

## **Turkish Reactions to the Arab Spring: Implications for United States Foreign Policy**

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### **Abstract**

While Turkey's accession into the European Union has always been a contested and strained subject in United States foreign policy, the role of Turkey is currently changing in the wake of the Arab Spring. This paper will discuss the changing United States-Turkey relationship and the changing role of Turkey in the evolving Middle East. Furthermore, it will show how these factors also influence United States policy towards the European Union. Specifically, it will address how United States diplomacy is changing, especially in regards to Turkey's accession to the European Union. Additionally, there will be a heavy analysis of the past triangular relationship of the United States, Turkey, and the European Union and show the changes therein. Finally, the main argument of the paper will be that the United States should continue to pressure the European Union to begin accession talks for Turkey's membership. However, these pressures must be done in a more delicate manner than the past. Furthermore, the United States should use direct support and diplomacy to shape Turkey's image and relationships with various Middle Eastern actors. If such actions are not taken, the West may risk losing Turkey to the power vacuum the Arab Spring has left in the Middle East, a vacuum that could benefit a more Eastern and Islamic focused Turkey.

**Key Words:** Turkey, the Arab Spring, the European Union, United States-Turkish policy

### **Background**

The history of the United States' relationship to both Turkey and the European Union is a complex and dynamic one. Interactions between the three powers have been dependent upon the current political atmosphere and, in recent years, have grown increasingly tense and complex. Currently, the outlook on relations between the European Union and Turkey are both confused and unreliable, especially given Turkey's recent interest in the Middle East after the Arab Spring and the recent revolutions in Turkey's bordering state of Syria. The United States' role in this matter, as it has always been historically, remains tentative and complicated.

While culturally different, Turkey has shared many ties to Europe dating back to the Ottoman Empire. Indeed, it was upon the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire that Turkey and its Arab neighbors began to differ in political structures and orientation towards the West. While Arab nations remained Islamic and non-democratic, the young Turkish state looked towards Europe as a political and economic model (Bauer and Schiller 2012). In 1924 the caliphate was abolished, paving the way towards the very secular state Turkey is today.

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Upon the fall of the Iron Curtain, Turkey sought to gain the support and acceptance of all of Europe. While Eastern European states were easily – and naturally- ushered into the folds of Europe, the appropriateness of a European Turkey was debatable. Still, in 1996 Turkey entered the European Union's customs union, which was soon followed by talks of Turkey's candidacy for the European Union. It "marked the beginning of higher levels of economic integration between Turkey and the EU" (Tocci 2011). Even after Turkey's candidacy was acknowledged, however, there has been little headway on beginning Turkey's accession into the EU, a process that takes several years even without the political delays Turkey has experienced.

While the issue is constantly debated throughout Europe, there have been several ideas and reasons for not admitting Turkey. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Turkey's economy and human rights violations were behind that of the EU's admissions standards (Tocci 2011). However, Turkey is now one of the fastest growing economies in the world at just under seven percent (Friedman 2010). While the Armenian genocide remains a huge topic of debate, violence within Turkey against its Kurdish minority has declined (Tocci 2011). Thus, the issues currently blocking Turkey's accession only regard Turkey's cultural, geopolitical, and geographical relevance for belonging in the EU. Generally, there is a sense that Turkey is an "other;" a Muslim state, with a recent past of human rights violations and closer geographical ties to the Middle East, it is certainly no traditional European nation.

The United States, however, views Turkey politically useful in three ways. European supporters of Turkey's EU accession often also believe in the same utilitarian qualities that the United States values of Turkey. First, Turkey has historically been a buffer state. Originally, this began out of a Cold War fear to contain Communism. Indeed, Turkey was included in NATO to be a buffer against the USSR (Tocci 2011). This was a mutually beneficial relationship; while the United States prevented Russia's access to the Middle East, NATO membership prevented the Russian attempts at controlling and creating a satellite state out of Turkey. Indeed, Turkey was one of the only Arab states targeted by Soviet influence, making the Western-oriented NATO a perfect option for communist deflection (Yilmaz 2012).

Secondly, Turkey has acted as a bridge between the West and the East. This has been a particularly useful aspect for both the United States and for Europe. Geographically, Turkey has been a physical territorial bridge, such as for US invasion into Iraq during the First Gulf War (Tocci, 2011). However, Turkey also serves as a political bridge between Europe and the Middle East. This connection stems naturally from Turkey's success as a culturally Islamic, secular democracy. Thus, while Turkey has worked to have strong political ties to Europe, culturally Turkey aligns well with the Middle East. Furthermore, Turkey borders key Middle Eastern players: Iraq, Iran, and Syria.

