

TURKEY'S RELATIONS WITH A CHANGING ARAB WORLD

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I would like to extend my thanks and congratulations Mr. Paul Salem and the Carnegie Beirut Center for hosting this conference in Beirut.

I would like to thank equally to Mrs. Layla al Zubaidi, Director of the Middle East Office of the Heinrich Böll Foundation and to Mr. Can Paker, the Chairperson of the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV) for their contributions to this conference.

To discuss Turkey's relations with a changing Arab World is becoming more and more challenging nowadays. Some of you will remember, this conference was initially scheduled for early February, but postponed while the demonstrations of the Tahrir Square were taking peak. Now we have new developments in our immediate neighbourhood in Syria. And we do not know yet how the world will be shaped in the post-Bin Laden period.

Developments are so fast and so unpredictable, it is better for us to fix a *rendez-vous* today to review our assessments six months or a year from now.

As the title of the conference evokes, the Arab World is changing. Some talk about an Arab Spring. I would rather borrow the term of "Arab Awakening", the unforgotten title of George Antonius, to use it in a different time and context. I think the Arab Awakening, with a note of warning, defines better the ongoing process than the spring.

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Nevertheless, the “awakening” of the Arab peoples also means a transition to a different and hopefully better era of political developments. So far all the events indicate that this will be both a transition and a transformation. It is almost certain that the Arab World is going through a revolution. Nothing will be the same anymore.

Given the high number of unknown elements in the equation, prudence is required while assessing the historic transformation we have been witnessing since the beginning of this year.

In fact, since a couple of years, it has been fashionable to express a variety of opinions on a shift or a shift of axis in the Turkish foreign policy. Many foreign policy experts preferred to say that Turkey, frustrated in its half-century long quest for EU membership and face to unending obstacles the EU created in this process, had returned to other horizons and started to look for substitutes.

There are who try to explain this change by the political and ideological orientations of the government. The shift, according to these analysts, had several dimensions, starting from internal political transformation to changing foreign policy priorities.

Some advocated, on the other hand, that the basic principles of the Turkish foreign policy, dictated by geography, economic constraints and security concerns, have not changed. There are surely new openings in Turkey’s foreign and economic policies, which are reflected in a more active international stance. But as in the case of the Middle East or Arab policy, what Turkey did in the last four-five years was an adaptation to emerging conditions.

We will be focusing on Turkey’s relations with the Arab World today. But we can easily repeat the same exercise for other regions surrounding Turkey.

There are, in my opinion, a series of developments and conditions which affected the Middle East in the post Cold War and post 9/11 environment. All these, encouraged, even forced Turkey to adopt active policies in its region.

First of all, global and regional conditions favored Turkey to play a more active role in its neighbourhood. The end of the Cold War changed the global balance of power, removed the sharp divisions and created a flexible environment in the region. This is the positive side.

By contrast, turbulent developments in Iraq and Afghanistan, the tension in Iran’s relations with the international community, unresolved political problems such as the Israeli-Palestinian question, the situation in Iraq and the growth of terrorist threat increased uncertainties in our region and put Turkey in a very difficult position. Turkey started to feel increasing threats and considered it necessary to take preventive diplomatic steps. To give you an example, the fragile stability and the weakness of authority in Iraq compelled Turkey to adopt an active policy in the region to prevent further instability and chaos.

The last global economic and financial crisis added new elements to this volatile environment.

On the other hand, Turkey’s own dynamics have facilitated and necessitated a more active stand in the region. We will discuss during the panels how the economic growth of Turkey,

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its political and sociological transformation shaped its foreign policy. The strengthening of democracy and a democratic culture of foreign policy in Turkey has also been instrumental. Accordingly, Turkey felt itself more confident in projecting its economic and commercial potential in its environment by launching regional projects and pushing for greater integration.

It is very important to note that the policies of Turkey have been reciprocated by the Arab leaders. So, Turkey has found reliable partners and been able to pursue its efforts. Turkey has developed a wide range of cooperation with Iraq and Syria since 2009 through the establishment of High Level Cooperation Councils, or joint Councils of Ministers.

Last year Turkey decided to implement a similar cooperation model with Lebanon and launched a four-country initiative which was aimed at establishing a common zone together with Syria, Lebanon and Jordan.

In short, Turkey has thus built a trust and contributed to the confidence building in the region.

Today we have a different Arab World. Turkey has been following the recent events which changed drastically the political landscape in the Arab countries with concern and hope. The change is not very easy to understand. But we should try to see long-term trends and avoid further divisions, violence and bloodshed.

Turkey has been criticized for being late to react to the uprisings in the Arab World and reverse its policies relying on the old Arab regimes. I would maintain that although it took some time to react publicly, Turkey has adopted a principled policy vis-a-vis the sudden upheaval in the region.

The Turkish Prime Minister and the Minister of Foreign Affairs have been stressing from the outset that governments have the responsibility to listen to their people and meet their legitimate aspirations without delay. This is, we believe, the only way to achieve sustainable security and stability.

Pursuing the accession negotiations with the European Union and going through a democratization process itself, Turkey was well aware of the potential dangers of sticking to archaic political structures.

In fact, already in 2003, President Abdullah Gül, when he was serving as Minister of Foreign Affairs, called on all OIC member states to put their houses in order urgently.

We believe that the Arab world was late to open the way for the political modernization. Maybe this transition towards democracy should have started much earlier, at least after the Cold War, as it happened in other regions in the world.

The wave of demonstrations started in Tunisia and spreaded to other countries have different causes, since every country has its own characteristics, political tradition and history. But all the peoples of the Middle Eastern countries have a common demand: Democracy.

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Turkey's expectation is to see democracy taking root in these countries. We all know that democracy is not a frozen stage or a happy end, but it is an ongoing process, evolving always towards a better level. We sincerely hope that every country will implement its own reforms and democratic processes to meet the demands of their people.

Turkey cannot be discouraged by the recent developments. Turks have deep historic and cultural ties and very good relations with the Arab countries. We share a common geography and common challenges with our Arab neighbours. By increasing our cooperation we can build better conditions for the peace and stability. And the well-being and prosperity of the peoples depend first of all on peace and stability.

Turkey aims at ending the disputes and increasing stability in the region by seeking new mechanisms to resolve conflicts, by encouraging positive change and interdependence, and by building cross-cultural bridges of dialogue and understanding.

We should all to address the root causes of the ongoing problems, without ignoring the core issue affecting the Arab societies. President Gul's article, published last week was entitled "The Revolution's Missing Peace" Everybody will agree that, the solution of the Israeli-Palestinian problem will remove the main stumbling bloc for peace and stability in the region.

Finally, I would emphasize the role of Turkey's relations with the European Union in this context.

The European Union has always been an organization radiating stability and contributing to the prosperity. As it was the case in the late 1990's and early 2000's in Central and Eastern Europe, the EU might have the ability to enlarge the area of political stability, rule of law, democratic values and economic prosperity towards the Middle East.

I believe that the EU will definitely gain new assets and new dimensions with the membership of Turkey. EU's enlargement towards Turkey will have a positive impact over the Arab Near East.

Imagine the positive effects on Syria and Lebanon of being the neighbours of a EU member.

Now that the political and social landscape of our region is changing very quickly, it may be easy to find quick answers to existing questions.

This change requires new approaches and new tools, which I hope will be elaborated here today.