

**Partners in Need: Turkey, the European Union and the United States face the
Arab Spring
Nathalie Tocci (2012)**

The Arab spring has cast Turkey back into the western fold and away from alternative alliance patterns which seemed to be in the pipeline only a few years ago. Turkey won't act in Syria without its western partners. Meanwhile it is the very incompleteness of the Turkish model which is of such interest to its neighbours.

Turkey, the European Union and the United States have, broadly speaking, always shared the same vision for the European neighbourhood. Whether during the Cold War, in the decades that followed, or in the aftermath of the Arab spring, the three have consistently called for stability, prosperity, and, insofar as it was compatible with their particularistic interests, peace and democracy in the region.

During the Cold War and its immediate aftermath this shared vision neither necessitated agreement on policy means, nor did it call for joint action. With few exceptions, the foreign policies of the three proceeded along parallel paths. In the early years of the twenty-first century, 9/11, the end of the Middle East Peace Process, the search for a credible alternative to EU enlargement, and Turkey's growing regional prominence all converged, upping the stakes for a joint EU-US-Turkey strategy. Yet the greater the need for joint action, the less likely it appeared to be. Particularly between 2009 and 2011, talk in the west about the 'loss' of Turkey, Turkey's 'change of axis' and its 'drift to the East' was commonplace. True, Turkey was recognized as an increasingly important actor in its neighbourhood. Yet the prospects of a transatlantic strategy held jointly with it seemed dim, as Turkey took pride in its newfound foreign policy autonomy.

Then came the Arab spring in 2011, and the dynamics between Turkey and its transatlantic partners changed once again. True, critical challenges bedeviling joint action remain, the dire state of EU-Turkey relations foremost among them. But the desirability as well as the feasibility of acting together, particularly in the Arab world, have never been so high.

Turkey returns to the western fold

Turkey, for one, has banged its head against the brick wall of its turbulent neighbourhood, increasing its readiness to cooperate with its transatlantic partners. In the early twenty-first century, a booming Turkey amidst a transatlantic community in economic crisis believed it could freelance in a multipolar world, confidently seeking “zero problems” with neighbours by (hyper) actively pursuing political, commercial and social ties with them and allying, when necessary, with other global powers. The Arab spring came as a cold shower upon Turkey’s foreign policy optimism. As [argued by Sinan Ülgen](#), Turkey’s utopia crumbled with the realization that seeking zero problems with neighbouring regimes inevitably meant turning a blind eye to the fact that neighbouring citizens were very far from having zero problems.

Initially Turkey staggered. It had few qualms about supporting people power in Tunisia and Egypt, with whom Ankara either had few relations (Ben Ali’s Tunisia) or engaged in unspoken regional competition (Mubarak’s Egypt). Hence, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, for instance, was the first western leader to call for Hosni Mubarak’s resignation in a televised speech on *Al Jazeera*, and President Abdullah Gül was the first head of state to meet with the Egyptian Supreme Council in Egypt. As the Arab spring progressed however, Turkey’s *realpolitik* crudely came to the fore.

In Libya, fearing a loss of commercial ties and the fate of Turkish workers in the country, Turkey initially opposed NATO’s enforcement of a no-fly zone and thereafter restricted its participation in the intervention to the humanitarian dimension. Ankara came around to officially calling for Gaddafi to resign in May 2011. Ankara followed a somewhat similar pattern with the Syrian uprising. Since Syria had been the flagship of Turkey’s zero problems policy, Ankara initially engaged in a flurry of diplomatic activity to spur President Assad to reform. As Assad ignored calls for reform and the violence escalated, Turkey took a back seat. It reemerged at the forefront only in the summer of 2011, when violence in Syria escalated to the point of spilling into Turkey with its masses of refugee flows. Since then, Turkey has openly backed the Syrian opposition, hosting meetings of the Syrian opposition in Antalya and Istanbul, engaging in civil society mediation efforts with Syrian opposition and refugee groups, and hosting the Syrian liberation army under the direct influence of the Turkish armed forces.

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As Turkey reconciled itself to walking the walk of the Arab uprisings in Libya and Syria, it gradually started talking the talk of democracy promotion in the Middle East, perhaps for the first time in its history. Notable in this respect was Erdoğan's [electoral victory speech](#) in July 2011, in which he saluted the democratic aspirations of peoples across the Middle East. Hence, despite initial hesitations in Ankara, as in Brussels and Washington, the three transatlantic partners ultimately came around to supporting, at least in principle, the anti-authoritarian drive sweeping across the Arab world.

Not only did Turkey, the EU and the US all come to support the Arab uprisings and broadly share the same views on Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Syria and Iran. But from the perspective of all three, the attractions of joint action in the quicksands of the Middle East have distinctly increased. Since 2011, Turkey has downscaled its perceived ability to act unilaterally in the neighbourhood, recognizing that, when faced with historic change and instability all round, partnering with its allies is of the essence.