Finally, Turkey's utility comes from it being a "Model for the Muslim World" (Tocci 2011). This has been especially helpful in the aftermath of 9/11 as the United States struggles to fight Islamic Terrorism. While economic stagnation has plagued Arab nations, Turkey has been growing, making it a model for a successful Muslim country, especially one that is democratic (Bauer and Schiller 2012). Indeed, many Arab elites view Turkey's success as enviable and see its "comparatively open and pluralistic political system... as an attractive point of reference" (Önis 2012). However, Turkey's role as a model is complicated by the European view. Many

Europeans, often the opponents of Turkey's EU accession, regard too much Turkish influence in the Middle East as evidence that Turkey does not belong deeply rooted in Europe.

Turkey's relationship with Israel is notable because of how it has shifted dynamically in recent years. Originally, relations with Israel began on good footing, as Turkey was the first Arab state to recognize Israel's sovereignty (Bauer and Schiller 2012). At the time, this declaration was not well received by Arab states, which were in constant opposition and war with Israel (Yilmaz 2012). Yet, for decades the strong Israeli-Turkish relationship was maintained. Recently, however, Turkey's stance on Israel has changed drastically. In June 2010, Turkey began cutting off relations with Israel after a deadly Israeli commando raid of a stationed Turkish flotilla (*New York Times* 2012). Beginning in September of 2011, Turkey began cutting diplomatic ties with Israel and expelled Israel's Ambassador to Turkey out of the country (Tocci 2011). These actions have been well received by Arab states. However, they worry both Europe, who views Turkey as suddenly not very European (Tocci 2011), and the United States, a strong ally of Israel.

It is the recent developments of Turkey's Arab relationships that are the focus of this paper. Previously, Turkey held a "zero problems with neighbors policy" in which it made no attempt to spread democracy or secularism to its neighboring Arab states (Önis 2012). By withholding opinions on the vitality of Arab governments, Turkey formed relationships with many leaders in the Middle East. Turkey has also been seen as a strong role model. Its recent economic success and political stability have not compromised its cultural values, and Turkey has no problems saying "no" to the West. Indeed, Turkey vetoed the NATO resolution to use force in Libya in 2011, an action that raised much criticism from the West (Önis 2012). Yet, the trend has also been looked upon with more than disfavor, such as the growing United States concern about the Turkish-Iran relationship, one that has lead Turkey to avoid economic sanctions on Iran (Tocci 2011).

Additionally, Turkey's relationship with Syria is of particular interest for this paper. Throughout the 1990s, Turkish-Syrian relations were poor. However, they improved dramatically during the post-1999 period after the reign of the Justice and Development Party [AKP] (Önis 2012). Turkey then began open trade relations with Syria and allowed for a flexible visa regime, allowing for easy movement of citizens between the two countries. This helped to improve relations between the two nations and added to Turkey's influence in both Syria and the Muslim world. However, as stated previously, the Arab Spring and revolts that have begun in Syria have changed Turkish policy. Now that the revolts have made it to Syria, Turkey has been forced to more directly participate in the Arab Spring through support of insurrectionists and harboring of Syrian refugees (*The New York Times* 2012). While previously a supporter of Syria's leadership, Turkey has now severed ties with the President Assad, imposed travel restrictions upon Syrian government officials, and has even mentioned the possibility of using military force to create a safety zone in Syria (*The New York Times* 2012). Thus, the radically changing times in Syria has put Turkey in a precarious situation, one that may require Turkey's military action if the violence does not end.

### **Potential Problems for United States Foreign Policy**

Currently, it is the uncertainty of Turkey's orientation in global politics that is the most concerning for the United States. Once a fervent supporter of Turkey's accession to the EU, it now appears as talks have stagnated. Currently, there is certainly discussion whether the issue of Turkey joining the European Union is still left pursuing, especially in the eyes of Turkey (Friedman 2010). A European Turkey will always benefit the United States, as both the US and Europe will have influence and clout with Turkish policies towards the Middle East. However, if Turkey no longer views Europe as a valuable identity, the United States could lose usefulness to Turkey as well. For, if Turkey no longer requires US support for its accession into Europe, the United States will need to find another aspect to base relations upon.

The longest standing problem in the triangular United States-Turkish-European relationship is the European Union's reluctance to include and admit Turkey. Even after Turkey worked to remedy human rights abuses and economic growth issues, the European Union has still dragged its feet and "snubbed" the strong assertions by the United States that Turkey be admitted into the European Union (Tocci 2011). The European Union after the Eurocrisis is one in which many member states are struggling economically; yet, Turkey has diversified and strengthened after a short recession in 2009 (Yilmaz 2012). After decades of watching other states admitted into a now financially struggling EU, the frustrations Turkey feels towards Europe are certainly warranted.

