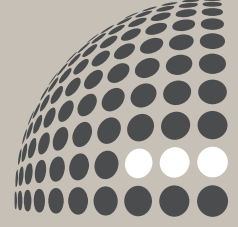


# SETA Policy Debate



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## Arab Spring and its Effect on Turkey's Regional Policy



| ali nader | taHa ozhan | steve larrabee | muhittin ataman |



## ABSTRACT

Recent Arab revolutions have brought both opportunities and challenges to Turkish foreign policy. As a country enjoying high popularity on Arab streets, Turkey has increased its profile in the region due to its robust economic growth and political transformation by consolidating democracy addressing long overdue questions. Under the ambitious zero problems with neighbours policy Turkey had also expanded contacts with many of the Arab regimes in the region. However, as Arab Spring knocked on the doors of Turkey's immediate neighbourhood –Syria–, it became clear that Turkey's zero problems with neighbours policy needs to be reconsidered in a way that would take into account people's aspirations for rights and freedoms. Turkey's position, in this respect, will have decisive impact on regional power balances between Turkey, Iran and Arab world in post-Arab Spring period.

SETA's public seminar "Arab spring and its effect on Turkey's regional policy" brought together Steve Larrabee of RAND Corporation, Ali Nader of RAND Corporation and Muhittin Ataman of SETA Foundation, to discuss further the implications of Arab spring on regional and international power balances in general, and on Turkish foreign policy in particular. The panellists addressed the following questions: What role can Turkey play in the region? How would Arab Spring affect Turkey's neighbourhood policy, especially its relations with Iran? How will Turkey's lowering relations with Syria affect Turkish-Iranian relations, and what meaning will it entail for the region?



October, 2011 | Policy Debate Series No: 3

## ARAB SPRING AND ITS EFFECT ON TURKEY'S REGIONAL POLICY

| ali nader | taha ozhan | steve larrabee | muhittin  
ataman |

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### *Policy Debate Series*

The Policy Debate Series serves to provide a forum for fresh perspectives on controversial issues in world politics and Turkish foreign policy by bringing together experts representing diverse viewpoints and backgrounds. The series aims to bring these informed and innovative discussions to a broad audience. The presentations are transcribed from speakers' voice records and edited in a way that maintains the original content of their speech.

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# ARAB SPRING AND ITS EFFECT ON TURKEY'S REGIONAL POLICY

## **Taha Özhan:**

Good afternoon everybody. Thank you very much for joining this second event on Arab Spring. We have three distinguished speakers today. I will start from my left end with Muhittin Ataman. He is a researcher at SETA and a professor in International Relations Department at Abant İzzet Baysal University. His articles appeared in journals like South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, Middle Eastern Studies, Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs, Alternatives and so on. He is also one of the editors of Middle Eastern Annual which has been published since 2005. Currently he is working on Saudi Arabia and Syria.

We have also a guest from the U.S., RAND Corporation, Stephen Larrabee. He is a very well-known academician in Turkey. He holds the Distinguished Chair in European Security at the RAND Corporation. Before joining RAND, Mr. Larrabee served as a vice-president and director of studies of the Institute of East–West Security Studies in New York from 1983 to 1989. He was a distinguished scholar in Residence at the Institute from 1989 to 1990. His recent RAND monographs includes *Troubled Partnership: U.S.-Turkish Relations in an Era of Global Geopolitical Change*, published in 2010 and *Turkey as a U.S. Security Partner* published in 2008.

Our other speaker is an Iran expert Alireza Nader. He is an international policy analyst at the RAND Corporation and the lead author of *The Next Supreme Leader: Succession in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, 2011. His research has focused on Iran's political dynamics, elite decision making, and Iranian foreign policy. Prior to joining RAND, Nader served as a Middle East specialist at the U.S. Department of the Treasury and as a research analyst at the Center for Naval Analyses.

I do not want to take too much time so I will pass the microphone to Muhittin Ataman from SETA to make his presentation.

