

## The Arab Spring and Calls for a **Turkey-EU** Foreign Policy Dialogue

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The Arab Spring caught both Turkey and the European Union by surprise and led both actors to review their existing policies towards the Middle East and North Africa. It also revealed disagreements between them about how to respond to the uprisings, particularly visible in the cases of Libya and Syria. The EU's and Turkey's different responses to the developments in the region have led several analysts to suggest that a foreign policy dialogue between the two should be established in parallel with membership talks. This article will first explore the EU's and Turkey's policies towards the Middle East and North Africa adopted since the uprisings began, with particular emphasis on the Libyan and Syrian cases, and then describe the recent proposals for a dialogue on foreign policy issues of mutual interest.

The European Union's Neighborhood Policy (ENP), launched in 2003, had the aim of promoting stability in the countries in the East and South of the Union using mostly economic incentives and by providing a multilateral forum for political dialogue. In light of the Arab Spring, the ENP was reviewed in May 2011 [1]. The main idea underpinning the review is "more for more",

which means that that the countries which make more democratic reforms in the future will receive more EU money and get to establish closer relations with the Union. These closer relations refer to increased mobility of people and more access to European markets. In addition, the Commission has increased funding dedicated to the region with an additional €1.2 billion[2]. Critics argue that these new measures will not be enough to bring about more democratization, since the funding is relatively small, and some EU member states lack the political will to deliver on the promises of increased people mobility and market Access[3].

Turkey's policy towards the Middle East and North Africa was based on the concept of "zero-problems with neighbors", formulated by foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu. This policy was translated in the 2000s into the signing of several agreements with neighboring countries on diverse areas including tourism, education, health and transportation and the establishment of visa-free regimes with 58 countries[4]. The policy paid off and the share of trade with the Middle East increased from 18.79% in 2003 to 29.3% in 2010 [5]. Turkey tried to forge closer ties with regional governments independent of their level of

democracy and refrained from openly defending a pro-democratizing agenda, adopting instead an approach which consisted of encouraging regional governments, usually behind closed doors, to conduct reforms. However, the goal of having zero-problems with the neighbors was shaken by the Arab spring, and Turkey was accused of pursuing “zero problems with dictators”[6]. When the Arab Spring started, Turkey was slow to adapt to the new circumstances, which was particularly visible in the Libyan and Syrian cases, discussed below.

### **Turkey’s and EU’s responses to the uprising in Libya**

Initially, Turkey was against imposing sanctions on Libya, saying that they would hurt the population, not the leadership, and accused some in the international community of acting not from a humanitarian perspective, but out of oil interests [7]. Turkey was also opposed to plans to establish a no-fly zone in the country and to conduct air strikes against Gaddafi forces, warning that “NATO’s involvement should not be used to distribute Libya’s natural resources to certain countries” and saying that a “NATO intervention in Libya would be absurd”[8]. In addition, Turkey was against France taking the leadership of anti-Gaddafi war efforts and resented not being invited to a summit meeting on Libya convened in Paris, after a UN resolution authorizing the operation in Libya was approved.

Turkey then did a complete U-turn, and insisted that the command of the operation to enforce the no-fly zone and the arms embargo and to conduct air strikes against Gaddafi forces should be given to NATO. It seems that, once it became clear that the operation was going to be carried out, Turkey did not want to be excluded from it; Turkey insisted that NATO, and not France, took the lead. Turkey then began to take part in the operation by assuming control of the Benghazi airport to coordinate the delivery of humanitarian aid, sending ships and a submarine to help enforce the arms embargo and later by freezing Gaddafi’s assets and imposing sanctions on the Libyan leadership.

Turkey continued its efforts to bring about a political resolution of the conflict by suggesting a road map which included the withdrawal of Gaddafi forces from besieged cities, the establishment of aid corridors and democratic change[9]. When neither side of the Libyan conflict endorsed the road map, Turkey then agreed with the position, taken by the US, UK and France, that Gaddafi had to step down[10].

For its part, the EU was divided on how to deal with the conflict in Libya. France and Britain favored a military response, whereas Germany preferred a political solution, the same stance initially adopted by Turkey. Germany did not take part in the military operation and abstained from the UN vote which authorized it.

The EU then tried to show unity by proposing on the 1st of April 2011 a Eufor mission in Libya, which would consist of 1000 troops, whose job would be to secure land and sea corridors for aid delivery[11]. Therefore, it would be a limited mission to support humanitarian assistance. However, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) declared that the mission would not be needed, because it could endanger aid workers by associating them with military actors, which effectively killed the initiative. A member of the European Parliament called the proposed Eufor mission in Libya an “April’s fool joke”[12].



