

## Analysis

August 16, 2012

**Summary:** The Arab Spring has put stress on certain fault lines between Turkey and Russia. How these fault lines might affect future Turkish-Russian relations will also have a region-wide significance. Will Turkey be able to sustain its positive strategy towards Russia after the Arab Spring? Or can the Arab Spring cause irreparable damage to Turkish-Russian relations?

## Turkey and Russia in the Arab Spring: Straining Old Rifts Further?

by *Gökhan Bacik*

### Introduction

Turkey and Russia have taken totally different positions on Syria since the beginning of the crisis in that country. Even so, the two powers now face serious threats and losses over Syria. Russia may be deprived of the regime in Damascus, which is its main geo-strategic partner in the region. This has the potential to affect Moscow's long-term position in the Middle East. On its side, Turkey now realizes that a post-Bashar al-Assad Syria, thrown into a chaotic struggle of various ethnic and sectarian groups that is reminiscent of Iraq, may become the nest of choice of Kurds hatching their dreams of autonomy.

This irony of Turkey and Russia losing together on Syria, despite their major differences on the subject, requires a deeper analysis of Turkish-Russian relations in the context of Arab Spring. A surface examination, the one that is widely entertained in the media, depicts both countries as taking different positions on the Arab Spring. Indeed, the Arab Spring has put stress on certain fault lines between the two countries. How these fault lines might affect future Turkish-Russian relations will also have a region-wide significance. Will Turkey be able to sustain

its positive strategy towards Russia after the Arab Spring? Or can the Arab Spring cause irreparable damage to Turkish-Russian relations?

### Will the Arab Spring Erode the Hybrid Spaces Between Turkey and Russia?

While remaining part of the Western security order, Ankara expanded its economic ties with Russia in the post-Cold War period. Furthermore, both sides managed to fence off political issues from their flourishing economic cooperation. In this way, Turkey has created "hybrid spaces" with Russia. The term "hybrid" is chosen to characterize Turkey's canny strategy of improving close relations with Russia while staying in the Western/NATO system.

However, the Arab Spring is having a negative effect on Turkey's traditional neutral position in the Middle East. It has transformed the whole region into a space where contending and overlapping ethnic and sectarian polities engage in endless bargain or struggle. In such a chaotic environment, any policy is counterproductive. Turkey is not insulated from this. Ankara's tactics, such as taking sides with the



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Islamist actors in Egypt, are also counterproductive. What political actors in the region need today are not neutral mediators but political allies. Since gray zones are quickly evaporating, Turkey's capacity to revive its traditional neutral position is likely to weaken.

Turkey's activism in the region is also counterproductive for the Russian side. The critical question is this: How will Ankara's involvement in regional affairs, in a manner that risks the weakening of its traditional neutrality card, affect Russia? The answer lies in Turkey's relations with other actors. Since the beginning, Turkey has supported several actors, and has simultaneously struggled with many of them, to shape regional developments. But is this the most suitable framework for relations with Russia in the long-term?

Here are the key items of the Turkish approach:

- Ankara has good contacts with the Islamists.
- In general, Turkey wants the Arab Spring to set in motion a process that recognizes Islamic actors' legitimacy globally.
- Turkey wants to delimit Shi'a political activism. While Turkey recognizes Shi'a groups as a natural part of the region, it does not want to see them become a transnational systemic bloc, affecting Ankara's strategy in the Gulf, Lebanon, Iraq, and Iran.

Turkey's rapprochement with Bahrain should be seen as another measure to counterbalance the burgeoning transnational Shi'a bloc in the region. Also to this end, Ankara champions the secular Shi'a groups, mainly in Baghdad. Iyad Allawi, a leader of the Iraqi National Accord, is Ankara's preferred candidate for the Iraqi premiership. Ankara's love for secular Shi'a parties has a simple logic: It believes that only secular Shi'a groups can guarantee the support of other groups against the Maliki-led Shi'a activism. Naturally, Turkey's activism in the Sunni-Shi'a layer inevitably gives it a Sunni-oriented profile. Turkey's rapprochement with Saudi Arabia and even Qatar is correctly seen as another manifestation of this profile.

## How will Ankara's involvement in regional affairs, in a manner that risks the weakening of its traditional neutrality card, affect Russia?

