

Analysis

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Summary: At the onset of the dramatic transformations in the Arab world more than two years ago, Turkey seemed positioned to assume an important role as a political, economic, and ideological reference for the emerging polities of the region. Two years on, the potential for a Turkish leadership role has receded. Circumstances seem to have maneuvered Turkey into unenviable positions in both Syria and Iraq. Ankara also seems to have tested the limits of its strategic alignment with Washington on issues stemming from its two southern neighbors. The result has been a loss of leadership credibility for the political power best positioned to have a positive stabilizing role in what promises to be years of unrest in the region.

Syria and Iraq – Convergence and Divergence in U.S.-Turkish Assessments

by *Hassan Mneimneh*

At the onset of the dramatic transformations in the Arab world more than two years ago, Turkey seemed positioned to assume an important role as a political, economic, and even ideological reference for the emerging polities of the region. Despite initial hesitations, the Turkish leadership appeared to rise to the occasion, with pronouncements and visits to “Arab Spring” capitals indicating a strategic commitment to a partnership that would be beneficial to all. Two years on, the potential for a Turkish leadership role has receded, and is no longer the locus of hope and solace for its supporters nor a subject of concern for its detractors.

While Turkish economic and political engagement continues in a more troubled North Africa, it is the derailing of Ankara’s approaches toward Damascus and Baghdad that may be identified as causes for the deterioration of its image as a regional reference. Circumstances seem to have maneuvered Turkey into unenviable positions in both Syria and Iraq. Ankara also seems to have tested the limits of its strategic alignment with Washington on issues stemming from its two southern neighbors. But most importantly,

the Turkish leadership seems to have allowed unwarranted expectations to affect its decisions and declarations. The result has been a loss of leadership credibility for the political power best positioned to have a positive stabilizing role in what promises to be years of unrest in the region.

While the Arab Spring caught most analysts and observers by surprise early on, many parties claimed to be inspirations or models. Voices from Baghdad, Beirut, Gaza, and Ankara, as well as Tehran, reflected on Arab Spring events from subjective prisms. The Turkish assessment of Turkey’s primary relevance was enhanced by repeated references from Arab accommodationist Islamist leaders in Western (and Turkish) media to the “Turkish model.” Far fewer such references appeared in the Arabic press, while considerable dissonance in the implicit definitions of the putative “Turkish model” was allowed to persist between Arab and non-Arab contexts. In the former, the Turkish model was alluded to as part of the gradualism that accommodationist Islamists adopted in their effort to “Islamize” host societies. Turkey was understood as being at a less

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developed stage than many Arab settings. In the latter, the highlights of the “model” were the presumed harmony of productive economic policies and democratic institutions with conservative values. Behind the dissonance, a symbiosis may have existed between two ideological visions only partially publicly articulated, a Turkish one that views a prosperous and powerful Turkey at the center of a new Islamic commonwealth, and an Arab Islamist one that seeks to leverage Turkey’s credibility to soften objections at home and abroad in the crucial formative phase of the nascent post-uprising polities. This precarious alignment provided Arab Islamists with political and diplomatic benefits, but it caused distraction in the formulation of Turkish policy.

As an emerging economic power with a robust political system, Turkey had sought a multi-directional diplomatic expansion and economic engagement. A “zero problem with neighbors” approach epitomized the conviction that mutual benefits would result from the new non-confrontational proactive Turkish political and economic openness. Previously repressed affinity with the Arab world, in particular, was allowed to inform the new relations. Turkey’s approach was both pragmatic and optimistic. Economic and cultural ties were believed to mitigate political tensions and lay the foundation for lasting stability. Even Tehran and Damascus — both categorized by the West as rogue capitals — were included in Ankara’s outreach. While both may have merely sought to break their isolation, the advantages that they derive from the enhanced relations, it was believed, would dilute their belligerence and encourage possible compromise on contentious issues. Turkish action toward both Iran and Syria was also a back-door approach for the United States and the West to engage these otherwise inaccessible governments.

Objectively, the transformations in the region confirm both the value of Turkey as a primary actor in the Middle East and North Africa region and the validity of its engagement approach. The Arab region could benefit considerably from Turkey’s political experience and its growth-oriented economic formula, all delivered with cultural sensitivity based on affinity. Turkey’s open borders policy to the citizens of many Arab countries has contributed to the growing attraction of its image as a Middle Eastern modern society. However, there seemed to be a discrepancy in the authenticity and modernity that Turkey projects. While the

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somehow insincere Arab Islamist invocation of the “Turkish model” informed Ankara’s design of its Arab policy, the Turkish leadership did not capitalize on the fact that Turkey’s attractiveness to many in the Arab world stems from its appropriation of the Western model of an open society and democratic state.

By supporting “moderate” Islamist forces, the Turkish leadership could argue that it is both responsive to majority (or at least plurality) popular will, while at the same time creating safeguards against the sliding of such Islamist forces into radicalism. It furthermore can note that most of these safeguards enjoy the support of the business community crucial to the desired focus on development as co-requisite to democracy. Turkey, accordingly, is not “ignoring” non-Islamist forces, but rather is applying a judicious calculus of engaging the most relevant elements of the emerging regional order.

In fact, the rhetoric regarding moderation of Turkey’s Arab accommodationist Islamist interlocutors was often adjusted for compatibility with the AKP vision, amidst a dearth in economic or strategic thinking that became evident only after their accession to power. This left Turkey exposed to accusations of bias and partisanship.

