

Turkey's Image in the Arab World

By Paul Salem



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PROGRAMME

It is impressive that Turkey's image in the Arab world, negative throughout most of the 20th century, became solidly positive in the past few years. TESEV's second survey of public opinion in the Arab world (and Iran) confirms this transformation. The positive opinion includes Turkey as a political, economic and social model; Turkey's regional mediation and investment; and its popular culture.

Nevertheless, this positive image has not been matched by equivalent influence in the region where Turkish influence continues to lag behind other regional and international players.

The improvement of the Turkish image in the Arab world over the past decade is due to a number of reasons:

- The rise of the AK Party (AKP) which tempered the anti-Islamic secularism and anti-Arab Westernism of the Turkish Kemalists and rebuilt Turkey's links to its regional and Muslim past.
- A "zero-problems" regional foreign policy opened up Turkey to the Arab and Muslim world and sought to resolve conflict with and among neighbours.
- The apparent success of the Turkish democratic experiment in an otherwise authoritarian region and the Turkish economic model of high productivity and export-led growth in a region where rentier economies dominate.
- The apparent success of the Turkish balance between religion, secularism and public freedoms in a region where religion and politics have not found a balanced formula of coexistence.
- Growing familiarity with Turkish culture and society through its popular television soap operas, export products, and tourism to Turkey.
- Turkey's strong stand against American use of its bases in the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Prime Minister Erdogan's rebuke of Israel during the Gaza war of December-January 2008-2009 and
- Turkey's stand against Israel after the Gaza Flotilla incident in May of 2010.

All of this at a time when the region was bereft of models of success or inspiring leadership. Until the Arab uprisings that began in December 2010, the Arab world seemed hopelessly mired in corrupt authoritarian regimes. In Iran, the Islamic revolution which had held out much promise in its early years seemed similarly mired in repression and corruption. Only the confrontation against Israel, by Hamas and Hizbullah, had inspired enthusiasm in recent years, although the support for them was for confronting Israel and not as popular models for politics or organizing society.

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POPULAR, BUT COULD TURKEY BE MORE EFFECTIVE?

As the TESEV survey shows, positive views toward Turkey are around a very impressive 80% in the Arab world. This indicates great potential for further deepening and development of Arab-Turkish relations in ways that would serve the interests of all countries involved as well as the interests of regional stability and prosperity. On the flip side, Turkey and its neighbours have not yet fully realized this potential. Relations have grown on the bilateral side, but no outlines of a more stable and cooperative regional order has emerged. Turkey, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon have set up what amounts to a free trade zone, but relations with Iraq, the GCC, and Iran remain on a largely bilateral basis. I have written elsewhere* that it is important for Turkey, Iran and the Arab countries to build a more stable, organized, open and prosperous regional order built on their common interests; in building this regional order Turkey has the leading role to play, because it is held in high regard by both Arab and Iranian publics, while Arab-Iranian relations remain poor.

Turkish regional foreign policy has also not scored the successes that it had set for itself. This is perhaps through no fault of its own—as conflicts in the region are complex and entrenched—but Ankara has still not found a way to transform its regional prominence to effective diplomatic influence. Its ambitious mediation to promote a peace treaty between Israel and Syria collapsed after Israel launched the Gaza war in December of 2008 without bothering to inform Ankara. Its bold

mediation, along with Brazil, to defuse the Iranian-Western nuclear standoff in May 2010 achieved an agreement with Tehran, but the agreement was summarily dismissed by the West and the Security Council. When the Lebanese government collapsed in January 2011, Davutoglu flew to Beirut to mediate a resolution, but left soon thereafter with nothing to show for his efforts. Turkish attempts to mediate between Fatah and Hamas were equally unsuccessful. In other words, despite Turkey's clear popularity in the region, Turkish policy has still not found a way to effectively translate that popularity into more influence and more effective diplomacy, nor how to leverage that popularity to play a leadership role in creating a middle east that is—in its own image—more stable and democratic.

