

Analysis

February 19, 2013

Summary: Turkey and Iran have different perspectives on the transformation of the Middle East in the wake of the Arab Spring. Why are Tehran and Ankara not able to avoid a rivalry on Syria? Will they be able to find a way to strike a balance and move beyond the current phase, as in the past? What are the limits of the escalation in the rivalry between Turkey and Iran on Syria? Turkey and Iran's preferences in Syria are reflections of the government systems they want to have in their own countries. The conflicting perspectives are not likely to be reconciled by pragmatic concerns. The current phase of confrontation is part of a larger domestic transformation of Iran and Turkey under the influence of the Arab Spring.

Turkey and Iran: Facing the Challenge of the Arab Spring

by *Bülent Aras*

Introduction

Turkey and Iran have different perspectives on the transformation of the Middle East in the wake of the Arab Spring. It is almost a given in the analyses that Turkey and Iran have rival positions. Those pointing to the rivalry speculate about the further deterioration of their relations, and even a possibility of regional conflict. This is, of course, not something Ankara and Tehran may want to see, considering that both face serious domestic challenges as well as the radical transformations in their neighborhood. Tehran's situation is more complicated, with the nuclear issue and the problems with the West. Nonetheless, it is also possible to hear pragmatic calls. For instance, Hossein Mousavian, a former top Iranian national security officer recently said:

Currently, Iran and Turkey (along with Turkey's U.S. and Arab allies) are inflaming the regional rivalry over Syria and beyond, while internationally Russia and the United States exacerbate it. Instead of widening the rift, Turkey and Iran should utilize their influence and leverage to orchestrate regional and

*international crisis management for the region.*¹

Henri Barkey argues that Turkish-Iranian relations historically had a bitter taste of competition. If this context is ignored, one may tend to exaggerate the current problems.² A former top Iranian national security official and a Turkey expert agree that the current stalemate is likely temporary. Turkey and Iran may choose to utilize their relative powers for leading the transformation of the new Middle East. This suggestion makes sense since Turkey has hosted Iranian nuclear talks in the past and it still is looked on favorably by Iranian society and, to a lesser extent, in its state establishment.

However, there is no signal that Turkey and Iran may reach an agreement, and even agree to disagree, on the Arab Spring at some point in the foreseeable future. Why are Tehran and Ankara not able to avoid a rivalry on Syria? Will they be able to find a way to

1 Hossein Mousavian, "An Opportunity for a U.S.-Iran Paradigm Shift," *Washington Quarterly*, vol.36, no.1 (2013), p. 134.

2 Henri J. Barkey, "Turkish-Iranian Competition after the Arab Spring," *Survival*, vol. 54, no. 6, (2012), pp. 139-162.

G|M|F OFFICES

WASHINGTON, DC • BERLIN • PARIS
BRUSSELS • BELGRADE • ANKARA
BUCHAREST • WARSAW • TUNIS



Analysis

strike a balance and move beyond the current phase, as in the past? What are the limits of the escalation in the rivalry between Turkey and Iran on Syria?

The missing element in Mousevian and Barkey's analyses is the deep impact of the Arab Spring on the domestic and international politics of these two countries. The barrier between domestic politics and regional order is fast disappearing in the Middle East. Turkey and Iran's preferences in Syria are indeed reflections of the government systems they want to have in their own countries. Therefore, the conflicting perspectives are not likely to be reconciled by pragmatic concerns. The current phase of confrontation is part of a larger transformation of Iran and Turkey under the influence of the Arab Spring.

The Meaning of the Arab Spring

The Arab Spring encompassed ideas and agents that transcend the domestic and international divide in an unprecedented fashion in recent history. The space for independent domains in the Middle East exists no more. The popular uprisings in a number of Arab countries are part of a larger transformation that stretches from North Africa to inner Asia. This transformation is not likely to end without a reorientation of the political landscapes of the countries in the Near and Middle East. The Arab Spring also touches upon the search for new ethical perspectives in a changing international system, with the relative decline of former hegemonic powers and the rise of new countries. Since the Arab Spring has an impact at the regional and international levels, it requires an interlinked analysis.

It is, in this sense, a serious blow to the Middle East's *status quo*, which was already outdated in a changing international environment. The former models of inward-oriented rulers, who were resistant to international influences, are giving way to new outward-looking leaders with a focus on honor, liberty, freedom, and good governance. The Arab Spring has also meant a challenge to the survival strategies of authoritarian rules through changes in regional power balances, international alliances, and an emulation of Asian developmentalist models. A new critical mass is likely to make more robust transformation possible from the middle-to-long run.

The former models of inward-oriented rulers, who were resistant to international influences, are giving way to new outward-looking leaders with a focus on honor, liberty, freedom, and good governance.

The ideas that brought Arab youth to the streets did not emanate from the works of well-known Islamist or socialist thinkers but were the universal values of honor, dignity, and freedom. It does not mean these writers did not have an impact, but they have not been source of inspiration for the popular uprisings in Arab world.³ The long-lasting stability of authoritarian rule has been largely replaced by a new balance in the region, with a renewed pattern of relationship with the outside world.

The international responses to the Arab Spring have also renewed the discussion about the ethical framework of the emerging international system. The so-called rising powers adopted an isolated or non-interventionist attitude toward the Arab Spring while trying to preserve their economic interests in the region. Considering the disappointment of the masses with the West in terms of pursuing long-term relations with former authoritarian rulers in Arab Spring countries, the behavior of the rising powers underlined the crisis of the international system. There seems to be no foreseeable prospect of change in the system. In contrast, the Arab Spring implies a possible tectonic shift in the international system as it touches upon a fault line of ethical deficiency.

