

Uncomfortable Ottomans

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Articles & Testimony

Turkey's newly assertive foreign policy is straining to keep up with the Arab Spring.

Turks are preparing for general elections on June 12, but it is Turkey's meteoric rise as a regional power that has captured the world's attention. The uprisings sweeping the Arab world have both accentuated and challenged this trend, and how Turkey responds will do much to determine its international identity for years to come.

Since coming to power in 2002, Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) has adopted a "zero problems" policy with its neighbors, attempting to resolve long-standing disputes and stressing cooperation over confrontation. It launched a rapprochement with Syria and other Arab countries, and, as a result, Turkish-Syrian relations improved dramatically beginning in 2003.

The AKP argued that establishing ties with the Muslim populations around Turkey would endow Ankara with soft power. But the plan had a flaw: In undemocratic states like Syria and Libya, Ankara was not expanding its relationships with the people, but with brutal leaders such as Bashar al-Assad and Muammar al-Qaddafi. With the Arab Spring toppling tyrants left and right, however, Turkey must not only take into account its relationships with dictators, but also the popular uprisings that challenge these rulers. How the AKP grapples with this conundrum will be the defining issue of Turkish foreign policy for the country's next government.

Syria is an important test case. So far, Ankara has called for Assad to reform -- but not to step down, even though he has killed more than 1,200 of his citizens, according to human rights organizations. In a June 7 interview, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu reaffirmed that Turkey "looks to the Syrian government as legitimate and has no plans to contact any Syrian opposition groups."

But Turkey is also gradually moving in support of the Syrian people. First, in April, the government facilitated a Syrian opposition news conference held in Istanbul, in which leaders of Syria's Muslim Brotherhood denounced Assad's regime. Next, on June 1, the Syrian opposition held a conference in the southern Turkish city of Antalya, which drew significant support from Turkish civil society and was held under state protection. The gathering of about 300 otherwise unorganized Syrian dissidents was perhaps the most serious attempt to construct a viable alternative to the Assad family's 40-year rule.

Turkey's coddling of the Assad regime was hardly charity work. Back in 2003, the AKP was looking to expand Turkish influence further east, and Syria -- which enjoyed clout among Lebanese, Palestinians, and Iraqis -- was a logical gateway. At the time, the Syrian leadership appeared to have a firm grip on power domestically, but was under immense international pressure stemming from its suspected involvement in political assassinations in Lebanon, its hosting of the Palestinian militant group Hamas, and the flow of foreign fighters from its territory to attack U.S. forces in Iraq. Turkey provided the Assad regime with much-needed political and economic relief, helping it emerge from its international isolation and attract much-needed foreign investment -- something Syria's long-standing alliance with Iran could not provide.

This confluence of interest was formalized through the first-ever visit by a Syrian president to Turkey in January 2004 and the signing of a strategic partnership treaty between the two countries later that year. The treaty eventually included almost 50 bilateral agreements; trade barriers and visa restrictions between the countries were lifted. In April 2009, the two countries held an unprecedented three-day military exercise and signed a defense cooperation treaty. In return, Syria promoted Turkey's regional ambitions by anointing Ankara in 2008 as chief mediator in its indirect negotiations with Israel, a role much coveted by the French and others. It also did not oppose a greater Turkish role in Lebanese and Palestinian affairs.

The current Syrian uprising brought this burgeoning strategic partnership to a screeching halt. Predominantly Sunni Turkey, especially because of the conservative and Islamist pedigree of the AKP, could not stand idly by as Assad, who heads a minority Alawite regime, massacred fellow Sunnis. Turkey also has to contend with the possibility that lasting chaos in northwest Syria would allow Kurdish militants to use the region as a base of operations against it. Such developments not only pose a serious security threat along Turkey's borders, but potentially undercut the AKP's domestic standing ahead of a general election.

Turkey's latest attempt to help organize the opposition also reflects an unmistakable desire to become a power broker in both domestic Syrian politics and the broader Levant. Whether Assad falls from power or somehow manages to hold on to his throne remains unclear. Either way, Turkey wants to be intimately involved.

Unlike the United States, Europe, and other regional powers, Turkey enjoys significant leverage with Syria and is uniquely positioned to engineer a "soft landing" for the current uprising. Its economic and military clout, and even its control over sources of water, could be brought to bear if Assad's determination to remain in power threatens Turkish and regional security. For now however, it appears that the AKP's "zero problems" with neighbors policy has found a modus vivendi: engage with the rulers and popular uprisings alike, with an eye to picking the winner.

If the AKP plays its hand well, the Arab Spring could finally give Turkey the soft power it craves in the Arab world. But Turkey's delicate balancing act between the people and their rulers could also have the opposite result if its ties with despised despots do not keep pace with the aspirations of newly empowered Arab peoples.

As a well-known Turkish expression, with a quaint reference to an Egyptian town, goes, "One might lose his rice while trying to take Damietta." In other words, Turkey could lose both the Arab people and their rulers if it bets on the wrong horse.

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