**Muhittin Ataman:**  
“The Arab Spring is a kind of Magna Charta for the Arab people. It initiated democratization process and provided a venue through which people could voice their demands for economic and social development”.

***Muhittin Ataman:***

Thank you very much Mr. Chairman. I welcome you all to the panel. My speech will be divided in two parts. In the first part, I will shortly mention from my own perspective what the Arab Spring means. And the second part of my speech will be about the impact of the Arab Spring on the Turkish foreign and regional policy. As we all know, the modern Middle Eastern system was established in the wake of the First World War by the Western powers, French and British in particular. The West, under the leadership of the U.S., consolidated this system through the Camp David accord in 1970s. Then with 9/11 attacks, the West seized an opportunity to maintain the traditional regional system by introducing the greater Middle Eastern project. However, the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq demonstrated that any imposition of the Western states will be too costly for them to initiate or realize this kind of a project. And then unexpectedly, in Tunisia the first Arab revolt broke out as a kind of natural response to the traditional regional system of the Middle East. That means the Arab Spring is not only directed to the Camp David order, but at the same time it is directed to the San Remo order that was established after the First World War.

The Arab Spring is a kind of Magna Charta for the Arab people. It initiated democratization process and provided a venue through which people could voice their demands for economic and social development. It is a kind of domestic natural self-determination. Today the main problems that Arab people are grappling with are not the result of the policies of Western states, as we say it in Turkish “dış mihrak”, i.e. foreign agents, who were and are still conceived by many in the region as the main cause of political and economic problems.

In this respect, claiming that Arab people are not capable of initiating a wave of revolts against their authoritarian regimes should be understood as a kind of Orientalist understanding. The Arab uprisings are solidly the result of genuine Arab will. Arab people including almost all Islamic movements now begin to realize that it is meaningless to oppose all Western institutions and values. They have begun to utilize all facilities such as technology and democracy in order to achieve what they want. They are now careful not to oppose, as I have said, to the Western discourse in order to get the Western support. Those groups, who use these means, especially the youth, have begun to question traditional fragmentation and dependence imposed by authoritarian regimes. Governments are now in more trouble to exploit natural resources for transferring their societies into charity societies. Their legitimizing forces, mainly the Ulema, are not untouchables anymore for the Arab youth and people in general. The secular regional regimes are also unable to characterize any opposition movement and demand of rights as Islamists in order to receive the Western support.

When you come to the impact of these Arab uprisings on Turkish foreign policy; the first point I would make is that the Arab Spring has a fundamental impact on regional power balances between Turkey, Iran, Israel and the Arab world. Turkey, under the

leadership of Erdogan and Davutoglu, has introduced a new political discourse towards the region. As an implication of this new discourse we can remember Erdogan's balcony speech after the last general elections. This new discourse upholds interaction with all regional actors and thus puts Turkey in a position between Iran and Israel. Unlike these two states, Turkey pursues a foreign policy that does not otherize any actor. In that respect, it seems that the Arab Spring will contribute to Turkey's new discourse while further isolating Israel and Iran who use opposite aggressive discourses.

The isolation of Iran and Israel will facilitate the de-securitization of the regional system and regional politics. Fall of Syrian regime will cause the isolation of Iran in the region and the fall of Jordan or Saudi Arabia following Egypt will further isolate Israel. Therefore both Iran and Israel who have long benefited from the status-quo are the most anxious states in the region. Looking from the Turkish perspective, I am quite optimistic about the future of the regional power balances. It seems more likely that the regional balance of power will change in favor of Turkey as the two significant regional players begin to lose power. On the one hand, Iran has begun to lose its power that it had gained in the wake of Islamic Revolution. Especially by supporting the oppressive secular Syrian regime against the legitimate demands of Syrian people, Iran now faces difficulty in representing the Islamic resistance and demands of regional peoples. On the other hand, the Israeli state has also begun to lose power and legitimacy vis-à-vis Turkey's increasing popularity in the region. Israel will face more difficulty in playing with inter Arab balances; from now on, it will face a set of regimes which are more sensitive to the popular demands in particular to the demands on the Palestinian issue.

