

Default Power in the MENA Region: Turkey as a Pragmatic Solution to the Post-Arab Spring Era

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Abstract

Over the last few years a political transformation period has been started in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. An unfortunate event of a street vendor's death in Tunisia initiated the period of "Arab Spring", "Arab Awakening" or "Arab Uprisings" (Brownlee, Masoud & Reynolds 2015: 10). In addition to that, problems among Israel and Palestine, and crisis in Syria and Iraq have made the things more complicated in this part of the world. Although it seems difficult to find a solution to stabilize and ease the tensions in the short run, there are needed new kinds of power(s) or coalitions. In order to achieve peace and tranquility how should be formed a new balance/nodes of power in the region and what should be the role of the United States in this unstable environment? This article attempts to find out feasible solutions and alternative suggestions by focusing on hard and soft power resources of the regional states and shifting alliances in MENA.

Key words: Arab Spring, Arab Awakening, Nodes of Power, Default Power, Despotic Power

Nodes of Power in MENA

Since the breakdown of the Camp David II peace accords in July 2000, the Middle East as a region has been in a position of flux. A key characteristic of this period has been shifting political alliances both within the region and with international players in Europe and North America. Some have noted the key *nodes of power* in the last decade or so have centered around three major sets of players: (1) Iran and its allies in Syria and Iraq; (2) Turkey as it moves from a neutral player to one with a significant relationship with Saudi Arabia; (3) and Israel (Migdal 2014: 14).

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There is some question as to how these alliances will continue to shift, and which will become predominant in the region. Some suggest that the Turkey-Saudi Arabia friendship may become the default node of power in the region (Migdal 2014). We want to suggest that this **default power** role on the part of Turkey is not reflective of a shortcoming in the region but is, instead, a very significant and important move that should be valued highly in United States policy circles. Why? Our key answers are: (1) Turkey's institutional history; and (2) cultural expectations surrounding political institutions in the region. We believe that the states that have had the hardest time with the Arab Spring have been those secular regimes put in place by European powers in the post-World War I era. In countries like Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Syria, we see the Arab Spring as precisely a clash between local cultural expectations about political institutions and forms of political participation, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the centralized, secular institutional form that those states took for most of the 20th century. That is, the Arab Spring in those states has been a significant clash between the people and this new form of state imposed on the region by international actors in the early 20th century. We see the monarchies in the Middle East, from Morocco to Jordan to the Gulf, as having had an easier time transitioning to the demands of local populations. We believe this easier transition is not a coincidence and is linked to the institutional and cultural expectations that we set out herein.

The institutional history of Turkey and the Middle East is one. It is an institutional history of diffuse rule rather than centralized rule, and one which strongly emphasizes local communal autonomy. This local communal autonomy often has had a dynastic quality to it, as local families took on leadership roles for sometimes centuries at a time. Rather than being a negative, as it might normally be seen from a U.S. perspective, local populations often saw these families as consistently able and willing to defend the interests of the local populations when called upon; such families would not be called upon again for leadership roles if they failed to do so. In this sense, many former provinces of the Ottoman Empire have continuing cultural expectations about political institutions that reflect very strong norms of local pure democracy. Leaders who were put in place in the newly established states, when European powers left the region in the 1950s and 1960s, did not always come from the locally-chosen leaderships. Indeed, some of them fall easily into the category of what Michael Mann calls "despotic power" (Mann 1984: 191): e.g., Baathist Iraq and Baathist Syria. Mann defines authoritarian rule as that characterized by high degrees of "infrastructural coordination" (which basically means high degrees of effective bureaucratic capacity) combined with high degrees of "despotic power" (low degrees of despotic power means meaningful and significant channels of communication and participation from society; high degrees of despotic power means low degrees of communication between society and state) (Mann 1993: 59-63).