The TESEV survey, which was conducted in August-September 2010 captures a particularly auspicious moment in the region for Turkey's image, as it comes only weeks after the Gaza flotilla incident in which Turkish criticism of Israel reached its highest pitch. It would be interesting to see what results would be if the survey were conducted today, after the events of the Arab spring, and particularly events in Egypt and Libya. With regard to Egypt, Prime Minister Erdogan was one of the first world leaders to express sympathy for the protestors and among the first to urge President Mubarak to step down. And President Gul was the first leader to visit post-Mubarak Egypt. These forthright positions in favour of democratization and peoples' rights were very positively received in Arab public opinion.

On the other hand, Ankara's position toward the Libyan uprising was noted as quite different. Turkish leaders failed to express clear support for the Libyan uprising, and even after Colonel Qaddafi began to unleash his air

* **Building Regional Order in the Eastern Middle East, Carnegie Paper 24, May 2010.** For a Turkish edition of the paper see http://carnegieendowment.org/files/TXT.TURK.PAPER_61.pdf.

and ground forces against civilian population centers, Ankara opposed the imposition of a no fly zone—even after the Arab League, the Organization of Islamic Conference, the Gulf Cooperation Council, and much of regional public opinion declared their support for it. Although Turkey then tempered its opposition after the UN Security Council had mandated it, Turkey remained lukewarm about it.

Also, Turkey refused to join the chorus of condemnation against Qaddafi, focusing instead on emphasizing the risks of Western intervention in the region. Turkey's image was not helped by widely-circulated press reports that charged that what was behind Turkey's soft position toward Qaddafi—despite his obvious crimes—was \$15 billion of Turkish contracts in Libya that would be jeopardized if Ankara crossed Qaddafi. The contrast between the image of the Turkish government as a principled champion of peoples' human and democratic rights in the region, versus its image as a government interested in lucrative business deals despite the human costs, was jarring.

Indeed, Turkish policy during the Arab spring was an opportunity lost. Events in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and elsewhere were finally proving that what Turkey was saying for years—that democracy was the only way forward—was correct. Turkey could have confirmed and consolidated its leadership and influence in the region by consistently standing up for the principles that its leaders—Prime Minister Erdogan, President Gul, and Foreign Minister Davutoglu—avowed in their public speeches.

On Libya, it is understandable that the presence of 25,000 Turks and \$15 billion worth of contracts there would give Ankara pause. But this was a historic moment; after the evacuation of most Turks from Libya in the first two weeks of the conflict, Ankara could have

taken the lead in pressing Qaddafi to stop his onslaught on his own population, declare support for the rightful demands of the pro-democracy protestors, and support and participate in imposing a no fly zone. Turkish military participation in the no fly zone would have helped demonstrate Turkey's leadership role in the region. It would have emphasized that Turkey is willing to put its money where its mouth is when it comes to building a democratic and stable region.

Instead, as of this writing (late March 2011) Ankara has come out of the Libyan crisis looking dependent and self-interested. There is still much to unfold in the wave of Arab pro-democracy uprisings in the region; and Turkey still has ample room to develop its leadership role in standing on the side of democracy and reform. This could be Turkey's moment in the Middle East; or the opportunity could be lost.

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THE TESEV SURVEY

The responses to TESEV's wide ranging survey provide very interesting food for reflection. The first question emphasizes that in all countries in the region (Arab countries and Iran), respondents identify economic problems as the most important facing their countries. This is a noteworthy result because Turkey is the only country in the region that has built a successful, productive, and rapidly growing economy that is able to compete in world markets. It is also the only country where

economic policy is a main driver of domestic and foreign policy, and where jobs and socio-economic justice issues are pressed upon the government by recurring and real elections. The other big economies in the region, such as those of Saudi Arabia and Iran, are largely dependent on oil and gas revenues, have not been able to raise productivity to global standards, do not create sufficient jobs, and wealth distribution is occasionally granted as a gift from the authorities rather than part and parcel of a truly democratic accountability mechanism.

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Regional prioritization of economic issues, and Turkey's obvious success in this area, must be accounted as one of the reasons of regional appreciation of the Turkish experience. The results of question 1 would have been clearer, however, had the question included a possible response relating to democracy or political participation; by leaving that alternative out of the question, the results might have been artificially skewed toward economic responses.

In any case, the prioritization of economic issues ties in to responses to a question about Turkish products, where 76% of respondents report that they have purchased or consumed a Turkish product; in other words, people have a firsthand experience of the success of the Turkish economy and Turkish exports through their own purchases and consumption.