Furthermore, the United States has utilized a lot of diplomacy efforts to fight for Turkey's admission to the EU. Often, this has led to criticism by Europe. While the United States has performed both public diplomacy and the "quieter" private diplomacy, strong recommendations for Europe to decide on the Turkish issue has come with backlash (Tocci 2011). French Prime Minister Sarkozy, a public opponent of Turkey's EU admission, stated that in regards to Turkey, "it's very important for Europe to have a border. For me, Europe is a stabilizing element in the world that I cannot allow to be destroyed." (as cited within Tocci p. 83). Germany's Prime Minister Angela Merkel also has criticized US efforts to push for Turkey's accession, stating that if Turkey is to be a bridge it "should never belong totally to one side. Turkey can fulfill its function as a bridge between Asia and Europe much better if it does not become a member of the EU." (as cited within Tocci, 2011 p. 99).

Additionally, changes in administrations have affected US efforts to push for Turkey's accession. Thus, these changes have affected the United States-Turkish dynamic in a way that is not beneficial. George W. Bush was very adamant for Turkey's inclusion in Europe (Tocci 2011). However, many argue that it stemmed from the utility of Turkey, especially for the hopeful use of Turkey to open a second front in the Iraq War of 2003. Barack Obama, despite his strong political clout and approval rating in Europe, has been less adamant about Turkish accession (Tocci 2011). While the United States has traditionally been the force fighting publically for Turkey's admission to the EU, the role has now softened. To Turkey, this may easily come across as a lack of caring by the Obama Administration, who could certainly use his influence in Europe to push for Turkish accession.

Turkey's relationship with Israel also puts the United States in a very uncomfortable position. While previously being very cordial, Turkey has recently and very harshly condemned Israel for its human rights abuses against the Palestinians. While Europe and Israel have criticized this as hypocritical, given Turkey's still improper treatment of Kurds and reluctance to acknowledge the Armenian genocide, the Arab World has received this new relationship well (*The New York Times* 2012). However, if the United States is going to continue to maintain close relations with Israel while continuing to influence Turkey, Turkey's radically sour relationship with Israel will need to be mended.

Finally, there is the issue of the Arab Spring and Turkey's reaction to the events in the Muslim World. When seen together with Turkey's waning, yet warranted, disinterest in Europe, many argue that Turkey may be positioning itself to become a more Eastern oriented power. If the United States and Europe "loose Turkey" to its Arab neighbors, the Western bridge to the Middle East may be closed. Indeed, Turkey is in a key position to become a regional power that could affect the access the West will have in influencing the newly changing Arab states.

Yet, Turkey has managed to maintain its careful balance between East and West in the Arab Spring until recently. It was only when the revolution arrived in Turkey's backyard, Syria, that strong pressure appeared on Turkey to intervene and influence the conflict. Certainly, the Western powers of Europe and America have currently chosen to not get involved in the revolution in Syria beyond the UN sponsored sanctions. And while Russia is warming to the idea of intervening, China has remained a supporter of the current regime in Syria (*New York Times* 2012). This allows Turkey the perfect opportunity to get involved in Syria by attempting to overthrow the current regime and thus being in a position to influence the state building of its neighbor.

Turkey also has an incentive to get involved in the Arab Spring. Turkey could remain the only Western influential ally in the Middle East, as the only other two key players are Iran and Saudi Arabia (Önis 2012). Furthermore, Israel's growing isolationism and the worsening of the Israel-Turkish relationship allow for Turkey to have more influence in the Middle East (Bauer and Schiller 2012). The accelerated chaos in Syria leaves antagonistic states such as Iran the opportunity to support terroristic actions- especially within the KKP- that will then cross the border to Turkey. In this way, the revolution in Syria will continue to put Turkey at a risk. Turkey must be involved so long as there remains uncontained violence on its border.

Yet, another worrying issue for the United States is the seemingly innocuously AKP party in Turkey, which represents a more Islamic and conservative political orientation in Turkey (Yilmaz 2012). While Turkey has long been exalted in the West for its secularism, especially among government officials, the younger generations and current political atmosphere in Turkey does seem to be becoming more and more conservative. The most worrying reflection of this conservatism has been increasing reports of repression of the press, such as has been reported in *The New York Times* (2012). In June 2010, Thomas Friedman reported a growing sense of concern among individuals he interviewed. Many asked for names to be withheld, so that they would not be targeted by legal action by Prime Minister Erdogan and the AKP (Friedman 2010). As of January 2012, the *New York Times* reports that 97 members of Turkey's press were incarcerated, although Mr. Erdogan has denied them being for issues of free speech.