Using Mann’s schema, if we graph local regimes using responsiveness to the local population as the key indicator of high or low despotic power, we believe the regional regimes looks like something approaching the following. We can also think of despotic power as the tendency of the state to intervene in society, or in the daily lives of individuals, in high degrees:

Figure 1. Adaptation of Michael Mann schema for Middle Eastern Regimes (Despotic Power vis à vis Infrastructural Coordination)

		Infrastructural Coordination (Bureaucratic Capacity)		
		Low	In-between	High
Despotic Power (Degrees of)	Low (Strongly responsive; low interventionist in its society)	Morocco; North African Sufi orders (historically);	Tunisia, Jordan	Turkey; Dubai; Ottoman Empire (early and late periods); Dervish orders (early period of Ottoman Empire); Lebanon (borders on being a non-state)
	In-between	Qadafi’s Libya (responsive town councils – forms of local autonomy); Yemen	UAE; Oman; Bahrain; Algeria	Dubai; Qatar, Kuwait; Ottoman Empire (middle period); Saudi Arabia
	High (Non-responsive)		Mubarak’s Egypt;	Baathist Iraq; Baathist Syria; Nasser’s Egypt; Khomeini’s Iran

Understanding Regional Metamorphosis

The United States, as an outside actor in the MENA region, comes from a distinct and separate set of traditions, both institutionally and culturally. (Even the forms of Christianity most predominant in the MENA region are Eastern forms of Christianity that are largely unfamiliar to Western observers: e.g., Maronite Christians, various forms of Eastern Orthodoxy, Coptic Christians, Ethiopian Orthodoxy, etc.)

The United States, thus, does not share some basic cultural traits that actors in the region do share with one another, despite some of the other external differences between them. This makes it that much more important for the United States to work with local, state-level actors in order to ensure a greater degree of familiarity with local institutions, historical traditions, and cultural expectations about political processes. After 2001, the expectations of the United States itself changed for the region, and local expectations of the United States changed accordingly, all in service of a larger democratization project. (Dalacoura 2005: 963) It is difficult to choose when to intervene, where to intervene, as well as how to intervene in specific situations where democratization appears to be an issue. Some local contexts may not be transparent to United States policy makers. The issue of veiling, for example, is often assumed to reflect decreased social or political power on the part of women. (MacLeod 1992: 536) In some states, however, wearing a head scarf has been a strategy on the part of some women to demonstrate public constraints in order to veil significant freedoms in the private sphere. Iran is an important example of this phenomenon. That is to say, we do not always understand local contexts in the MENA region, including cultural and political details with significant implications for international relations if we understand them incorrectly.

Rational Solution for Peace in MENA

In this article, we are discussing the second note outline above, primarily Turkey. Turkey is a close ally to the United States that is reasonably well trusted by the United States. Today's controversies within Turkey are unrelated to this basic, long-standing relationship. Turkey has been a long-standing international actor working with NATO, since 1952. The Turkish Military has contributed generously to the myriad of peacekeeping operations around the world. These contributions started with Korean War and continued with other United Nations (UN) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) peace support operations. Past examples include: UN Operation in Somalia – UNOSOM; UN Protection Force-UNPROFOR (in Bosnia); NATO Implementation Force-IFOR/NATO Stabilization Force-SFOR (in Bosnia); UN Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo – MONUC; UN Mission in Sudan – UNMIS; NATO Training Mission Iraq - NTM-I; UN Interim Force in Lebanon-UNIFIL; and naval or air force operations including: Essential Harvest; Amber Fox; Allied Harmony; Concordia; Proxima; Deny Flight; Deliberate Forge; Joint Guardian; and Sharp Guard Operations. Today the Turkish military supports continuing operations including: Kosovo Force – KFOR; EU Operation ALTHEA (in Bosnia); International Security Assistance Force – ISAF (in Afghanistan); Combined Task Force 151 -CTF 151 (for preventing piracy in the seas of Somalia); the Standing NATO Maritime Group 2 – SNMG 2 (for preventing piracy in the seas of Somalia); and the UN Mission in Lebanon - UNIFIL.