The second point to be made is the end of personalistic and authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, this will, in turn, institutionalize and normalize both domestic and foreign policies of regional states. This will also be to the advantage of Turkey. It will be easier for Turkey to improve the relations with the new more democratic and responsible regimes in the region rather than with authoritarian states. It is expected that Arab states will decrease their military spending during the post-Arab spring period. With the allocation of less material resources to security and military, resources will be used for social and economic development. The more emphasis is given on social and economic development, the bigger and easier role Turkey will play in the region.

Finally, it is worth noting that global and regional environment is also convenient for domestic transformation. Both the Western states and regional actors demand regional restructuring based on democratic values. In that sense, expectations from regional change overlap with the needs of the region. Turkey tries to use this overlap in order to facilitate a peaceful and soft transformation of the region which will be for the benefit of both the region and the West. And if the West helps Turkey in its regional efforts, this will improve its negative image in the region too. Overall, I am optimistic about the future of the region; I believe that increasing dependence between states will overcome existing problems. Thank you very much.

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**Alireza Nader:**

Thank you, I appreciate the opportunity to speak before you. I just want to briefly talk about the Arab Spring and its impact on Iran and how the Iranian government views the Arab Spring, and what this means for Turkish-Iranian relations. When we look at Iran’s reaction to the Arab Spring we see that Iranian senior officials have depicted it as a success for Iran’s Islamic Revolution. Ayatollah Khamenei, the supreme leader, generals of the revolutionary guards, has said that the region’s Arabs have been inspired by Iran and its revolution. And they also depicted it as a setback for the U.S.

When we look at the allied regimes, they are all in trouble now: Ben Ali of Tunisia, Mubarak of Egypt, the regime in Yemen and the demonstrations in Bahrain. It is somewhat easy to see why the Iranian regime would feel this way. We can ask whether the Iranian government really convinced that the Arab Spring has benefited Iran or they pretend so for political purposes. You can argue that both cases make sense. However, what is happening in Syria poses real challenges to Iran. Syria is a very close ally of Iran -its closest ally in the region- and Bashar Assad regime faces a lot of pressure. There is a concern in Tehran regarding who will come after Bashar Al Assad. New regime in Syria will potentially be a Sunni dominated regime and it might not be as pro-Iranian as in the past. Whereas some Iranian officials say Syria is different, and the uprisings in Syria have been supported by the U.S. and created by Israel. But interestingly some Iranian officials have claimed the otherwise. President Ahmadinejad, in a televised interview, said that there is no military solution to the Syrian problem. Another member of parliament in Iran, however, stated that Iran’s support for Syria should be conditional because the demonstrators are pious Muslims. There are also reports that Iranian representatives have met with Syrian opposition.

Iran sees the Arab Spring as a potential to expand its influence in the Middle East, but there are challenges; there is Syria, there is the fact that Gaddafi fell with NATO’s support. Again the opportunist Islamists may come to power in places like Tunisia or they may gain increased influence in Tunisia. Or that could be the case for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Whether or not these parties are pro-Iranian, I think, remains open to question.

So what does it leave to the Turkish-Iranian relations? In the past few years, Iran and Turkey have become much closer. There is increased economic cooperation between the two countries. Turkey’s nuclear deal with Iran came as a relief to Iran. I think, to certain extent, Iran appreciated Turkey’s mediation efforts. Another issue that united both countries is the Kurdish Issue. Both Iran and Turkey face a Kurdish insurgencies; the PKK in Turkey and the PJAK in Iran. We have seen increased cooperation between the two countries on the Kurdish issue especially in recent weeks. So those are some avenues of cooperation.

