

Summary: Mistrust and missed opportunities characterize one of the most important relationships in the European space — that between Turkey and the European Union. As the Arab Spring unfolds, the absence of a joint EU-Turkey strategy to confront the shared challenges of the neighborhood becomes costlier by the day. From an EU perspective, the logic of cooperation with Turkey has become more compelling given the renewed significance of the Turkish model in the neighborhood. No longer a simplistic and static slogan, the Turkish experience has become a more dynamic and articulate notion that Arab leaders can explore as they grapple with the challenges of domestic change.

The Prospects and Meaning of a Strategic EU-Turkey Dialogue on the Neighborhood

by *Nathalie Tocci*

Mistrust and missed opportunities characterize one of the most important relationships in the European space — that between Turkey and the European Union. Since the opening of accession negotiations in 2005, momentum in Turkey's EU membership bid has withered. There has been no proverbial train-crash, but Turkey and the EU have progressively parted ways. Amongst the prime casualties of this gradual divorce is a joint EU-Turkey strategy to confront the shared challenges of the neighborhood. As the Arab Spring unfolds, the absence of such a strategy becomes costlier by the day.

21st century Turkey, particularly under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) governments, has often basked in the international limelight. Far from the inward-looking Turkey of the 1990s with a highly defensive foreign policy, Turkey's foreign policy has become outward looking, deploying the whole panoply of its soft power tools to deepen its outreach abroad. For the EU, partnering with the new Turkey in foreign policy has become compelling. But up until recently, it appeared unlikely. As Turkey turned its hybrid identity into a foreign policy

asset, it came to value its newfound strategic autonomy. This did not necessarily mean distancing from the EU. But it did mean that Ankara started having fewer qualms parting ways with its European partners — be this over Russia, Cyprus, Iran, Syria, or Israel — when interests clashed.

Then came the Arab Spring, which altered Turkey's strategic context, raising not only the appeal but also the prospects for a joint strategy with the EU. Initially Turkey staggered. It enthusiastically embraced people power in Tunisia and Egypt where norms and interest neatly dovetailed. But concerns about commercial losses and the fate of Turkish migrants in Libya, and destabilization and refugee flows from Syria, meant that Turkey was initially cautious in these two cases. As events unfolded and both Turkey and the EU came round to walking the walk of the Arab Spring, both (re)started talking the talk of democracy promotion across the region.

Furthermore, while acknowledging its verve to become a regional order setter, Turkey has also realized that when faced with historic change all



round, partnering with its allies is of the essence. This is particularly so given its distancing from Iran and Russia. Vis-à-vis Iran, the ancient rivalry with Turkey has resurfaced over developments in Syria, Turkey's acceptance to host one of NATO's radar systems, and its increasing distance from the sectarian politics of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. A similar story can be told of Russia. Today, Turkey and Russia stand on opposite sides of the Syrian divide. The partnership between Russia and Cyprus is also deepening, with Russian interests in Eastern Mediterranean gas and talk about a Russian bailout for the beleaguered Greek Cypriot economy. The Arab Spring has thus cast Turkey back into the Western fold and away from alternative alliance patterns, which seemed to be in the making only a few years earlier. Turkey continues to pursue its strategic autonomy and has not turned back into an uncritical subject of the West. But the discourse of Turkey's axis shift is passé. Well aware that the challenges facing its neighbors are too great to confront alone, Turkey seems to have rediscovered the virtues of cooperating with its allies, first amongst which is the EU.

Also from an EU perspective, the logic of cooperation with Turkey has become more compelling given the renewed significance of the Turkish model in the neighborhood. No longer a simplistic and static slogan, the Turkish model or, more aptly put, the Turkish experience, has become a more dynamic and articulate notion that Arab leaders can explore (alongside other examples) as they grapple with the challenges of domestic change. Tunisia and Morocco watch the trajectory of Turkish political Islam and the evolution of the AKP. Egypt observes the development of civil-military relations in Turkey. Across North Africa and the Middle East, new leaders are inspired by Turkey's economic development as well as its foreign policy orientation, which, while remaining anchored to the West, has displayed rising autonomy and public support. Naturally, what is of interest here is not a static emulation of Turkey's situation but a dynamic observation process of Turkey's experience, learning from its steps forward and from its mistakes. It is precisely the incompleteness of the Turkish model that makes it of interest to its neighbors, and that which renders Turkey an ideal partner for the EU in inducing transformative change in the region.

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Appreciating the benefits of joint action, the EU and Turkey have sought to establish foreign policy dialogue. Indeed the stalled membership process had poisoned EU-Turkey foreign policy cooperation as well. As EU-Turkish ties soured, opportunities for Turkey and the European Union to discuss foreign policy became fewer and Turkey, feeling snubbed by the EU, began aligning its positions with the Common Security and Foreign Policy (CSFP) only when it came at little or no cost to itself. In view of the gravity of the situation, EU High Representative Catherine Ashton and Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu have recently established constructive regular talks, coupled with an annual four-way meeting between Ashton, Davutoğlu, EU Enlargement Commissioner Štefan Füle, and Turkish Minister for European Affairs Egemen Bağış. Davutoğlu has also occasionally participated in the EU's Gymnich meetings. The "positive agenda" between and the EU, launched in 2012, is an additional impulse and framework within which to conduct a strategic foreign policy dialogue.

But these talks are insufficient and not framed under the CFSP accession chapter. Moreover, an institutionalized dialogue would only be the starting point of a joint strategy for the neighborhood. A joint strategy would necessarily go beyond regular dialogue and foresee joint actions in at least three key domains.