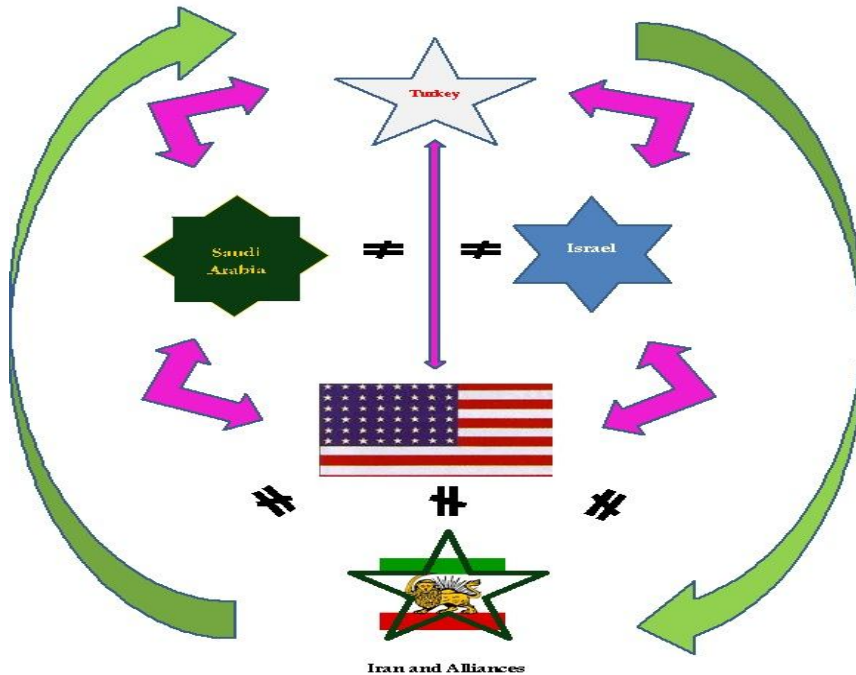
In addition to these operations there are also two centers belonging to NATO inside Turkey. These are, Partnership Peace Training Center and Center of Excellence Defense Against Terrorism in Turkey, which increase the coordination between the international military personnel. Both of these NATO organizations are located in Ankara, Turkey. In addition to this history of international institutional ties vis à vis the Turkish military, Turkey has also been a host to many important diplomatic summits. These have included summits on relations between Turkey and Africa; relations within Eurasia; the Istanbul Summit on women; summits between Armenian and Azerbaijan (although tensions remain there); a tripartite meeting between Turkey, Iran, and Azerbaijan (Newspaper, Tehran Times); Turkey-Iran-Egypt (e-newspaper, Daily News Egypt); Turkey-Azerbaijan-Georgia (Oliker and Szayna, 293); Afghanistan-Turkey-Pakistan (Newspaper, Today's Zaman); mediation of a Caspian dispute between Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan (Radu, 106); as well as many bilateral and multi-lateral summits both within and outside of the context of the United Nations and NATO. Turkey has served as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council four times, and has announced her candidacy again for the term of 2015-2016 (Harte, 30). Since 2002, ties between the United States and Turkey have become increasingly vital and substantial. This institutional history is simply to make the point that Turkey has a long track record of cooperation with the United States and European regimes.

As a regime that is fairly well trusted by the United States, and which has a long track record of working with both the United States and Europe, Turkey will be a very important actor for the United States to work with in making those critical decisions about where, when, and how to intervene or assert influence in the region. That the United States has his influence is a given, from our perspective. So, the task becomes to assert it increasingly well rather than the alternative. We are, thus, making an argument for a ***pragmatic approach*** on the part of both United States policy makers and MENA regimes at large.

As represented in Figure 2 below, Turkey is a regime that has active ties and track record of ability to work with almost all of the critical actors for the region. Moreover, there are cultural and religious factors with significant political implications that make it difficult to know what situations call for interventions and which do not. Iran is an excellent example of this. Turkey is an important cultural center of tourism and education for many parts of the MENA region in a way that is similar to the relationship between the United States and South America. The cultural and religious ties between Turkey and the rest of the MENA region, however, are far closer than that and include an institutional history of cooperation and mutual support through communal autonomy under the Ottoman Empire.

In suggesting Turkey in this way, we are not making a neo-Ottoman argument (Al-Ghazzi and Kraidy 2013: 2344); we are arguing for a pragmatic approach to the MENA region, one that we believe will allow the United States to be more confident about when and where and how to intervene in specific situations.