The faltering of Turkey’s policy toward Syria was in part the result of an underestimation of the resilience of the dictatorial regime and the value of the survival of this regime from the perspective of Tehran and Moscow. It was also the result of an overestimation of the power of personal politics — cordial and friendly relations with the Syrian head of state did not translate into more influence. Ankara’s Syria policy, however, certainly was weakened by the characterization of Turkey as a “Sunni” power seeking to enhance the position of fellow Sunni forces south of the border. The grand vision of a regional success story helping usher in local reforms in a neighboring state for the benefit of all was thus replaced



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by the portrayal of an atavistic ghost from a factional past — itself often serving the interests of international powers — seeking to prop up its vassals in the pursuit of regional hegemony.

From red lines against atrocities hastily drawn by its leadership and consistently ignored by the Syrian regime forces to the disparaging incident of having one of its planes downed by Syrian air defenses, Turkey has suffered a considerable public relations defeat. Ankara may have chosen to downgrade its relations with the bellicose regime in Damascus, but it was maneuvered into losing what could have been a fruitful engagement with Baghdad.

Iranian influence in Iraq has grown considerably since the toppling of the regime of Saddam Hussein. Through a complex web of alliances and rivalry management, Tehran exerts considerable and visible influence over the Iraqi political process. However, even with the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq — which extends well beyond the military — Iran does not enjoy full control. There are two primary “king-makers” in Baghdad: Iran and the Hawzah — the loose clerical organization dominated by the overarching figure of Ayatullah ‘Ali al-Sistani. Accusations by sectarian detractors notwithstanding, Sistani has proven an able commander for the benefit of relative stability in Iraq, and has repeatedly served as a moderating influence on Shi‘i politics.

Even within the camp of Iran’s close allies, Iraqi politicians have endeavored to create space for sovereign political expressions. Dismissed by their Gulf Arab counterparts as merely seeking to camouflage their Shi‘i sectarian motives, many in Iraq have looked to Ankara as a potential counterweight to Tehran. For the advocates of the Baghdad-Ankara rapprochement, the degeneration of the relationship is as much a product of the thorny issues that needed to be resolved as it is a result of deliberate machinations of internal and external parties who stand to lose from such a rapprochement. That the Baghdad government fell victim

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to such machinations is understandable given the non-institutional and chaotic character of the circles of power in the Iraqi capital. From the perspective of these advocates, that Ankara did not see and avoid the trap is perplexing.

Prior to Turkey’s Iraqi retreat, it seemed that Ankara was poised to assume three complementary roles contributing to the stabilization and advancement of the new Iraq. Turkey’s commercial inroads into the Iraqi market were a primary element in the emergence of quality affordable consumerism that favored the middle class. In being a credible interlocutor to parties from all communities, Turkey seemed able to mediate trust among politicians and their constituencies. Last, but not least, Ankara provided Baghdad with the opportunity to counterbalance Tehran with a non-hostile regional power. Turkey’s comprehensive role and strategic importance in Iraq was illustrated by the cordial reception Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan received from Ayatullah Sistani during his visit to Iraq in 2009. Many in Iraq also interpreted this as recognition of the importance that Sistani places on the Turkish input in Iraq.

Today, only a few years later, Ankara’s “input” does not reach south of Irbil, the capital of the Kurdistan regional government, which both leverages and is leveraged by Turkey in their respective feuds with Baghdad. Turkey may be the regional superpower, but in Iraq, it engages on a noticeably lesser scale.

On both the Syrian and Iraqi issues, the United States and Turkey are in substantive alignment. Both would like to see the end of the Damascus regime, and an Iraq that calibrates its relationship with Iran. A common U.S. and Turkish vision, however, cannot be equated with a shared assessment of priorities. Washington believed the faulty assumption of a rapid collapse of the Damascus regime, and thus indirectly encouraged Ankara to grandstand against Bashar al Assad, but has not softened the subsequent public relations blow of Assad’s continued rule. More dramatically, the U.S. absence has catapulted regional opponents of the Damascus regime into inconsistent support of different rebel factions — a situation that threatens the de facto Somalization of Syria. Turkey faces tumultuous times if its immediate southern neighbor is reduced to warlordism. Two vastly different courses of action would



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change this outcome: either push Washington to consolidate the anti-regime coalition and contemplate a Kosovo-style action; or include the Syrian question in the engagement with Moscow and Tehran — seeking new thinking on safeguarding their interests through the survival of the Syrian state, not the regime. Both courses require yet-to-be-provided robust support from Washington. The alternative is further dangerous attrition that would lead to the irremediable fall of regime, state, and society in Syria.

U.S. officials may plead lack of capacity on Syria. Some of them, however, still list the United States as a kingmaker in Iraq. There may be enough U.S. credit left in Iraq for Washington to jump-start the rapprochement between Baghdad and Ankara.

Ankara may succeed in reinforcing economic ties with North Africa. Common strategic readings may insure its continuing relevance in the Gulf. However, the vision of an integrated region is only possible with corrective measures implemented to redress policies in Syria and Iraq. In both cases, the role of the United States as an enabler is inevitable. In its renewed conception of a world order that achieves stability through means other than direct U.S. intervention, Washington views Ankara as a reliable ally sharing a common strategic understanding. For Turkey to realize its potential as a credible reference for the reformed Arab world, however, the role of the United States in processing the legacy of the past remains indispensable.

About the Author

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