

# Turkey's Role in the New Middle East:

*CPRS Turkey Research Initiative*

By Prof. Alpaslan Özerdem\*

**O**n 22 February 2011, Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, the long standing dictator of Libya appeared on TV to declare that he was going nowhere, did not care what the people of Libya wanted for their future and that he was planning to become a martyr in his own country. The defiance of Gaddafi was probably not surprising, despite the fact that thousands of Libyans had already been butchered by his sub-Saharan mercenaries. What was really surprising though, was that the need for such a speech from Gaddafi would have been quite unthinkable even only a couple of months earlier. In his speech, he referred to Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak, the former dictators of Tunisia and Egypt, respectively, claiming that he is a different kind of 'leader' and would not leave his country as they did in the face of mass demonstrations and public dissent. At the time of writing, Gaddafi was still clinging to power, but probably not for very long before that he is consigned to the bloody pages of history as the third dictator in North Africa, who was removed from power in February 2011.

Whether this storm of political transformation in the region will come to an end with the Libyan chapter is yet to be seen, but Bahrain, at the Gulf end of the Middle East is already struggling with its own political violence as the result of an uprising of the Shiite majority against the Sunni royal family rule. The demonstrations in Yemen against another

long-ruling Arab dictator has been waging over the last few weeks. From Morocco and Algeria to Jordan, Syria and Saudi Arabia, a wide range of other countries are likely to be affected by this wave of popular uprising, which seems to be led primarily by youth with the use of new media for mobilisation and resistance. In short, the power of the Kings, rulers, and leaders of single-party 'democracies' in the Middle East has never been so threatened like this since their creations in the post-WW I context by Britain and France.

It is clear that the political map of these countries is being re-written and in the context of international relations, this new era will mean a major change in the way some of the key international powers such as the United States (US), European Union (EU), China and Russia approach their foreign policies for the Middle East. There have already been unusual alliances and responses in the face of this sudden political change in the region. For example, Mubarak received direct and indirect political support from Israel and the Palestinian Authority when thousands of Egyptians filled Tahrir Square in Cairo, demanding his removal from power. To a large extent the US and EU response was muted and talked a lot about the need to listen to the demands of people, without taking a clear stance on Mubarak's initial claim that should remain in power. Another interesting phenomenon in terms of international responses to this political transformation has been the role of Turkey.

Until the wave of revolutions started to hit the region, Turkey's popularity in most Middle Eastern countries was at a peak, largely because of Turkey's confrontation with Israel under the Premiership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan over the protracted Palestinian issue. It all started with the Israel's military campaign of 'Operation Cast Lead' against Gaza in 2008. Before that Turkey was the strongest ally of Israel in the region with strong economic, military and political ties, and even acting as a mediator between Israel and Syria over the Golan Heights. Then over the Israeli offensive against Gaza, the famous 'one-minute' crisis between Erdoğan and Israeli President Shimon Peres took place in Davos on 29 January 2009. Erdoğan's walkout not only created a public frenzy in Turkey but he has suddenly become one of the most popular politicians in many Middle Eastern countries.

There were many tit for tat tactics between the two countries' foreign ministries before the next crisis took place with the Israel's military inception against the Blue Marmara ship on 31 May 2010. The ship was part of 'the Gaza flotilla', trying to break the Israeli blockade of Gaza by taking humanitarian aid and carrying hundreds of activists. The military attack which was carried out in international waters and resulted in the death of nine Turkish activists faced widespread international condemnation and strained the relationship between the two countries further. With this incident, Turkey's popularity among the Arab population increased tremendously, largely because Erdoğan seemed to be doing what their leaders had always failed to do – to confront Israel by means of effective diplomacy and be a strong voice for the Palestinian cause. Moreover, in line with the new foreign policy of 'zero-problem with neighbours' by Ahmet Davutoğlu, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Turkey has been deepening its relationships with most Middle Eastern countries. For example, with Syria, Lebanon and Jordan there is now a visa-free movement of people and their cabinets hold joint meetings. Turkey was one of the most influential mediators in the latest Lebanese crisis, as it can talk to all sides in the country, including Hezbollah, or in cooperation with Brazil, Turkey managed to score a deal with Iran over its



*Prof. Ahmet Davutoglu  
Minister of Foreign Affairs of  
Turkey*

nuclear capabilities. Overall, Turkey was using the soft power of political tools such as diplomacy, trade and cultural ties to become a regional power centre, which has also been perceived as an attempt of neo-Ottomanism by some, but doing this the main objective was to maintain the stability in the region. In other words, its foreign policy was to protect the existing status quo in order to increase its influence through the means of soft power.