First, Turkey and the EU could closely coordinate their diplomatic interventions in the region so as to jointly support transformative change. Indeed there could be a useful division of labor between Turkey and the EU in terms of diplomacy. The EU may be better placed to advocate universal norms grounded on international law, be these related to human rights, fundamental freedoms, transparency, accountability, or the rule of law. When resting on the solid turf of international law, the EU, whose



reputation in the neighborhood is far from stellar, would be less subject of criticism. Turkey, instead, could focus its diplomatic interventions on more specific political topics, particularly those on which its own experience confers to it greater legitimacy. A notable example is Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's praise for secularism during his visit to Cairo in the fall of 2011. While subject to criticism, the Egyptian reaction would have been far more virulent had an EU official uttered the same words. The fact that a leader broadly viewed as Islamist at home was calling out for secularism conferred to Erdoğan a degree of legitimacy EU officials would be hard pressed to obtain. Following the same line of reasoning, one could imagine retired Turkish military officials advocating the democratic oversight of the armed forces in the neighborhood, or Turkish business persons calling for export promotion policies. A variety of Turkish actors could thus send diplomatic messages to neighboring countries which, while coordinated with the EU, would somewhat differ from those of EU actors and may be better received because of the "incompleteness" of Turkey's ongoing democratization process.

Second, we could imagine joint EU-Turkey action on technical assistance. In this respect, the relevance of EU TaieX and Twinning programs comes to mind, whereby the EU engages in exchanges and training to support the building of capacity in the neighborhood. Turkey could be brought into these programs, bringing to bear its own experience in a number of areas where it has undertaken reform. One is the banking sector, where pre-2001 Turkey, unlike the EU and like the neighborhood, was bedevilled by problems of clientelism, and has since then engaged in a radical overhaul of the sector by establishing effective regulatory mechanisms. Another example is that of urban planning and housing, critical areas in Egypt, Tunisia, and Algeria. Unlike the EU, Turkey, having experienced a similar urbanization process and youth bulge to the southern Mediterranean countries and having overcome related housing problems through the work of the Mass Housing Authority, could share its expertise. A final example is that of small and medium enterprise promotion, necessary in the Middle East and North Africa region where undoing state capture of the economy and promoting an independent private sector are arduous tasks ahead. Here, the experience of the Turkish chamber of commerce — TOBB — could be usefully integrated in EU programs. TOBB, in fact, was instrumental in

establishing the Levant Business Forum, which represents business organizations from Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan. Moreover, by bringing in non-EU member Turkey, EU Twinning and TaieX programs could downplay their focus on the export of the *acquis communautaire*. *Aquis* promotion is one of the EU's main professional biases. While reasonable in the eastern neighborhood, where the aspiration of EU membership exists, approximation with the *acquis* is highly problematic in the southern Mediterranean. By including Turkey into its programs, the EU's may be nudged to move away from merely exporting the *acquis* and towards responding more effectively to the governance needs of its neighbors.

Finally, Turkey and the EU could together develop an effective multilateral response to the neighborhood. There are a number of key policy questions, ranging from infrastructure and communications to non-proliferation, combating organized crime, and maritime security, which continue to warrant multilateral solutions. However, existing EU multilateral initiatives are badly wanting. The increased degree of heterogeneity of the region suggests that a working multilateral framework should probably not be as rigid and institutionalized as the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, and, more so, the Union for the Mediterranean. Rigidity and institutionalization have been a recipe for deadlock in Mediterranean multilateralism and are likely to be even more so in future. A pragmatic, ad hoc, and probably more sub-regional approach (e.g., building on existing sub-regional groupings such as the 5 + 5, the Western Mediterranean and the Arab League) would seem more appropriate when dealing with regional problems in a post-Arab Spring Mediterranean. Notwithstanding the need for a new multilateral initiative, the impulse is not coming from the EU's usual suspects — France, Italy, and Spain. Turkey, for its

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Analysis

part, has traditionally been skeptical of EU-driven multilateral Mediterranean endeavors, fearing that its participation could be traded as an alternative to full EU membership. In view of this, working together on this front would have significant added value. A joint EU-Turkey initiative would reassure Turkey, which would play a key role in it, that a multilateral Mediterranean policy would be no substitute to its accession process with the EU. Turkey's participation could also infuse such a multilateral endeavor with the necessary institutional lightness and flexibility that EU-driven initiatives often lack. Moreover, working on a new multilateral framework with Turkey would also signal greater EU openness to a regional vision that is reflective of current realities and would leverage the EU and Turkey's comparative advantages vis-à-vis regional countries and groupings.

Talk about foreign policy cooperation between Turkey and the European Union is not new. For years, a joint strategy has been a worthwhile endeavor to explore. Yet never has there been an alignment of the stars like today. The historic transformation underway in the Middle East and North Africa has rendered EU-Turkey strategic dialogue imperative. Above all, the Arab Spring has highlighted in full force that neither the EU nor Turkey can act effectively alone in order to confront the extraordinary challenges underway. Such a strategy could foresee diplomatic public and private interventions, assistance, and multilateral cooperation. This is not to underplay the many obstacles that hinder a strategic dialogue between Turkey and the EU in the neighborhood, foremost amongst which is the dire state of EU-Turkey relations. But responding effectively to the shift of tectonic plates underway in the neighborhood is a challenge neither can afford to shy away from.

About the Author

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