

Turkey, Russia, and the Arab Spring

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More than a year after the inception of the so-called Arab Spring, Turkey's much-ballyhooed regional rise is teetering on the brink. Especially in its ability to influence outcomes in Syria, but also in its reading of regional dynamics in general, Turkey finds itself consistently outmaneuvered by other regional powers like Russia and Iran with longer standing interests in the Middle East. Furthermore, the convergence between the positions of Turkey and the West on Syria, when so explicitly pitted against the Russian position (whether or not by design), recalls to mind Cold War dynamics where Turkey was hardly more than an extension of the United States in terms of its role in the region. In other words, Turkey may finally be in the big leagues, but it is also dangerously close to a strikeout.

This means that soon the AKP government of Turkey may face the very real possibility of having to reduce its regional ambitions to little more than Turkey's traditional (and mostly irrelevant) twentieth century role in the Middle East. That this would be so despite the economic, political, and social strides Turkey has made over the last decades would make such an outcome an even worse failure than it was in the past. This is also bad news for the United States and the EU, because a Turkey perceived not to be autonomous will have no credibility at all in the Middle East and hence will be entirely useless as a middleman between the West and the region.

Not all is lost for Turkey, and for its friends in the West who believe that active Turkish involvement makes the Middle East a better place. There is still a window for Turkey to regain its foothold in the region, but first it needs to stop making rookie mistakes. This requires getting a better read on regional competitors like Russia and playing to Turkey's strengths in foreign policy, which involve neither religion nor the military.

As in the Caspian, So in the Middle East

One of the main roadblocks to Turkey's ambitions for influence in the Middle East is Russia, now that the latter has thrown its weight squarely behind the Assad regime in Syria (and also Iran). Turkey has repeatedly criticized the Assad regime, given aid to Syrian refugees fleeing across the border, hosted the second "Friends of Syria" meeting in Istanbul in April, and called for international intervention with increasing urgency. Yet Assad has kept hanging on, in no small part due to Russian support, and Turkey is burning through its hard-earned (but shallow) cache of soft power in the Middle East with each passing day of bloodshed. This puts Turkey once again in an uncomfortable position vis-à-vis Russia.

This, however, should not have come as a surprise. It is a repeat of the scenario Turkey has been facing in the Caucasus, another region of common concern. Turkey should have learned from its experiences in the Caspian basin, where Russia did not at all meet its expectations on at least two major policy issues (as Turkey had presumed it would):

1) Normalization of relations with Armenia

In 2008, the AKP government initiated an attempt to normalize relations with Armenia. The border between the two countries has been closed since 1993 in solidarity with Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. As part of this initiative, President Abdullah Gül visited Yerevan in 2008, and the governments signed joint protocols in 2009 establishing diplomatic ties and an opening of the border. This warming of relations was vigorously protested by Azerbaijan, whose concerns could only be assuaged by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's promises not to make any more progress on the bilateral relations until the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute was settled. Armenia rejected the effort to link the two issues, and the reconciliation efforts quickly unraveled.

Russia heavily figures into this debacle. As Stephen Larrabee remarks, "Turkish leaders appear to have believed that Turkey's good relations with Russia somehow would induce the Kremlin to put pressure on Armenia to make concessions on Nagorno-Karabakh."¹ This optimism was quite misplaced. The continuation of the conflict between Turkey, Armenia, and Azerbaijan ensures Armenian dependence on Russia. At the same time, Azerbaijan's frustration with Turkey's attempt at normalization (and U.S. support for this move) brought Azerbaijan closer to the Russian camp. In other words, contrary to Turkish expectations, Russia had nothing to gain from assisting Turkey on this matter, and it did not.

2) Turkey's Caucasian energy ambitions

Turkey also was completely blindsided by the August 2008 Russian invasion of Georgia, which drastically threatened Turkey's plans to become the center of the planned East-

¹ Stephen Larrabee, "Turkey's Eurasian Agenda," *The Washington Quarterly*, 2011, 109.

West energy corridor, as manifested in the existing Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (South Caucasus) natural gas pipeline and the planned Nabucco project.

The invasion put Turkey in a really difficult spot between two seeming allies. Georgia is a strategic partner of Turkey in the aforementioned energy projects and also one of the rare neighbors with which Turkey has an almost open-door trade and travel policy. Russia, on the other hand, is Turkey's largest trading partner, supplying more than half of Turkey's natural gas and a considerable portion of its oil imports. Russia also plays a leading role in Turkey's pursuit of nuclear energy. Finally, Russia is an important market for Turkish goods and construction contracts. Given such ties, Turkey could not take a strong stand against Russia's invasion.