It also ties in to responses to a question about the region's strongest economy in which respondents rank Turkey second to Saudi Arabia today in terms of economic strength,

but they perceive that Turkey will be well ahead of Saudi Arabia, Iran and other economies ten years from now. In other words, although oil revenues give Saudi Arabia and Iran current power, only Turkey is perceived as having a model for sustained and rapid growth.

Interestingly, despite the high current rating of Saudi Arabia's economic power, Turkey is nevertheless perceived as currently having the most 'economic influence'. This might reflect the perception that while Saudi Arabia and Iran's oil economies give them large amounts of cash, Turkey's economic growth is built on economic interaction (trade, investment, tourism, etc.) with its neighbours; hence its economic relations are perceived as integrated into the economies of its neighbours perhaps more so than those of the oil economies, where their money is made by selling resources to China, India, Japan, and Europe and the US rather than deep engagement with the economies of the region.

In question 2 of the survey, when asked what is the most pressing issue facing the Middle East as a region, respondents from all countries except Iraq and Iran identified the Israeli-Arab conflict as number one; in Iraq and Iran, economic issues remained the top priority. This triggers two reflections: first, Ankara is correct to give that conflict a high priority in its regional diplomacy; but second, for its biggest two immediate neighbours, it is economics not the Israeli-Arab issue which is highest in peoples' minds. This indicates that in giving attention to the Israeli-Arab conflict, Ankara should not overemphasize that issue at the expense of economic and developmental issues.

This might be relevant in calibrating Turkey's approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict: until 2008 Turkey's value-added in the Arab-Israeli

conflict was its ability to mediate between the parties, which relied on its good relations with both sides; since the Gaza war and the flotilla incident Turkey has become more popular in the Arab and Iranian region by becoming more openly hostile to Israel, but has lost some influence and relevance in the Arab-Israeli conflict because it no longer has the ability to offer effective mediation. The confrontational attitude is understandable and probably justified given what happened in Gaza and with the flotilla, but it puts Turkey in a similar position to many other countries in the region, and removes one of its comparative advantages.

Also Turkey's strong stance toward Israel—again, although understandable—seemingly goes against Turkey's 'zero problems' foreign policy approach. At the end of the day, as Turkey has stated repeatedly relating to many crises in the region, there is no real way forward besides serious negotiation and looking for conflict resolution and building of common ground. Turkey's zero problems policy was partly built to serve its economic interests in a stable and open region; the sooner Turkey can return to a leadership position in pushing the peace process forward, the better it is for Turkey and the region.

In a question about regional and international organizations, such as the Arab League, the Organization of Islamic conference, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), as well as the UN, EU and NATO all have acceptable approval ratings of around 50% despite their many shortcomings at various levels. To my mind, this indicates that there is a broad level of acceptance for multilateral cooperation and organizations. This is an encouraging sign in the direction of building a regional cooperation framework. Arab countries are involved in the Arab league, the OIC, and some in the GCC.

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Turkey is a member of many such organizations such as the G20, D8, NATO, OIC, BSCE, and others. And Turkey has moved toward limited regional organization for example through organizing a free trade zone with Syria, Lebanon and Jordan. The long term goal would be to build a broader framework including the Arab countries of the Levant and the gulf along with Turkey and Iran. As I have mentioned above, I have written about this elsewhere (op. cit.), but the findings of this question seem to encourage such cooperation.

The survey shows that Turkey has a very high positive association in the Arab countries and Iran (around 80-90%), except in Iraq, where the rating is around 58-69%. The reason for this is probably because of Kurdish northern Iraq opinion in the survey, given the troubled history of Kurdish-Turkish relations. Given the entrenchment of Kurdish issues in Iraq, Syria and Iran, this question indicates that the Kurdish question remains a primary challenge for Turkish foreign policy as it is for domestic policy. Although the AKP has dramatically improved relations with Kurdish communities both within and outside Turkey, the relationship still remains tense. Turkish relations with Iraqi Kurds have improved dramatically with Turkey being the main investor in Iraqi Kurdistan; but old wounds take time to heal and more work needs to be done.