³ Firozeh Kashani-Sabet, "Freedom Springs Eternal," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol.44, no.1, (2012), p. 157.



The Impact of Arab Spring

The Arab Spring is diffusing a set of norms that has started to change power, authority, and transboundary loyalty patterns in the region. The experience of other countries that have undergone this kind of transformation is not necessarily helpful here. As Solingen put forward aptly, domestic structures and legacies may facilitate or block transnational diffusion.⁴ Iran's response, for example, has been to block the diffusion, which may erode that government's favored model of political survival. Iran's strategy is to wage the struggle beyond its borders. Iranian policy in Syria is to build a firewall against the influence of Arab Spring. The Iranian establishment faces a crisis of major renovation and reform, which may not end without a systemic change in the Islamic Republic. A serious blow to Iran has been the loss of legitimacy in the Arab streets, which served as a provider of moral ground. The Iranian regime's proclaimed "nativity" and "siding with the oppressed" left it to ally with ruthless dictators and seek refuge in Asian style authoritarianism. Iranian policy in Syria aims to preserve an inward-looking approach in the Middle East, which is already disappearing.

The Iranian establishment tried to claim some success in the uprisings by framing it as Islamic awakening. This is also an attempt to play to a domestic audience and preserve their hold on power at home. Their aim is simply regime maintenance and survival. Turkish policymakers, in contrast, extended immediate support to the popular uprisings in Syria and utilized alliances with NATO and the United States for security concerns.

For Turkish leadership, the regional transformation has been a clear warning that Turkey cannot manage a regional role without addressing its own democratic deficits at home. Their responses are clear indications of their domestic preferences. New administrations in the Middle East will be more sensitive to the Palestinian question and less friendly to Israeli and the U.S. policies. In addition, one may expect a stronger sense of Islamic solidarity. This situation is likely to put an end to the long-time Iranian domination of these areas and erode Tehran's ability to project soft power in the region. It forces Turkey into a position of enriching its own aspects of soft power, i.e., democracy, and of building

further capacity in foreign policy to address the complicated regional dynamics.

Iran and Turkey: The Way Forward

The Arab Spring seems to be leaving permanent scars on the course of domestic and foreign policies of Turkey and Iran. The relations between the two countries have always been complicated and multidimensional. The relations also used to have a domestic dimension, which made relations vulnerable to power struggles at home. Today, however, the situation is much different. Turkey and Iran face a critical period of transformation in their neighborhood, which forces policymakers into a difficult situation in terms of foreign policy choices and the structure of domestic landscapes. The rivalry in Syria is not similar to the earlier cycles of confrontation, which used to normalize after a period of tension. The situation is more about domestic structures and survival strategies of political systems rather than specific interests in foreign policy.

The competing positions in Syria are the result of their struggle with the diffusion of a new set of norms and the region's changing political atmosphere. Syria is both a firewall for Iran and a chance for Turkey to prove its adaptability to the new situation. The real battleground is their respective domestic landscapes, and their own challenge of transformation to good governance and societal rule. We

The rivalry in Syria is not similar to the earlier cycles of confrontation, which used to normalize after a period of tension. The situation is more about domestic structures and survival strategies of political systems rather than specific interests in foreign policy.

⁴ Etel Solingen, "The Domestic, Regional, and Global Politics of International Diffusion," *International Studies Quarterly*, vol.56, no.4, (2012), pp. 631-644.



Analysis

will see how long the Iranian firewalls hold before transformation comes to the country. Turkey's challenge is to raise the quality of democratic rule at home. There is reason for optimism given the possibility that the future course of political development in these two countries may converge under the transformative influence of the Arab Spring. But if this convergence does not occur, their relations may face more challenging cyclical turns and tensions in future.

This is a period for leaving behind the old habits and ideas of the past, which is not easy for policymakers in this region. Will they resist or lead the transformation? Turkish and Iranian policymakers' course of action will have a lasting impact on not only bilateral relations but also the future of the region.

About the Author

Bülent Aras has been the chairman of the Foreign Ministry's Strategic Research Center since November 2010. He is currently a visiting fellow with Wilson Center. He is also an academic advisor to the minister of foreign affairs. He became a full professor at Işık University in 2006. He has also taught at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences of Istanbul Technical University. Prof. Aras has had 13 books published abroad and at home. His articles have appeared in numerous magazines and newspapers and have been translated into several languages.

About GMF

The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) strengthens transatlantic cooperation on regional, national, and global challenges and opportunities in the spirit of the Marshall Plan. GMF does this by supporting individuals and institutions working in the transatlantic sphere, by convening leaders and members of the policy and business communities, by contributing research and analysis on transatlantic topics, and by providing exchange opportunities to foster renewed commitment to the transatlantic relationship. In addition, GMF supports a number of initiatives to strengthen democracies. Founded in 1972 as a non-partisan, non-profit organization through a gift from Germany as a permanent memorial to Marshall Plan assistance, GMF maintains a strong presence on both sides of the Atlantic. In addition to its headquarters in Washington, DC, GMF has offices in Berlin, Paris, Brussels, Belgrade, Ankara, Bucharest, Warsaw, and Tunis. GMF also has smaller representations in Bratislava, Turin, and Stockholm.

About the On Turkey Series

GMF's On Turkey is an ongoing series of analysis briefs about Turkey's current political situation and its future. GMF provides regular analysis briefs by leading Turkish, European, and American writers and intellectuals, with a focus on dispatches from on-the-ground Turkish observers. To access the latest briefs, please visit our web site at www.gmfus.org/turkey or subscribe to our mailing list at <http://database.gmfus.org/reaction>.