Subsequent efforts by Turkey to maneuver out of this tight spot between Georgia and Russia created only more problems. One such effort involved the hastily pieced-together Caucasus Platform for Cooperation and Stability, an initiative that was supposed to enhance cooperation between Russia, Turkey, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia. However, this initiative ended up dead on arrival and, at the same time, alienated the United States and the EU as they had not been consulted by Turkey in the effort. Yet another problematic effort involved Turkey signing up for Russia's South Stream pipeline project. Despite Turkey's public claims to the contrary, all experts agree that the South Stream pipeline is a competitor to the EU-planned Nabucco or other southern corridor pipeline, designed to cut Russia out of Caucasian energy routes. For years, Nabucco has been central to Turkey's energy ambitions and has served as important leverage in Turkey's EU negotiations. Given this, Turkey's involvement in the South Stream project is best described by paraphrasing a Turkish proverb, "in order to please Russia, Turkey is cutting the branch it is sitting on."

Turkey as a Great Game Novice

Given these developments in the Caucasus, it should have come as no surprise that Russia is similarly undermining Turkey's involvement in the Middle East. Yet wild-eyed optimism about Russia's support for Turkey's regional ambitions again led to Turkey getting blindsided here as well. What accounts for this miscalculation?

For one, despite a centuries-old rivalry between these countries, the bilateral relationship between Turkey and Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union has been uncharacteristically warm, or at least perceived as such from the Turkish side. In addition to the aforementioned trade and energy ties, the increased presence of Russian tourists in Turkey, as well as many intermarriages, have left in most Turks' minds the image of a fuzzy, friendly, and jovial Russia, as opposed to, for instance, an interventionist United States or hypocritically snobbish Europe. There is also a sense of common victimization, a belief that Russia suffers from similar double standards as Turkey on the part of the West.

Furthermore, until the recent ambitious turn of Turkish foreign policy, Turkey was completely aloof to developments in neighboring regions. Newspapers hardly

covered what was happening in the Caucasus², Iran, or the Arab Middle East; politicians rarely talked about these regions; Turkish academics hardly ever studied them.³ This is a real problem in crafting Turkish foreign policy – Turkey’s newfound ambition is sitting on a serious vacuum of expertise, which is further constrained by the very hierarchical ideas many Turks have about political development and modernization as a result of their own internalization of official Turkish history (this is true even among the Islamists). Many Turks believe that they are naturally due a leadership role in the Middle East and have condescending notions about development in the region.

A lack of regional expertise did not pose as much of a challenge when the Middle East was politically stable. Back then all that was needed for influence were Turkish merchants making business contacts and Turkish soap operas gathering television audiences. Turkish businessmen could sell even non-*halal* snails in a Muslim neighborhood (to borrow another Turkish saying) and Turkish soap operas are quite addictive, so influence came easily. However, since the inception of the Arab Spring, Turkey finds itself quite hampered by its inability to effectively understand regional dynamics, including the motivations of Russian involvement there.

Sunnification of Turkish Foreign Policy is a Mistake

Partly in order to fill this knowledge gap, the governing AKP party is increasingly digging into its own expert networks, which I think partly explains the increasingly Sunni emphasis of AKP’s foreign policy. Devout Sunni communities in Turkey are one community that (at least theoretically) maintained ties with the Middle East during Turkey’s Republican years. Yet it goes without saying that these communities have their own biases when it comes to the various sectarian communities throughout the Middle East. More importantly, a feeling of “brotherhood,” however genuine, cannot replace true policy expertise.

Such are some of the reasons behind Turkey’s recent missteps in the Middle East. If Turkey is to become a serious player in the Great Game of the twenty-first century, it has a lot of catching up to do. The first step is coming to terms with Russia’s power and strategic regional interests. This does not mean Russia is Turkey’s enemy, but neither is it the friendly uncle Turkey has made it out to be. Any long-term planning by Turkey that does not accurately anticipate Russia’s strategic behavior is bound to unravel. Second, Turkey needs to understand that it is always going to be bested by Russia and the West in the military realm in terms of resource capabilities; by Russia, Iran, and Saudi Arabia in the energy realm; by Iran and Saudi Arabia in the religious identity politics realm; and all Arab countries in the ethnic affiliation game. It is a fool’s errand to chase dreams of power in these spheres.

² Even during the height of the Ngorno-Karabakh conflict, this region received much less attention than the Balkans.

³ I would generously estimate that for every twenty academics that study an area to the west of Turkey, there is only one academic who studies an area to the east or south. This situation started to change only recently.

Instead, what Turkey can really offer is its hybrid of East and West: democracy with a blend of mild authoritarianism, apparent community with a blend of capitalism, and moderate conservative values with a blend of tolerance for alternative choices. This is a compromise model that is both attractive to all parties involved and more sustainable than the other options in the long run, especially for states that are not resource rich, which is the majority in the Middle East. If the United States wants stability in the Middle East, this is the Turkish strategy it should be pushing for.