The positive view of Turkey is confirmed in that it is no longer seen as a threat (except by some 6% of Iraqis—see reasoning above), while it is

seen as a primary defender of the Palestinian cause and a voice for Muslims in general. Note that the time period in which the survey was conducted highlighted Turkey's clash with Israel after the flotilla incident; were the survey to be taken today, respondents might answer the question in light of more recent events: Turkey's profile in light of the recent Arab uprisings, and its position vis a vis the Libyan crisis.

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The survey also highlights Arab views about Iran, indicating that a majority (59%) want Iran to play a bigger role in the middle east, and opinion is split (39% to 35%) as to whether Iran should acquire nuclear weapons. The first of these findings, in particular, indicates that many of the people who favour a strong Turkish role in the region (question 10: 78%) also favour a strong Iranian role. In other words, most respondents don't see the Turkish role as countering or balancing the Iranian role. Although the survey doesn't explore the reasoning behind this, it might be that respondents feel that Iranian and Turkish roles are complementary in providing strategic weight and depth to the Arab world in countering threats from Israel, or possibly the west; or simply that larger roles for strong regional Muslim neighbours like Turkey and Iran is in generally a good thing in itself for Arab societies, economies and states.

The results of the question about the Turkish model are truly impressive, as 66% of respondents believe that Turkey can "be a model for middle eastern countries". And

follow up questions try to find out why this is the case, with respondents giving myriad answers including Turkey's Muslim background, its economic power, its democratic regime, its secular system, and many other reasons. In other words, no clear picture emerges as to why Turkey is favoured as a model, although it clearly is. One might summarize the impression by saying that Turkey has a clearly functioning democratic system, a booming economy, and a balance of sorts between Islam and secularism, and a strong and impressive role in the region and the world. What's not to like? The question would have been more powerful, had surveyors also asked whether other countries, like Iran, Saudi Arabia, or Syria were also perceived as models. This would have given the reader a much stronger measurement of how far ahead Turkey was as a model, or was it simply being identified as such because of its popular role in standing up to Israel etc. This issue could be further explored in a subsequent survey. However, the recent Arab pro-democracy uprisings, as well as pro-democracy protests in Iran, would indicate that Turkey's democratic political system is an important factor behind its popularity as a model.

Questions 20 and 21 indicate the influence of soft power. A full 78% of respondents in the Arab world and Iran report that they have watched Turkish soap operas. Indeed these TV programs have taken the region by storm, with Turkish TV stars becoming pop idols among young and old, men and women. The impact of watching hours of these Turkish soap operas cannot be underestimated as they have the effect of creating attachment, understanding, and affection for Turkish identity, culture, and values among wide regional publics. Like Egyptian TV and cinema created a prominent cultural place for Egypt in previous decades, Turkish television has made

similar inroads in Arab (and Iranian) popular culture. This has been complemented by a wave of tourism to Turkey in which Arabs and Iranians from various classes and walks of life have visited Turkey and become familiar and attached to its towns and cities, history and monuments, culture and people. Turkey is identified in the survey as the most popular tourist destination (35% put it as their first choice; followed by 19% for Saudi Arabia; and 13% for Lebanon.)

CONCLUSION

Indeed TESEV's latest opinion survey gives the reader a broad and fairly solid picture of regional views of Turkey. The view is overwhelmingly positive, and certainly gives Turkey unprecedented opportunities—and perhaps responsibilities as well. Turkish regional

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foreign policy has been very active in recent years, making headlines repeatedly, although not yet scoring many successes. As the people of the region rebel in favour of democratic change, Turkey certainly has even more potential—and responsibility. The TESEV survey shows that the people of the region are very positively inclined toward Turkey, and this implies that they would be favourable to a broader Turkish role that goes beyond confronting Israel, and toward helping the societies of the region move more steadily toward democratic change and economic development.



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TESEV FOREIGN POLICY PROGRAMME

The Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV) is an independent non-governmental think-tank, analyzing Turkey's most pressing social, cultural, political and economic issues. Based in Istanbul, TESEV was founded in 1994 to serve as a bridge between academic research and the policy-making process in Turkey by opening new channels for policy-oriented dialogue and research.

TESEV's Foreign Policy Programme aims to contribute to the resolution of critical foreign policy issues, to advocate Turkey's membership in the European Union and to help Turkey define its regional and global position. Currently the Programme works under four main themes: the European Union, Cyprus, the Middle East and Armenia.

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