

ZERO PROBLEMS? TIME FOR A NEW POLICY NARRATIVE

The uprisings in the Middle East have prompted important questions about the future role of Turkey in the region as well as on the state of play at home. While Turkey has been presented as an inspiration or a model, not in the least by Turkey itself, there is little proof to back the relevance of this claim. The Arab spring rather exposes a number of problems for Turkey's foreign policy. The “zero problems with neighbors” doctrine is primarily interest driven, and based on the goal of stability in the region. The Arab street's call for freedom and human dignity call for a new orientation focused on values and prompt questions about the respect for fundamental rights in Turkey itself. Both Turkey's foreign and domestic policies should be rooted in fundamental rights of citizens. With the upcoming elections as a decisive moment for Turkey's future, it is time to define an explicit point on the horizon. A Turkey in which fundamental rights are guaranteed is a better partner and example for all its neighbors.

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The uprisings in the Middle East have prompted important questions about the role of Turkey in the region and the state of play at home. While Turkey has been presented as an inspiration or a model, not in the least by Turkey itself, there is little proof to back the relevance of this claim. The Arab spring rather exposes a number of problems for Turkey's foreign policy. Choices have to be made in the wake of challenges to the 'zero problems with neighbors' doctrine which is primarily interest driven, and based on the goal of stability in the region and friendly relations with neighboring governments. But just as the West is confronted with the unsustainability of its interest driven policies in relation with countries such as Egypt and Libya, the Arab street's call for freedom and human dignity should make Ankara rethink its priorities too. Both Turkey's foreign and domestic policies should be more deeply rooted in fundamental rights of citizens.

Europe and the United States have conceded that interests increasingly conflicted with fundamental rights of citizens in its foreign policy towards the Middle East. American and European politicians have rightfully pledged to reform their policies in favor of supporting people's rights and freedoms. The new era in the Middle East may well see values and interests overlapping. While no one is certain about the outcomes of much of the unrest from Morocco to Syria, Turkey like no other country will need to be more pronounced about the values side of its ambitions in the region. Changes in the Middle East are the final reason to bury the "zero problems" narrative and to replace it with concrete, values based policies.

An Appropriate European Response

Europeans are often caught between faith and suspicion about the real ambition of today's Turkey. Leadership by supporters of Turkey's EU accession is key to keep a fragile balance on the positive side. Prime Minister Erdoğan was complimented by the leader of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, Guy Verhofstadt, for giving "the only appropriate European response" to the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia: to immediately support the people's call for freedoms, rights and opportunities.¹ However, on Libya Turkey took a less decisive stance, placing itself at odds with the West as well as with the population and possible new leadership in this country. Several decisions opposing the line of Turkey's Western allies have led to serious concerns over the ultimate ambition of the Turks over the past years. Strained relations with Israel and the United States, the warm welcome of wanted war criminal Omar Al-Bashir, as well as the "no" vote on Iran sanctions in the UN Security Council are a few clear examples. At the same time, the Europeans' desire to find in Turkey an ally and a liaison with the complicated Middle East remains unchanged.

Turkey has a set of increasingly competing interests with different neighbors. Choices have to be made and priorities have to be formulated. The uprisings in the Arab world will be a litmus test for Turkey's leadership ambitions. This role of Turkey is much

¹Guy Verhofstadt, "The situation in Tunisia and Egypt", 2 February 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dlg04YOv5TI>

debated in Europe. A lack of deliverables after strongly stated ambitions towards several Middle Eastern countries have exacerbated European doubts about Turkey's ultimate goals or its effectiveness. Much of the mistrust of Turkey stems from a lack of a pronounced set of values to guide its policies. Combined with a lack of results to back up claims of a position as a broker for stability in the region, and divergence with the West on a number of crucial decisions, the situation is grim. The revolutions in the Middle East underline the fact that interests do not exist in a vacuum, and that values remain a key foundation of alliances. It is time for Turkey to define an explicit point on the horizon and to embed this domestically as well as to implement values in its international relations. This could give the strained relationship between Turkey and the EU a real boost. It would defy the growing number of voices who fear that Turkey is drifting off in the wrong direction both in terms of Western interest and values.

Syria will be a real test of whether Turkey can materialize its claims as a broker for regional stability and reconciliation. The need for a response to the violent crackdown on citizens confronts Turkey with conflicting interests. In the public perception of the West it may well be an ultimate test case of what Turkey's priorities really are.

Calls for democratic reforms and Turkish appeals to the Syrian government will need to be backed by actions and results. Ironically, relations between Syria and Turkey improved drastically in the past decade – and particularly in the last few years, and this has been referred to as one of the successes of the ‘zero problems with neighbors’ policy.

