

## Analysis

June 8, 2011

**Summary:** This brief summarizes discussions at the “EU, Turkish, and U.S. Responses to the Arab Spring: Exploring Synergies in a Transatlantic Context” conference in May 2011. Among a plurality of views, a broad consensus emerged around a few core observations. First, the Arab revolutions are pushing Turkey and the West together as they present transatlantic partners with similar opportunities, dilemmas, and challenges. Second, whether or not it is correct to speak of a “Turkish model,” the United States and Europe should take advantage of Turkey’s regional influence and soft power to reinforce positive aspects of the unfolding democracy and civil society movements. And third, that greater coordination among Turkey, the United States, and the EU is desirable and achievable, but divergences may persist, especially insofar as the use of force is involved.

## Turkey and the West Address the Arab Spring

by *Emiliano Alessandri*

As the Arab Spring unfolds, the debate is intensifying on how transatlantic partners can maximize their limited resources to support the transitions and coordinate efforts to ensure that as the old order disintegrates, conflict does not spread throughout the region. In this sense, the Arab revolutions have become a new test for the Turkish-Western relationship. The rapid transformation of the political landscape of North Africa and the Middle East has revived the debate on Turkey’s strategic orientation while notably shifting the discussion from whether Turkey is “drifting eastward” to how the “new Middle East” will relate to Turkey, and what the implications for Turkish-Western cooperation might be.

To address these issues in a transatlantic context, the German Marshall Fund of the U.S. and the Italian Embassy in Turkey co-organized a seminar on May 23, gathering a select group of American, EU, and Turkish officials and experts in Ankara. Among a plurality of views, a broad consensus emerged around a few core observations. First, the Arab revolutions are pushing Turkey and the West together as they present transatlantic

partners with similar opportunities, dilemmas, and challenges. Second, whether or not it is correct to speak of a “Turkish model,” the United States and Europe should take advantage of Turkey’s regional influence and soft power to reinforce positive aspects of the unfolding democracy and civil society movements. And third, that greater coordination among Turkey, the United States, and the EU is desirable and achievable, but divergences may persist, especially insofar as the use of force is involved. These conclusions were tempered by a cautionary note. Deeper cooperation between Turkey and the West will not necessarily revive Turkey’s stalling accession process with the EU.

### Common Opportunities and Shared Challenges

A year ago, the international debate on Turkey reached a historic peak around the provocative question of whether Turkey was “turning its back on the West.” Fraying relations with Israel after the flotilla crisis and Ankara’s “de-alignment” on the Iranian nuclear question led some to conclude that



## Analysis

Turkey was shifting the axis of its traditionally Western-oriented foreign policy.

The unexpected advent of the Arab Spring in 2011 has reframed this discussion, with attention focused on whether a coordinated Turkey-Western response is possible. The first perception was one of a certain asymmetry in the respective positions and reactions of Turkey and Western countries. Ankara was caught off guard by the outburst of the Arab Spring as much as the rest of the world, but it responded with only a short delay to the events in Tunisia and Egypt in order to support the Arab peoples' demand for change. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan was the first international leader to publicly ask Egyptian President Mubarak to step down. Turkey was also explicit in presenting the uprisings as democratic revolutions and in arguing that Turkey would come out stronger from the reshuffling of the regional order. This confidence and assuredness could not be found in Western capitals, where a mix of trepidation, uncertainty, and bewilderment seemed to prevail.

As events have unfolded, the early image of Turkey riding the wave of change and America and Europe overwhelmed by it was quickly proved misleading and largely delusory for Turkey. Turkey soon realized that the network of relationships it had built in the 2000s, when Ankara filled the void created by the decline of American influence, was seriously undermined by popular movements challenging the survival of regimes, such as Gaddafi's in Libya and Assad's in Syria, with which Turkey had built fruitful economic relations and close political dialogues.

The tradeoff between supporting brutal regimes to protect existing interests and endorsing the peoples' demand for change has turned out to be as great for Turkey as for the rest of the West. Indeed it may be greater for Turkey because of its substantial economic interests in the Arab world. Ankara finally recognized its strategic dilemma: the Arab Spring might stabilize the region, but it might also engulf it in chaos and conflict. Moreover, Ankara has worried that Iran might succeed in steering the currents of change in a direction contrary to Turkey's and to those of the West.

