

Ties to Neighbors, Not Their Dictators

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Turkey is rising to the challenge to lead the Middle East by example.

The Middle East is not Benelux, unfortunately -- not yet. In 2002, when Turkey's newly elected Justice and Development Party began a policy of rapprochement with the country's Middle Eastern neighbors, including Syria, the hope was that this would jump-start integration between Turkey and its neighbors, creating something like the 1950s "Benelux" bloc of Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg. Ankara also hoped to benefit from this process by building soft power across the Muslim Middle East, in hope of rising up as a regional leader.

Until the Arab Spring, this policy seemed to be inconclusive, largely because of the hard reality on the ground: Turkey's counterparts in rapprochement were not its neighboring peoples, but rather their undemocratic regimes.

Syria is a case in point: whereas Ankara hoped to reach out to the Syrian people, the Assad regime took advantage of its close ties with Turkey, a member of NATO, to gain legitimacy while oppressing its people.

The Arab Spring has ended the mirage. Even though Ankara repeatedly asked President Bashar al-Assad to stop killing civilians, he chose to ignore these calls -- demonstrating that there was never true rapprochement between Turkey and Syria, and that Ankara had been unsuccessful in establishing effective soft power over Damascus.

Subsequently, Ankara has dropped Assad, emerging instead as the chief regional opponent of his policies. This is Ankara's new policy toward the Arab Middle East: leading the world in dropping dictators in favor of the pro-democracy movements, from Egypt to Libya to Syria.

Accordingly, Turkey now has a chance to promote democracy in the Middle East, build ties with its neighboring peoples, and rise to leadership in the region, all at the same time.

Turkey's time to become a Middle East power seems to have arrived. Challenges remain, of course, including the future of Turkish-Israeli ties and Iran's hostile attitude to Ankara's rising influence in the region. If Turkey and Israel can come to some accord, this would help Ankara's ambitions to become a regional leader, respected and liked by the peoples of the region. Iran is a more tricky case: Tehran envisions itself as the Middle East hegemon and will

do all it can to undermine Turkey's ambitions to be the leader of a democratic Middle East.

Turkey is already rising to the challenge to lead the region by example. For instance, its prime minister recently called for secular democracy during his trip to Egypt, upsetting that country's Islamists. Not since the heyday of the Ottoman Empire have the Turks had this much clout in the Middle East. The sultans must be green with envy.

Soner Cagaptay is director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute. ❖

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