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### Turkey's and EU's responses to the conflict in Syria

Turkey's response to Syria's violent oppression of protestors, at first, was to appeal to the Syrian authorities to act with restraint and to advise the Syrian government to listen to the will of its people. Prime Minister Erdogan held phone conversations with Bashar al-Assad and sent Turkish envoys to Damascus to say that Turkey would stand by him if he pursued more democratic reforms. With Turkey's urging for the Assad government to reform falling on deaf ears, Turkey raised the level of criticism, but still insisted that an orderly transition to democracy was the best option. Finally, with the killings continuing, Prime Minister Erdogan announced in September 2011 that Turkey was no longer in contact with Syria. Turkey then decided to impose its own sanctions on Syria, even though the UN Security Council failed to pass a resolution to that effect because of China's and Russia's opposition[13].

The European Union was more united in opposition to the conflict in Syria, in comparison to the position taken in the case of Libya. The EU gradually strengthened sanctions against the Assad regime. First, it imposed travel-bans and asset freezes on several members of Assad's inner circle, including Assad himself, and on some Syrian firms. Then, EU countries agreed to impose an oil embargo on Syria, which exports 95% of its oil to the EU[14]. However, even though most EU member states agreed on the ban coming into force in mid-October, Italy insisted that the ban should be delayed until the 30th of November, arguing that several European companies had already paid up-front for oil deliveries[15].

### The case for a Turkey-EU foreign policy dialogue

The different approaches adopted by Turkey and the EU in the cases above are not the only examples of disagreements between the two. In 2010, Turkey refused to adopt tougher EU sanctions against Iran, choosing instead to adopt

the sanctions agreed by the UN. The compatibility rate of Turkey's foreign policy with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy has been steadily declining in recent years, from an 85% compatibility rate in 2008 to 48% in 2011[16]. Given the different courses of action being taken by Turkey and the EU in regional matters, proposals for the establishment of some form of enhanced cooperation between the two actors have become more frequent[17].

As things stand, the number of platforms for the EU and Turkey to discuss foreign policy matters with each other remain limited. Before the Lisbon treaty, there were contacts between Turkey's foreign minister and EU officials within the

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framework of Troika meetings, which occurred twice a year when the Presidency of the Council rotated. Since the Lisbon Treaty came into force in 2009, the Troika meetings have been replaced by the Turkish-EU political dialogue ministerial level meeting, attended by the Turkish foreign minister, Turkey's chief EU negotiator, the EU High Representative for foreign affairs, and EU Enlargement Commissioner. The problem is that this meeting also only takes place twice a year. Foreign minister Davutoglu also participates in the informal "Gymnich" meetings of EU foreign ministers which take place once during the six-month tenure of each presidency.

Even before the Arab Spring, Turkey had already put forward in July 2010 proposals to enhance dialogue with the EU on foreign policy issues. The proposals included the participation of Turkey's

political leaders in European Council meetings; of Turkey's foreign minister in Foreign Affairs Council meetings on an ad hoc basis; regular meetings between Turkey's delegate to the EU and the Political and Security Committee (PSC), among other forms of consultation[18]. These proposals were significant because in the past Turkey viewed any form of cooperation outside membership talks with suspicion, fearful that it could lead to some form of "privileged partnership" short of membership. However, some EU countries have so far rejected these proposals[19].

More dialogue would certainly be beneficial for both parties. The sharing of information and the discussion of policies to be adopted may lead to more cooperation in the foreign policy field and hence to more effective Turkey's and EU's policies towards the Middle East and North Africa. Turkey could benefit from the EU's financial and institutional capacity and the EU could benefit from Turkey's credibility, influence and network of relationships with the region. Although more dialogue will not necessarily lead to a common approach, it will most certainly contribute to a more constructive relationship between Turkey and the EU. When it comes to important security issues being discussed by the West, as was the case with Libya, Turkey has shown that it wants to

be involved, and that it tends to be uncooperative if it thinks it is not getting the respect it feels it deserves. By being consulted on regional matters, and being recognized as a regional power, it is possible that Turkey's policies will be more aligned with those of the EU. With the membership process stalled and challenges in the Middle East and North Africa far from settled, the option of establishing enhanced forms of dialogue on foreign policy issues with Turkey should be seriously considered by the EU.

**Notes:**

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