This realization forced Turkey into some painful, even embarrassing policy reversals. Turkey's zero-problems-with-

neighbors policy looks increasingly untenable in the context of its rapidly deteriorating regional security environment. Not surprisingly, Turkey is rediscovering the importance of European and transatlantic links. Coordination with the United States and Europe on Syria, where Turkey has important economic interests but also probably greater leverage than other transatlantic partners, is growing. After initial hesitations, Turkey is also cooperating with Western allies in Libya, including establishing ties with the Benghazi-based National Transitional Council. Moreover Ankara is calculating that it has an interest in engaging the new Egypt, establishing ties with as diverse groups and institutions as possible, so as to address a wide range of alternative scenarios. If it demonstrates anything, its response to the Arab Spring illustrates a healthy maturation of Turkish foreign policy thinking.

Israel and Iran remain missing pieces of this still embryonic new mosaic of Turkey's relations with its neighbors. Recent tensions with Jerusalem have ruled out Turkey's role as a facilitator of the peace process. Turkey criticizes the stance of the current Israeli government, but will ultimately have to acknowledge that a satisfactory solution to Israel's security problems is key to the stabilization of Turkey's neighborhood even in the new context.

Turkey has been notably less outspoken about the need for political change in Teheran than other Western countries. Turkey still supports a policy of engagement with Iran, but it now appears to be more firmly anchored to the possibility that Iran may take advantage of regional volatility to further its influence in the region. Turkey seeks to avoid instability on its borders, including on its border with Iran, a possibility that is endangered by the Arab Spring's stimulus to Iran's own domestic reform movement.

### Turkey-EU Relations in the New Context

The value of Turkey in strategic, economic, and soft power terms for the emergence of a new order in the Middle East elicits praise from the European Union, but this does not translate into renewed support for admitting Turkey into Europe. Accession for Turkey remains stalled because of the unsolved Cyprus issue and the anti-Turkey stance of some EU members. Meanwhile a new Turkish self-awareness is being articulated everywhere and publicly: Turkey does not



## Analysis

need the European Union. In parallel, the idea of a strategic dialogue beyond the accession process has become popular.

If the latter means informally comparing notes, it is already largely happening in various contexts. If, on the other hand, it means establishing a formalized system of consultation, as it would be through the invitation of Turkey to sit the European Council meetings on foreign policy, then the prospects for realization are far less clear, since some EU members are opposed. In fact, even if the assumption has traditionally been that a strategic dialogue between Turkey and the EU would lend credibility to the prospect of a privileged partnership as opposed to full membership (and was therefore looked at with great skepticism by Ankara), it now seems that the opponents of Turkey's EU membership are curiously also those who do not want to formalize a more limited EU-Turkey exchange on strategic issues in the neighborhood. If confirmed, this position would be deeply harmful for the EU, which has just laid out a new neighborhood policy for the Mediterranean, which would greatly benefit from Turkey's active involvement.

In the meantime, Turkey can play a direct role in NATO, of which it is a long-time member. But while Turkey's views of its neighborhood increasingly converge with those of the West, Turkey's position on the use of military force still distinguishes it broadly from the rest of the Alliance. Turkey has resisted military action in its neighborhood, and it has been deeply uncomfortable with NATO's intervention in Libya. As much as Ankara will, in the end, come on board with the need of military engagement, Turkey will hardly be as supportive of the use of force as it was in the civil wars in the Balkans, when it was a major advocate of humanitarian missions. At the same time, Turkey wants to play an active role in areas that are of critical importance, such as reinforcing a security dialogue with southern neighbors already involved in the NATO-sponsored Mediterranean Dialogue and Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, and in encouraging defense sector reform in the transitioning countries.

The Arab revolutions remain works in progress, and they may veer in different directions. The fear of an Arab Winter following the Spring is, unfortunately, a no less realistic scenario. In either scenario, the West will be stronger if it enjoys Turkey's cooperation...and vice versa.

### **Emiliano Alessandri, Transatlantic Fellow, The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF)**

Emiliano Alessandri develops GMF's work on the Mediterranean, Turkish, and wider-Atlantic security issues. Prior to joining GMF, Dr. Alessandri was a visiting fellow at the Center on the U.S. and Europe (CUSE) of Brookings Institution in Washington D.C. where he conducted research on European security issues and Turkey. He has held several positions in leading foreign-policy think tanks and academic institutions in Italy, the U.K., and the United States. Dr. Alessandri is an associate fellow at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) of Rome and serves on the board of the IAI-based The International Spectator. Dr. Alessandri was educated at the University of Bologna, the School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) of the Johns Hopkins University, and Princeton University, and received his Ph.D. from the University of Cambridge.

### **About GMF**

The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) is a non-partisan American public policy and grantmaking institution dedicated to promoting better understanding and cooperation between North America and Europe on transatlantic and global issues. 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 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 seven offices in Europe: Berlin, Paris, Brussels, Belgrade, Ankara, Bucharest, and Warsaw. 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](http://www.gmfus.org/turkey) or subscribe to our mailing list at <http://database.gmfus.org/reaction>.