The regional matrix that Turkey envisions, however, nurtures certain risks in terms of relations with Russia. To begin with, Turkey's strategies potentially put Russian geopolitical interests in the Middle East at risk. Although not intending to target Russia directly, Ankara's policies have a general tendency to weaken Russia's strategic interests in the region. If Russia cannot maintain its established interests in a post-Assad Syria, Turkey will be remembered for its high-level contribution to that development. Indeed, there is no serious demonstration on display with Ankara's positive concern about Russian interests in the Middle East.

Secondly, Turkey's relations with third parties are also likely to create concerns for Russia. In general, Turkey is disposed to seek alliances with other regional states on regional issues, however undesirable those alliances are from the Russian point of view. For instance, Turkey's close cooperation with Qatar at the Geneva meeting on Syria made Russia unhappy. As has been observed during all the phases of the Syrian crisis, Russia wants all countries, including Turkey, to treat it as a global superpower on par with the United States. With the exception of Turkish Premier Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's phone briefing with Russian President Vladimir Putin just after the downing of the Turkish airplane in Syrian airspace, Turkey has never been willing to have an efficient coordination mechanism with Russia. Erdoğan's one-day visit to Moscow last July demonstrated once again that both countries have different perspectives on the region.

Thirdly, the long-term effects of the ongoing developments in Caucasus and Central Asia may affect the Russian position on Turkey. The Arab Spring has forced Turkey to adopt a new doctrine in foreign policy: Regime change can now



be on Turkey's agenda. Ankara declared it would not back any regime that oppresses its own people. This is certainly a radical shift from the "zero problems with neighbors" policy of yore.

Under its former "zero problems with neighbors" policy, Turkey accepted that it can cooperate with its neighbors despite the serious democracy and human right gaps tolerated by some of their regimes. That did not mean that Turkey was indifferent to those issues. Rather, the former doctrine had a gradualist approach. However, the Arab Spring, and especially the protests in the regional countries, made that gradualist approach useless. To put this another way: The new doctrine evaluates state-society relations with another country on the basis of the protests and violence that break out in them. Accordingly, Turkey will distance itself from any regime that oppresses its citizens. Naturally, the long-term implications of this doctrine require close attention by regional countries. Will Turkey implement this doctrine if it faces similar cases in countries like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, or Azerbaijan? Indeed, Turkey will likely be selective when it comes to bringing this revisionist doctrine to bear on its allies. So it is not clear to the Russian side how this new revisionist doctrine will imprint on the general characteristics of Turkish foreign policy.

Meanwhile, there is a growing tendency in Russia to read the recent Turkish activism in the Arab Spring as more proof that Turkey is a devoted member of the Western/NATO system. Turkey has played key roles in many projects, such as the expansion of NATO, that have limited Russia's global influence. Turkey's aggressive pro-Western

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activism in the Arab Spring is consistent with this. Furthermore, it is believed that Turkey will maintain this consistency in any forthcoming regional crisis.

Given all these developments, the Turkish-Russian axis is now more fragile than it has been in years. The Arab Spring has proved that the two countries have conflicting perspectives on the region. Both states prefer different countries when it comes to alliance formation. So, what could be the Turkish strategic calculation behind the scenes? Why has Turkey put its relations with Russia at risk in the region?

There is a simple logic here: Turkey sees the weakening of Russia in the Middle East as an opportunity to ease its vulnerability vis-à-vis Russia. Turkey has failed to liberate itself from dependence on Russian energy and has failed to persuade Russia to regulate energy prices. Turkey is very critical of the Russian energy regime, but has no means of challenging it.

Second, in the last decade, Russia has successfully limited Turkey in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Rarely does one hear a comment on Central Asia from the Turkish leaders. Russian activism in the Caucasus put great pressure on Turkey.

Thirdly, the accord between Russia and Iran on many regional issues has the capacity to weaken Turkey's regional role. The upshot of all this is that the weakening of Russia in the region may increase Turkey's power leverage in Moscow.



### Turkey, Russia, and Islam

Russia has a difficult and complex relationship with Islam. Since President Putin's first term, Moscow has developed an approach to Islam that covers both the domestic and international terrains. As a major aspect of this approach, under Putin's administration, Moscow decided to increase its role in Islam-linked processes both domestically and globally and follow a carefully designed strategy towards the Muslim World. It is instructive to recall that in 2004, Putin declared Russia's interest in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Russian relations with the OIC states also has a key economic aspect, as Russia's trade with Muslim states is worth not less than US\$75 billion.