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Thus, after Turkey's constant rejection from the EU, there is a growing sense in Turkey that they will be better received in the Middle East. As Thomas Friedman said in his Op-Ed "Letters From Istanbul, Part 2," "The Turks wanted to get into the European Union and were rebuffed, but I'm not sure Turkish businessmen even care today. The E.U. feels dead next to Turkey." Indeed, with a growing economy, one in which 17% of trade relations are with the Middle East and growing, Turkey has become less reliant upon the approval and acceptance of the EU (Yilmaz 2012). This may be signaling an overall migration from Western political thought to influence in and by the Middle East. For the United States, this could mean losing Turkey as a Western ally to the political advantages the current changes in the Middle East offers.

### **United States Foreign Policy Implications and Recommendations**

While Turkey's changing political climate should be of some concern to the United States, the policy of Turkey's accession into the European Union should never the less be continued. It is still in the United States' strategic interest for Turkey to be Western and European. Indeed, a European Turkey that continues to maintain its Islamic background and ties to the Middle East could become a powerful regional player. In the past, the Middle East has respected Turkey when it stood up to the United States, especially after denying the US access to Turkish territory for the Iraq War of 2003 (Önist 2012). Thus, an independent, Western oriented Turkey could still function as an influence in the Middle East, especially if there is still a sense of respect towards the success of Turkey as an Islamic democracy.

However, the United States must continue to work with Europe to soften relations and change the stalemate that is Turkey's EU accession. As Ziya Önis explains, "Although key Turkish foreign policy figures denied the fact that Turkey had lost interest in the EU membership," the long-standing history between the EU and Turkey indicates that the issue will not easily be overcome in the near future (2012 p. 12). Yet, now is a critical time in Turkey's development, as it is susceptible more than ever to the draw of potential power in the instable Middle East. Europe and the West must continue to be a strong ally to Turkey during this new era.

The United States must also be careful in the delivering of this diplomacy. Criticism of the past, especially of the overly zealous Bush administration, must caution the way the Obama Administration handles the Turkish issue. Often, feedback from Europe has been that private diplomacy is well received but forceful public comments urging for Turkey's EU accession is considered distasteful (Tocci 2011). Even the Obama Administration has been criticized, such as when a French official was commented saying "Please tell your president to shut up!" after a pro-Turkey speech given by President Obama in April 2009 (as cited in Tocci 2011). This may be the reason the Obama Administration has been less active in lobbying for Turkey's EU membership than other administrations (Tocci 2011). However, the United States should be careful to still support and align with Turkey, especially publically. The manner this will be done may change, of course, if a new, Republican Administration is voted into office in the November 2012 United States Presidential Election.

Additionally, the United States should work with Turkey to influence the changes in the Middle East. Particularly, Turkey and the United States are in a position to influence Syria via non-public forms of diplomacy and action. While Turkey may want to influence Syria, it simply does not have the resources to do so alone (Önis 2012). Yet, the United States and Europe may benefit from directly and publically staying out of the insurrection movement in Syria. Neither the EU member states or the United States would have the popular support to authorize military actions, especially not in the United States, which just recently pulled troops out of Iraq and continues to fight in Afghanistan.

The United States can, however, give military and humanitarian aid to both Turkey and Syrian insurrectionists, in the hopes that the violence may lead to the overthrow of President Assad. Turkey, however, should be cautioned against direct military intervention in Syria. Iran, who has their eyes on control of Syria after the revolution, may retaliate with equal force if Turkish troops attempt to create a peace zone in Syria. Furthermore, Turkey may be able to still contribute to the insurrectionist cause by maintaining open borders for refugees, funneling in direct humanitarian aid, and by continuing to covertly supply Syrian insurrectionists. The United States may benefit by supporting Turkey in this endeavor, especially if Turkey becomes a key regional player after the end of the Arab Spring.

Another important aspect of Turkey that the United States must work on facilitating is the Turkish-Israeli relationship. While Turkey may view a negative relationship with Israel as beneficial, especially in the support the new relations have garnered from Arab states, the United States will have a hard time continuing to support the only two Western oriented Middle Eastern states if they are both at odds with one another. While Israel is a key partner in United States diplomacy in the Arab world, Turkey brings a different kind of utility to US policy in the Middle East. Israel is predominantly Christian and Jewish and has shown trends of becoming isolationists after the Arab Spring (Bauer and Schiller 2012). Turkey, however, is the only Islamic based Western partner for the United States. While one could argue relationships with states such as Saudi Arabia are beneficial to the West, Turkey is unique in that it is democratic and secular, yet Islamic by culture. Maintaining ties with Turkey must be a top priority for Middle Eastern diplomacy.