But Iran’s view of Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East is not always positive. There are indications that Iran officials are unhappy with Turkey’s policies in the Middle

East. One major issue is Syria; Iran has criticized Turkey's position in Syria and Turkey's criticism of Bashar Al Assad. Iran perceives Turkey to have aided the downfall of the Syrian regime. Another major issue is Turkey's hosting the radar missile system. Iranian reactions have been very negative. Other potential areas of difference come forth in Iraq. The two countries, Iran and Turkey, are, to some extent, competitors in Iraq. During the last parliamentary elections, Iran backed the Shia parties while Turkey backed the other Sunni parties. Turkey has a lot of economic influence in Iraq, and Iran is also trying to expand its economic interaction with Iraq. The Iraq issue is a heated one in terms of Iran-Turkish competition. Withdrawal of U.S. forces adds another dimension to the competition over Iraq. There is a perception in the region shared by all parties, not just the Iranians and Turks but also the Arabs; there is a power vacuum to be filled. Countries like Saudi Arabia are especially concerned about what's going on Iraq.

When it comes to Palestinian issue, Iran has always championed the Palestinian class, but we have seen Turkey take a lead on Palestinian issue. All the Iranian criticism has been very explicit, we have to remember the Palestinian issue is something Iran had used to gain influence in the Arab world. A lot of Arab populations -not their governments necessarily- have appreciated what they perceived to be Iran's resistance at the U.S. and Israel on the Palestinian issue. Finally, the nuclear program could also become another issue. As Iran's nuclear program progresses, there is a possibility that Turkey could change its policies on the Iranian nuclear program. One of the supreme advisors Yahya Safavi, a former commander chief of the Revolutionary Guards, recently made a speech which I think reflects Tehran's thinking on Turkey.

I mean when we look at Iranian decision-making on Turkey; yes we have to pay close attention to what President Ahmadinejad says, but we have to also pay attention to what Khamenei and advisors are saying about Turkey. Safavi said that Turkey made three mistakes: one is hosting the radar, the second is supporting the Syrian opposition and the third is PM Erdogan's visit to Egypt and his presenting Turkey as a secular model for the region. And when you look at the statements particularly from the perspective of Iranian conservatives, they worry that Turkey is presenting an alternate model to the Islamic Republic in the region. There we come back to the point I have mentioned before. The Iranian government claimed that the Arab Spring has been inspired by the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Here, we have Turkey basically offering itself as a model for the Arab population in the region. This contradicts with Iranian interests to a certain degree.

However we should bear in mind that Iranian view of Turkey is not monolithic in that there are differences. Iranian viewpoints regarding Turkey are not always unified or coherent. I think the Iranian government overall is pragmatic. It knows that Turkey is an important player in the Middle East and that the two countries have to live side by side. If you look at Turkey and Iran, both countries have very deep roots in the Middle East. Unlike the Arab countries, the two were not creations of Western colonialism. So I think, to certain extent, both countries are aware that they will be shaping the Middle

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East especially in the light of the Arab Spring. So when we look at their relationship, it is not based on a pure competition or partnership. It is a very complex and mixed relationship and I think this is what we will have in the future.

When the Islamic Revolution broke up in Iran, Turkey was concerned about Iran being a threat to Turkey. As we have seen in the last three decades, the two countries have managed to live side by side. There has not been as much tension between Turkey and Iran as it has been between Iran and Saudi Arabia, for example. In the future, we can expect to see some tension, perhaps especially depending on where Syria goes, but we can say that the relationship would move through rivalry and cooperation. Thank you.

**Stephen Larrabee:**

Thank you very much. I will try to put the Arab Spring in a broader framework, focusing on number of issues including its impact on Turkish foreign policy and the U.S. foreign policy. I would like to stress that my remarks represent my own point of view. It seems to me that if one looks over what’s happened in the Middle East in the last six or seven months, it is possible to say that there are, in some ways, some winners and losers. There are three countries that are likely to lose: Iran, Syria and Israel.

Israel is already a big loser in the sense that it is today much more isolated than it was before the Arab Spring. At least under Mubarak there was some support to the peace process. I think that it is going to decrease irrespective of whatever happens, whatever regime comes to power in Egypt. It also has lost the support of Turkey, and therefore it is much more isolated than before. So those are the three losers, just briefly.