Today, Islam is an important factor in understanding the Russian approach to the Arab Spring. Russia has a considerable number of Muslim citizens, and Moscow's chief concern is to prevent the rise of any kind of domestic extremism. For instance, a recent attack on the pro-government Islamic clerics in Tartaristan was immediately interpreted in Moscow as an alarming development. The other concern is the rise of new alliances of various Muslim states with a negative attitude to Russia.

Therefore, the effects of the Arab Spring's developments on Islamic activism have become a key concern for Moscow. Categorically speaking, Islamic politics refers to two levels of activism:

- State level activism. On this level, Islam can be a part of a state agenda, as observed in the case of Saudi Arabia and Iran.
- Group level activism. This level refers to another type of Islamic activism, one that occurs through Islamic *tariqats* (religious social movements).

Russia believes that it has been a target of state-level Islamic activism since the 1990s, and is alert to the potential of the Arab Spring to contribute to that. Threats from the Wahhabis have become a particular concern. Russia does not want to see the rise of regional states like Saudi Arabia and Qatar that may promote Islamism. Last July, Russia criticized Saudi Arabia for certain human rights violations in its Eastern Province, in a display of Moscow's attempts to counterbalance the impact of the Saudis.

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When it comes to group-level Islamic activism, the rise of Islamism in Egypt and the return of Islamists to politics as legitimate partners in many other Arab states may promote certain Islamic movements and *tariqats*. It is not a secret that Russia is a historical target of Islamic "missionary" movements. The Arab Spring may affect Russia's situation in various ways: Egypt is likely to position itself as a devoted member of the Sunni bloc. President Mohamed Morsi of Egypt's first international visit was to Saudi Arabia. Russia's worry is that the new balances in regional politics may lead to a peaceful environment for transnational Islamism. Meanwhile, new Islamic actors are also likely to consolidate the anti-Iranian bloc. Such developments may harden Russia's relations with Islam. That may in turn generate a more delicate regional system that would be highly sensitive to the Russian-Iranian cooperation.

Turkey has a totally different position on Islam. First, unlike Russia, Turkey has championed the return of Islam as a legitimate force in the Arab Spring. Turkey's full support of Islamic actors is very clear, so much so that this created a certain degree of resentment among secular and liberal Arabs in Egypt. Most of the new Islamic actors, aside from the Salafis, are under pressure by large constituencies that demand more freedom and welfare. New Islamic actors are likely to follow a globalist and Western model rather than the example of Russia or China. It is not clear how the new Islamic actors will integrate with Russia.

Second, Turkey and Russia are likely to differ on Iran and Shi'a Islam. While trying to limit the Saudi-inspired Wahhabi-style of Islamic activism, Russia seeks to be in cooperation with other competing Islamic states like Iran. It is very common to see news on the Iranian Press TV about



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how “the U.S.-supported Wahhabis are threatening Russia.”<sup>1</sup> Also, it is a desire of Russia and Iran to see Iraq also in their camp. Russia and Turkey are heading toward becoming permanent members of two competing alliance formations.

### Conclusion

The Arab Spring has crystallized the nature of the historical rifts between Turkey and Russia. Despite their successful cooperation on energy and the economy, Ankara and Moscow have competed for influence in the Middle East. Moreover, some policy differences between Ankara and Moscow are not temporary situations thrown up by the Arab Spring moment; instead, they have the potential to affect bilateral relations in the long term. Therefore, a critical question is whether those policies will negatively affect the hybrid spaces of economic cooperation between Turkey and Russia that have been created so far. If not fine-tuned, the rifts that appeared during the Arab Spring can easily grow to include bilateral economic cooperation.

### About the Author

Gökhan Bacik is an associate professor of political science at Zirve University. Bacik also taught in different European Universities as Erasmus Visiting Professor. He is the author of *September 11 and World Politics* (2004) and *Modern International System: Genealogy, Teleology and the Expansion* (2007). He also published in many scholarly journals such as *Middle East Policy*, *International Review of Sociology*, *The Muslim World*, *Arab Studies Quarterly*, *Peace Review*, *Turkish Studies*, *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, and *Terrorism and Political Violence*. His most recent book is *Hybrid Sovereignty in the Arab Middle East* (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2008). He also writes weekly columns for *Today's Zaman*. Bacik is the head of the Middle East Research Center at Zirve University, and was recently elected as an associate member to the Academy of Sciences of Turkey.

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