The recent Middle Eastern revolutions have already demanded that Turkey re-adjust its foreign policy as the protection of the status quo would also mean continuing to work with leaders like Mubarak, Ben Ali and Gaddafi. Turkey has chosen to support uprisings and for example, it was probably the only regional country with a clear stance on the political

crisis in Egypt. One week after the mass demonstrations started in Egypt and while all major international powers were rather timid and quite about the departure of Mubarak, Erdoğan's speech at the Turkish Parliament, which was a clear message to Mubarak to go, was broadcast live to thousands in Tahrir Square. It is interesting that Turkey, which was always criticised for its poor human rights record and shaky democracy until very recent times, has now become the beacon of moral guidance for such matters in the Middle East. With the comfort of having improved its own democracy, rule of law and human rights problems domestically, though there is still a big need for

further change, Turkey seems to be wanting to side with the people of the Middle East rather than their tyrannical regimes. Obviously, such an issue is likely to face a further credibility test if popular uprisings start to emerge in places such as Saudi Arabia, Iran and Syria where Turkey has much more significant economic and geopolitical interests. Nevertheless, it is clear that the new political landscape in the Middle East will bring new dynamics which will demand increasingly different responses from regional actors, and Turkey seems to be intending to increase its soft power engagement further.

It is probably not surprising to see that Turkey has increased its regional engagement because it occupies a critical geopolitical position between Europe,



the Middle East and the Caucasus. It has a burgeoning economy and strong private sector and membership of a wide range of organisations from NATO, G20 and the OECD to the Islamic Conference and candidacy to the EU. Turkey is a pivotal player in global affairs too, as it is an important peace broker in regional conflicts, a leading country for peacekeeping operations and has been a generous donor for disaster response around the world. However, Turkey is also a country trying to merge its Islamic heritage into broader structures and models of western liberal democratic governance. It still needs to address a number of fundamental socio-cultural and development challenges in order to deal with the legacy of its Ottoman heritage and nation-state building policies of the Republic. Furthermore, Turkey's internal stability is badly affected by a protracted armed conflict based on Kurdish separatism. Therefore, peace and conflict issues are critical for Turkey not only for regional and global stability, but also its own domestic security, stability and prosperity.

With these issues in mind, the Centre for Peace and Reconciliation Studies (CPRS) at Coventry University is home to an innovative research group since January 2011 that seeks to explore a wide range of conflict and peace related matters with a specific reference to Turkey. The CPRS Turkey aims to:

- ◆ Create an enabling environment for research on peace and conflict related issues in the context of Turkey and on the role of Turkey at regional and international levels;
- ◆ Seek funding opportunities for scholars to undertake comparative research and encourage staff/student exchange between Coventry and Turkish universities;
- ◆ Provide scholarships to students from Turkey to undertake the CPRS flagship MA in Peace and Reconciliation Studies, Postgraduate Certificate in Conflict Resolution Skills and online MA in Peacebuilding;
- ◆ Run a book series with an academic publisher;
- ◆ Organise a seminar series in Coventry to host leading scholars researching on Turkey;
- ◆ Organise an annual conference on peace and

conflict issues in Turkey and an annual public lecture in Coventry;

- ◆ Publish an annual 'Peace in Turkey' issue as part of the online Journal of Conflict Transformation and Security;
- ◆ Publish a biannual electronic newsletter to disseminate the activities of the research group.

A series of exciting CPRS Turkey events are already in pipeline, for example, Mr Filippo Grandi, Commissioner-General of UNRWA (UN Agency for Palestinian refugees,) will launch the CPRS Turkey annual public lecture series with a talk at Coventry University on 4<sup>th</sup> May 2011. An international conference on human security will be jointly organised by CPRS and three Turkish Universities (Kadir Has, Akdeniz and Trakya) in Istanbul on 27-28 October 2011. A number of Turkish academics will be visiting CPRS this summer. Moreover, with an exciting portfolio of activities, the CPRS Turkey aims to expand its network of organisations and individuals. If you are interested in peace, conflict and security

related issues in the context of Turkey or Turkey's regional and international role in such matters, we would like to hear from you. As an academician, researcher, civil society activist, diplomat, aid sector practitioner and representative of national authorities, you could involve in the CPRS Turkey initiative in a number of ways



by:

- ◆ becoming an 'Associate of CPRS Turkey' in order to take part in our research and consultancy programmes;
- ◆ participating in our workshops and conferences that are held in Coventry and in different parts of Turkey;
- ◆ bringing your research ideas for joint funding applications;
- ◆ organising staff and student exchange programmes;
- ◆ publishing in our online Journal of Conflict Transformation and Security. **PR**

**Note:**

\* **Alpaslan Özerdem** is Professor of Peacebuilding at Coventry University.