One of the winners, one of the countries that has really benefited from the Arab spring is Turkey. Turkey, I think, is needed more and more as a model or inspiration for the countries of the Middle East. Turkey has been able to take advantage of these changes. But at the same time I have to say that Turkey like other countries was caught off guard by the changes. The changes in the Middle East after the Arab Spring would bring down the old order, but I do not know exactly what will replace that order. But region is at least in a process of democratic change.

Turkey’s reaction to the events was somehow contradictory. In the case of Egypt it was quite easy, I think, for Erdogan to call on Mubarak to step down because Turkey’s relationship with Egypt was not particularly strong. Turkey did not have large economic interests in Egypt, and in fact Mubarak saw Turkey, in some way, as a rival due to its increasing regional influence. Libya represented for Turkey rather a different problem because relations between Libya and Turkey were good and stable. Turkey had strong economic interests, with some 30000 Turkish people working in the country. Hence, Turkey followed a very cautious policy on Libya. Actually Erdogan asked Qaddafi to step down as he did with Mubarak, but at the same time he opposed to NATO involvement. All these decisions actually put Turkey rather in a disadvantageous position as the



problems began to gain strength. The third area, where Turkey was cautious is the question of Syria. After all, the relationship between Turkey and Syria had become rather good in the last decade. Turkey had a strong interest in maintaining good relations with Syria. The idea of seeing Assad thrown out is not something any government wanted to see, let alone the Turkish government. If Assad falls, the most likely scenario would be turmoil and civil strife with the potential of spilling over to Turkey. Of course given the present problems Turkey faced at home with the Kurdish issue, Turkey did not want to see a situation in which the Kurdish issue became a big issue in Syria. It is understandable, to some extent, that Turkey took some time before it finally made up its mind on Syria. However relentless calls on Assad to make reforms went unheard, creating a big disappointment on Turkish side. I think Turkey overestimated her ability to influence Syrian policy.

When it comes to the Turkish model and influence, the general changes in the Middle East worked to Turkey's benefit. Turkey will emerge as a growing influence in the region. Erdogan's power and influence cannot be denied. People have been talking about the Turkish model; certainly Turkey inspired the discussions of the Middle East. However, we should also ask what is the Turkish model? It seems like Turkish model consists of two versions. One version is -that existed up to very recently- where the military in Turkey acted a kind of empire behind the scenes. The second version is a political system that has blended Islam and democracy. If you ask whether any of these two versions of the Turkish model are likely to take place in the Middle East, I would argue that the conditions in the Middle East are vague.

Turkey has a long history of reform, and Westernization proceeded with the establishment of the Republic in 1923. It has taken 50 years of evolution before we got to the situation that we have today, where we have a modern, reformist, democratic oriented regime. So if I look, for instance, at Egypt, it is more likely to see in Egypt the first version of the Turkish model: military not governing directly but having the final say behind the scenes. The process is long and daunting. It seems to me lots of setbacks will emerge on the way.

Regarding the U.S. policy, U.S. policy was like Turkish policy. Almost all the governments were surprised about the pace of the events in the Middle East. The U.S seems to me, under the Obama administration, has tried to make clear that it is on the side of change. I want to say also a final word about Libya. If anyone had asked me and most Americans six or seven months ago, will the U.S. be involved in Libya, most American and I myself would say, how? This is an example on how fast things are changing now. I personally think that Obama did what he had to do. For several reasons, we could not just watch Gaddafi come in and probably brutally oppress the rebels. The U.S. is involved in two major conflicts and it is trying to solve major economic problems. Currently it does not have really strong vital interest in Libya. The U.S. took action to at least prevent a massacre. To a great extent, I would argue that they have done a good job. NATO did

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a lot of mistakes at the beginning of the intervention, but towards the end they got the right strategy. There is a lot of criticism of the U.S. stating that Obama should have been more active, should have done more. This particularly came from conservative circles who favored to provide a leadership. However, Libyan people should take the ownership of the reform process themselves. The U.S. or the NATO could only provide a support. Let me just enclose by reminding that I do not think that it would be easy to establish any kind of progressive democratic regime in Libya. It will take a long time.

**Ali Nader**

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