The Empires Strike Back

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Articles & Testimony

Turkey will rise as a regional power only if it sets a genuine example as a liberal democracy and builds strong ties with all its neighbors.

As Egyptians and Tunisians vote to replace ousted despots and the Syrian government teeters on the brink, two old imperial powers are competing to exert their political influence over Arab countries in upheaval. And they are not America and Russia. After years of cold-war competition over the Middle East and North Africa, it is now France and Turkey that are vying for lucrative business ties and the chance to mold a new generation of leaders in lands that they once controlled.

This rivalry is nothing new. Since Napoleon invaded Egypt in 1798, France and Turkey have competed for dominance in the Middle East. France's rise as a Mediterranean power has been an inverse function of Turkish decline around the same sea. As the Ottoman Empire gradually collapsed, France acquired Algeria, Tunisia and, temporarily, Egypt. The French took one final bite from the dying empire by securing control over Syria and Lebanon after World War I.

This rivalry subsided in the 20th century, when Turkey became an inward-looking nation state. During the era of decolonization, France lost political control of lands extending from Morocco in the west to Syria in the east. Paris, however, maintained economic and political clout in the region by supporting large French businesses, which established lucrative ties with the region's rulers. Even Turkey once looked to France as a model: when Mustafa Kemal Ataturk founded modern Turkey in 1923, he championed the French model of hard secularism, which stipulates freedom from religion in government, politics and education.

While France has dominated much of the region over the past two centuries, that is now changing. And if Turkey plays its cards right, it could match France's influence or even become the dominant power in the region.

In the last decade, Turkey has witnessed record-breaking economic growth. It is no longer a poor country desperately seeking accession to the European Union. It has a $1.1 trillion economy, a powerful army and

aspirations to shape the region in its image. As political turmoil paralyzes North Africa, Syria and Iraq, and economic meltdown devastates much of Mediterranean Europe, Turkey and France have largely been spared. And their growing rivalry is one reason France has objected to Turkey's bid for European Union membership.

Taken together with France's efforts to create a European-Mediterranean Union, which Nicolas Sarkozy conceived in 2008 as a way to place France at the helm of the Mediterranean world, one thing has become obvious to the Turks: Paris won't allow Turkey into the European Union or let it become a powerful player in a French-led Mediterranean region.

Turkey's newly activist foreign policy has therefore shifted away from Europe. The ruling Justice and Development Party, known as the A.K.P., is now cultivating ties with former Ottoman lands that were ignored for much of the 20th century. Of the 33 new Turkish diplomatic missions opened in the past decade, 18 are in Muslim and African countries.

This has resulted in new commercial and political ties, often at the expense of Turkey's ties with Europe. In 1999, the European Union accounted for over 56 percent of Turkish trade; in 2011, it was just 41 percent. Over the same period, Islamic countries' share of Turkish trade climbed to 20 percent from 12 percent.

New trade patterns have led to the emergence of a more socially conservative business elite based in central Turkey, which derives strength from trading beyond Europe and is using its new wealth to push for a redefinition of Turkey's traditional approach to secularism. Since 2002, Ataturk's French-inspired model has collapsed; the A.K.P. and its allies have instead promoted a softer form of secularism that allows for more religious expression in government, politics and education. This has made the Turkish model appealing to Arab countries, which for the most part regard French-style secularism as anathema.

Although both countries once coddled dictators -- Mr. Sarkozy allowed Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi to occupy central Paris and pitch a tent near the Elysee Palace in 2007, and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan accepted the Qaddafi international prize in 2010 -- Turkey threw its support behind the Arab revolts early on, winning fans across the region.

Until it backed Libya's rebels last year, France had bet on the enduring nature of dictatorships and never forged ties with the democratic forces opposing them; Turkey did so, perhaps unwittingly, by expanding its soft power into Arab countries, building business networks and founding state-of-the-art high schools, run by the Sufi Islam-inspired Gulen movement, to educate the future Arab elite. Now, the Arab Spring is providing Turkey with an unprecedented opportunity to spread its influence further in newly free Arab societies.

As France's business ties with the old secular elite fray, its influence is waning. It remains a military and cultural power, and will continue to attract Arab elites, even Islamist ones, seeking weapons and luxury goods. However, France will find it hard to market its brand of secularism across the region or match Turkey's grass-roots business networks, especially in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq, where Turkey already has significant clout.

Even so, the road ahead will be rocky. Turkey ruled the Arab Middle East until World War I, and it must now be careful about how its messages are perceived there. Arabs might be drawn to fellow Muslims, but like the French, the Turks are former imperial masters. Arabs are pressing for democracy, and if Turkey behaves like a new imperial power, this approach will backfire. At a recent conference at Zirve University, a gleaming private school in Gaziantep financed by the local businesses that have made Turkey a regional economic powerhouse, Arab liberals and Islamists from various countries disagreed on most matters but agreed on one thing: that Turkey is welcome in the Middle East but should not dominate it.

In September, when Mr. Erdogan landed at Cairo's new airport terminal (built by Turkish companies), he was warmly met by joyous millions, mobilized by the Muslim Brotherhood. However, he soon upset his pious hosts by

preaching about the importance of a secular government that provides freedom of religion, using the Turkish word "laiklik" -- derived from the French word for secularism. In Arabic, this term loosely translates as "irreligious." Mr. Erdogan's message may have been partly lost in translation, yet the incident illustrates the limits of Turkey's influence in countries that are far more socially conservative than it is.

Turkey may have the upper hand in soft power, but France has more hard power, as the recent war in Libya and its veto power at the United Nations make clear. And despite Turkey's phenomenal growth since 2002, the French economy is over twice the size of Turkey's, and France is still dominant in North Africa.

Turkey's relative stability at a time when the region is in upheaval is attracting investment from less-stable neighbors like Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Ultimately, political stability and regional clout are Turkey's hard cash, and its economic growth will depend on both.

If Turkey wants to become a true beacon of democracy in the Middle East, its new constitution must provide broader individual rights for the country's citizens, including the Kurds. It will also need to fulfill Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu's vision of a "no problems" foreign policy. This means moving past the 2010 flotilla episode to rebuild strong ties with Israel and getting along with the Greek Cypriots who live on the southern part of the divided island of Cyprus (Turkish Cypriots control the north). The conflict there has lasted for decades; poorer Turkish Cypriots want a loose federation and the Greek Cypriot majority wants a strong central government.

The recent discovery of natural gas off the south coast of Cyprus is a major opportunity. Turkey could rise above the fray by proposing unification of the island in exchange for an agreement to share gas revenues. Such a deal, coupled with improved Turkish-Israeli ties, could facilitate cooperation in extracting even larger gas deposits off Israel's coast; Turkey is the most logical destination for a pipeline from there to foreign markets.

Turkey will rise as a regional power only if it sets a genuine example as a liberal democracy and builds strong ties with all its neighbors. This is Mr. Erdogan's challenge as he tries to undo Napoleon's legacy.

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