dialogue and regional cooperation. Furthermore, such regimes would also be more positive towards Turkey's engagement with the region than existing leaders who have been receptive to Turkey mainly due to changing circumstances. Nevertheless, there is also a possibility that the transitions may fail, at least in some places. The history of democratic transitions tells us that this process is not linear and it may lead to chaos and /or the emergence of hybrid regimes that also have authoritarian characteristics. Thus, the future of the Middle East is not certain. This uncertainty presents difficulties for Turkey and yet requires more active involvement preferably by engaging other actors that share its vision and have an interest in the prosperity, stability and peace in this region.



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