One way to remedy an aspect of the Turkey-Israeli relationship is to address the human rights concerns within Turkey. Indeed, one of the criticisms by Israel after Turkish condemnation of the treatment of Palestinians was the fact that Turkey had its own domestic issues to mitigate. The United States should first and foremost work with Turkey to acknowledge the Armenian genocide. While a complicated issue, many in the West have recognized the genocide, including France, Greece, Italy, Belgium, Sweden, and the European Parliament (Tocci 2011). Recognition of the genocide may even facilitate talks with EU as well, allowing for a general acceptance of the strong stance Turkey has on Israel and the Middle East.

Furthermore, Turkey's relationship with its Kurdish population must not be ignored. While terrorism by the KKP is a real threat to Turkey, retaliation by Turkey has become increasingly severe. In October 2011, Kurdish militants killed 24 Turkish soldiers. In response, Turkey deployed 10,000 troops backed by warplanes into Northern Iraq, a stronghold for the

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Kurdish population (*The New York Times* 2012). Such an answer is extreme and unwarranted, yet it speaks volumes on the complexity and tension the Kurdish issue holds in Turkey.

The United States must work with Turkey to foster relations with its Kurdish separatist minority. While the issue is complex, continuing to find a solution for this minority group within Turkey would only help to stabilize Turkey politically. This is especially significant because Kurdish people comprise of the largest minority in Syria and have remained distrustful of the uprising throughout the revolts against Assad (Karam 2012). While the regional “Friends of Syria” [SNC] meeting in Istanbul, of which Turkey is a natural member, pledged to uphold Kurdish rights in Syria on April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2012, Kurds still remain suspicious of Turkey’s reactions and intents of upholding the pledge (Karam 2012). If Turkey is to remain a legitimate and peaceful influence in Syria, the United States should pressure Turkey to continue to change its relations with Syria’s Kurdish population as well as its own. Keeping the promises of the SNC meeting will help to further legitimize a softer relationship between Turkey and the Kurds.

Finally, the United States can continue support of Turkey by defending it publically, especially from threats by Iran. Recently, Iranian leadership has threatened to attack NATO missile defense shields in Turkey if the United States or Israel intervenes in Iran’s nuclear program (*UK Daily Mail* 2011). Additionally, there has increasing criticism of Turkey by Iran. This is due to Turkish support of Syrian insurrectionists, which Iran views as “Syrian terrorists.” (Dehghan 2012). If Turkey can maintain somewhat good relations with Iran, this may benefit the United States as an ally to Turkey. Still, the situation is precariously and rests heavily on the validity of threats by Iran to retaliate against nuclear non-proliferation sanctions. The United States must also work on gathering intelligence to find out the extent to which Iran intends to oversee the rebuilding of Syria and the Middle East after the Arab Spring.

### Conclusions

While a complicated issue prior to the Arab Spring, the United States-Turkish relationship is growing dangerously more complex and precarious. While Turkish strategic interests are not so well known, it is evident that Turkey will benefit by focusing in on the events in the Middle East. It surely hopes to become a regional partner; however, the true point of concern is how conservative and Islamic-focused Turkey will become in order to fit into the Middle Eastern political arena. Relations between the EU and Turkey do not help matters, as Europe continues to see Turkey as an ally but not a true member of Europe. Lastly, it is unclear whether Turkey even wants to continue to pursue its EU candidacy, especially given the Eurocrisis of 2010 to the present. Regardless, the United States can still separate itself from the negative opinions of Europe and position itself as a strong supporter of Turkey. Furthermore, the United States will benefit from bettering not only Turkish-European relations but also Turkey’s relationships with Israel and Iran. Yet, so much of what the future holds relies heavily upon the outcomes of the Arab Spring. A political “Arab Winter” may plunge the Middle East back into totalitarianism, thus bring Turkey away from intervening in its neighbors. Yet, success in Syria could open the door for Turkey as a strategic partner in the Middle East, in which the United States will surely want to be on the side of Turkey. Now, Turkey is no longer the fledgling country of the past. Through creating a mutually beneficial relationship via strategic support and

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behavior, US influence may still be there to guide Turkey as it maneuvers the world's political big leagues.

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