Until serious investments in trade partnerships and visa free travel were made, military tensions loomed between Turkey and Syria. The relationship with Syria's regime, which has been carefully developed since the turn of the century, now confronts Turkey with difficult decisions while the world is watching. Further moves to either engage or pressure the Syrian regime to respect the human rights of citizens will directly rub off on Turkey's credibility with the international community and on relations with other neighbors. At the same time, Turkish constructive involvement is very much desired and hoped for by Europeans and Americans alike.

Populism and Polarization

Domestic realities on each side add complications to the relationship between Turkey and the EU. The rise of populism on both sides feeds off of harsh statements about the other. Short-term domestic political gains are obvious but long-term damage should not be overlooked. While populists and the far right are against Turkey's European accession to begin with, progressives have been its strongest defenders. Yet, the recent threat to fundamental freedoms in Turkey has put Turkey's strongest allies in a difficult position.

A polarized debate on fundamental freedoms is waging in Turkey. This debate further intensified after the recent arrests of journalists following a court order that criminalizes the possession of a yet unpublished book. The arrests of journalists in Turkey's Ergenekon case have had a significant impact on Turkey's strongest European allies. Liberals are forced to speak out strongly when the values they fiercely defend in Europe

and across the world are violated in Turkey. Free expression, press freedom and civil liberties are key values for liberals.

Prosecutors accused hundreds of conspiring to overthrow the government or, as is the case with dissident journalists, creating a “psychological environment” for a coup. When the Ergenekon case started in 2007, many in Europe supported the effort believing it was aimed at dealing with Turkey's anti-democratic past – especially the role of the military which has staged three coups since the republic was founded in 1923 and continued to meddle in politics. But optimism soon made way for concern as no convictions followed and pre-trial detention periods kept extending. Concern has turned into alarm as fear, polarization along political lines and mistrust in institutions among large parts of Turkish society grew as a result of recent arrests.

This is why European Union officials called upon the government of Turkey to safeguard fundamental rights. Prime Minister Erdoğan reacted saying Europe “should look at itself” before criticizing others.² Such a statement may serve domestic audiences, but it is an inappropriate and untruthful statement to deliver to European counterparts as press freedom and fundamental rights are constantly hotly debated within the EU itself. Such statements also do not help gain public support for the already difficult accession process. After all, when Turkey joins the EU it will be subject to the same laws and scrutiny as other Member States. It has been suggested Erdoğan's planned trip to Brussels was cancelled to avoid critical talks about the state of freedom in Turkey. This is problematic as the Copenhagen criteria, which are the formal criteria by which accession progress are measured, are focused almost entirely on democratic and fundamental values and the rule of law. If any comment is rebutted with a suggestion that Europeans should look at themselves before criticizing Turkey, this is de facto call for disengagement.

Protecting fundamental freedoms is a responsibility of any government. That is why liberals fight threats to press and internet freedom, civil liberties and fundamental rights both in the EU and in the rest of the world. Today's most outspoken critics of Turkey's fundamental rights standards are also among the staunchest defenders of Turkey's accession to the EU, despite obvious electoral benefits in doing the opposite. They have no interest in bashing Turkey or directing undeserved criticism at a country whose candidacy they firmly support.

Those who fight for Turkey's accession to the EU believe both will benefit. Most of all, it will enhance the freedoms, rights and opportunities of people in Turkey. The arrests of journalists and the lack of trust in the independence of Turkey's institutions also take away from Turkey's credibility to work on rebuilding post-revolution societies in the Middle East.

² "Erdoğan's PACE rebuke", *Today's Zaman*, 15 April 2011, http://www.sundayszaman.com/sunday/columnistDetail_getNewsById.action?newsId=241071&columnistId=83

The Summer 2011 Elections

With the June parliamentary elections in Turkey the next month will likely be filled with more messages for domestic consumption. It is advised that the (aspiring) leaders make concrete commitments to serving the rights and freedoms of citizens as a primary responsibility, but also as a foundation for a reenergizing the EU accession process. The outcome of the elections will impact the point on the horizon that Turkey needs to identify. Developments such as the crackdown on press, and the proposals for increasing Presidential powers cause concern that Turkey is growing more authoritarian. In this context developments in the Middle East should also be a wake up call to Turkey's leaders that repression can have a high price.

If the momentum is seized well however, the developments in Turkey's and Europe's joint neighborhood can become a driver for closer ties and better relations. It can be the foundation for the much-needed new narrative for Turkey's accession to the EU and a realignment of the relation. On the other hand, if the (new) government does not make a clear decision in favor of fundamental rights and values, the Arab street may well become a model for Turkey's young generation. A Turkish, democratic season is needed and should be driven by the government with a broad support in Turkey's society. But it requires a serious reorientation of both domestic and foreign policies, anchored in the fundamental rights and freedoms of people. If Turkey chooses the fundamental rights of people as the cornerstone of domestic reforms and foreign policies, it will have a real chance to become the regional power it aspires to be, and Europe will be a natural ally.