Turkey's regional rivals

This is particularly so given Turkey's distancing from its historic rivals in the region: Iran and Russia. Turkish-Iranian relations lived through a brief honeymoon in the early 2000s, brought about by shared interests over the Kurdish dynamics unleashed by the 2003 war in Iraq and Turkey's rising dependence on Iranian energy supplies. The height of the rapprochement between the two was in 2010, when Turkey, together with Brazil, brokered an agreement over the Iranian nuclear question, rejecting a UN Security Council vote on sanctions on Iran. Yet the Arab spring has brought a temporary halt to this honeymoon. The ancient rivalry between Turkey and Iran has resurfaced over developments in Syria, alongside Turkey's agreement to host one of NATO's radar systems on its soil, and its increasing distance from the sectarian politics of Iraqi Prime Minister al-Maliki, strongly backed by Tehran. The downturn in the relationship is captured by the [menacing words](#) pronounced by Maj. Gen. Yahya Rahim Safavi: 'Turkey must radically rethink its policies on Syria, the NATO missile shield and promoting Muslim secularism in the Arab world, or face trouble from its own people and neighbours'. Equally harsh were the [words of Turkish Vice Prime Minister](#) Bülent Arınç: 'I do not know if you [Iran] are worthy of being called Islamic... Have you said a single thing about what is happening in Syria?'.

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A similar story can be told of Russia, another historic Turkish rival, towards whom Ankara had been warming in the early years of the twenty-first century, again over energy interests. Also in this case, Turkey and Russia ended up on opposite sides of the Arab spring divide, epitomized by Moscow's veto over a proposed UNSC resolution on Syria, a veto which Foreign Minister Davutoğlu unflatteringly defined as being driven by a Cold War logic.

The Arab spring has cast Turkey back into the western fold and away from alternative alliance patterns which seemed to be in the making only a few years ago, whether in the Middle East or in the sovereignist 'global south'. Turkey, of course, remains far from being a trigger-happy interventionist power in its neighbourhood. Moreover, Turkey continues to pursue its strategic autonomy and has **not reverted** into being an uncritical subject of the west. But the discourse of Turkey's axis shift is now passé. Ankara's support for the democratic aspirations of its neighbours is careful, cautious, and above all conditional upon multilateral cooperation with its partners, be it the EU and the US, or the Arab League. In the specific case of Syria for example, Turkey's intervention by setting up a humanitarian corridor, a buffer zone or a no-fly zone would hinge on the agreement, participation and support of the UN, NATO and the Arab League. Well aware that the challenges bedeviling its neighbours are too great to confront alone, Turkey seems to have rediscovered the virtues of cooperating with its allies.

The west re-evaluates the Turkish experience

Viewed from a European and American perspective, the logic of joint action with Turkey has also become more compelling, given the renewed significance of the Turkish model in a neighbourhood undergoing profound transformation. No longer simply a US-inspired and Turkish/European- embraced static slogan, the *Turkish model* or, more appropriately, the *Turkish experience*, may become a more dynamic and articulate notion that Arab leaders could explore (alongside other examples) as they grapple with domestic change.

As argued by Ülgen, the multifaceted notion of the Turkish model is **captured by the support it elicits** from a mixed bag of actors, ranging from Egypt's General Hussein Tantawi and Tunisia's Ennahda leader Rashid el-Gannouchi, to US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton and Islamist scholar Tariq Ramadan. Turkey, indeed, may offer different ideas to different people, to inspire change in its near

abroad. Tunisia and Morocco may turn to the trajectory of Turkish political Islam and, specifically, to the evolution of the Justice and Development Party as a post-Islamist party which has accumulated unprecedented political power within a secular system. Egypt may take an interest in the development of the Turkish military and civil-military relations in Turkey, including both the Turkish military's preference for the barracks following its interventions in politics in the past, and the more recent reduction of the military's political power within formal and informal institutional channels. Across North Africa and the Middle East, political leaders, businessmen and civil society actors may explore Turkey's model of economic development, and in particular its switch from import substitution to export promotion to become the world's sixteenth largest economy. Finally, politicians particularly in Egypt and the Gulf may explore the evolution of Turkish foreign policy, which, while remaining anchored to the west, has displayed rising autonomy and domestic public support.

Naturally, what is at stake here is not a clear-cut and static emulation of Turkey's situation, an emulation which would be neither possible nor desirable. It is rather a dynamic process of Turkey's observing ongoing experience, learning from its advances, and, perhaps, even more critically, from its mistakes. As argued by Kirişci, it is precisely the incompleteness of the Turkish model that is of interest to its neighbours,^[1] and which thus renders Turkey an ideal partner for the EU and the US in inducing transformative change in the neighbourhood.

A joint strategy for the neighbourhood?

Talk about a trilateral strategy between Turkey, the European Union and the United States in the Arab world is not new. For years, the broad convergence of views and visions between the three has made a joint strategy an endeavour worth exploring. Yet never has there been an alignment of the transatlantic stars as today. The historic transformation unfolding in the Middle East and North Africa has rendered a joint trilateral strategy both desirable and feasible. Above all, the Arab spring has fully exposed to the light of day the fact that none of these three actors can effectively act alone if they are to confront the extraordinary challenges under way.

A joint strategy could include the establishment of a standing trilateral working group for the neighbourhood, which would in turn determine whether, when and in what policy areas complementary action should proceed separately or

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simultaneously. Broadly speaking, a strategy would foresee diplomatic public and private interventions, assistance, trade and security cooperation. In some areas, such as diplomacy, assistance and trade, there could be a useful division of labour between the three. In the field of security instead, as currently demonstrated in Syria, joint action would be warranted.

This is not to underplay the many obstacles that hinder foreign policy cooperation between Turkey, the EU and the US, foremost among which is the state of EU-Turkey relations. But responding effectively to the inexorable shift of tectonic plates in the neighbourhood is a challenge none of the three can afford to shy away from.

[1] Kirişci, Kemal (2011) 'Democracy Diffusion: The Turkish Experience', in Linden, Ronald *et al* (2011) *Turkey and its Neighbors: Foreign Relations in Transition*, Boulder, Lynne Rienner.