Figure 2: Relationships of the Primary Nodes of Power in the MENA Region



Within the past five years, Turkey has experienced tensions in its relationships with Israel, Egypt, and Syria. However, we see these issues as fairly temporary in a longer history of fruitful institutional ties. The then Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan offended Israeli President Shimon Peres in the 2009 Davos Summit in Switzerland in his now famous “one minute” speech. (Newspaper: Financial Times) He said Peres, known for his peace advocacy, was responsible for killing Palestinians, and he drew upon the Biblical Commandments in doing so. In making this comment, Erdoğan may have won the hearts of some Arab countries within the region, but it caused friction for some time with Israel. These frictions were exacerbated with the Mavi Marmara flotilla in 2010. Israel attacked a flotilla of humanitarian relief aid shipped from Turkey to Gaza by the Turkish Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief. (Newspaper: New York Times) Relations with Israel have since warmed, although many report that they are not as close as they once were.

Nonetheless, Turkey retains a strong working relationship with Israel despite these incidents, which did also have the effect of strengthening Turkey's legitimacy in the eyes of many Arab regimes. (Bayoumi 2010: 197) Pragmatically, for Turkey, Israel, and the region at large, all of this is a good thing in the sense that it makes Turkey one of the only actors with some degree of trust on the part of most regimes in the region.

We are not suggesting the positioning of Turkey as a direct diplomatic force within the MENA region. While it is engaging in significant diplomatic relations and efforts, and in some cases, mediation, within the region, asking Turkey to play a direct mediating role in some of the larger conflicts in the region would be setting it up for failure. Only the United States has leverage for some of these larger conflicts. However, Turkey can play a very powerful role in **translating** the local context for the United States in instances where that cultural translation can have dire political consequences. This includes determining which situations suggest a need for United States intervention and which suggest a need for the United States to stay out of the fray. Since World War II, one of the largest questions in international diplomatic relations has been when to accommodate, when to remain isolated, and when to intervene.

Working with a local regime such as Turkey that has a working relationship with most regimes of the region, as well as with Europe and the United States, can allow for a better estimation of how to answer the balance between these different approaches. The United States' stated diplomatic agenda in the Middle East since 2003 has been democratization (with some nod to the significance of human rights in the region as it relates to democratization). This policy goal will be achieved more successfully in working closely with a regime like Turkey, and will allow the United States to better avoid those situations and errors that detract from United State legitimacy in the region. Working with a local regime that is seen within the region as able to work bilaterally and multi-laterally so effectively will also increase the stature and trust of the United States within the region.

What we are suggesting, however, does involve an express willingness for the United States to engage in some degree of **power sharing** within the Middle East. Regarding United States diplomatic involvement in issues relating to democratization and human rights, this power sharing will be critical to success. (Stewart: 400) In a very real sense, we are asking for *more* intervention into issues of institution-building and democratization within the region, but done in the context of power sharing and seeking the advice of regimes like Turkey to make our comprehension of the region better and our efforts, therefore, more successful. For example, the United States, since 1979, has been very uncomfortable with Iran as a player within the Middle East.

(Halliday: 42) It is one of the major nodes of power in the MENA region, nonetheless. As a question of the pragmatism we are suggesting in the MENA region, it is therefore important to work with Iran in some way. Turkey has been able to work with Iran, for example, on the nuclear issue, oil disputes in the Caspian region between Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, and security issues between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The United States was quiet about most of these efforts but was not favorable to the compromise mediated by Turkey and Brazil regarding the dispute over nuclear power in Iran in 2010. By rejecting the Turkish-Brazilian agreement, ironically, the United States decreased Turkish legitimacy and power in the region in favor of Iran.

We acknowledge the reality that sometimes the United States and Turkey will not have the same interests on a given question. However, Turkey is uniquely situated within the MENA region as able to work with almost all regimes therein. Working closely with Turkey, a willing ally of the United States, on questions of democratization will ease tensions between the United States and the region on many levels (political, cultural, as well as intangibles like the "hearts and minds" question). Likewise, Turkey, on its part, needs the United States for the success of its efforts in the MENA region. The humanitarian crisis in civil war torn Syria, which is experiencing a prolonged Arab Spring, is a recent case in which Turkey needed the United States' strong political and diplomatic support to help alleviate that situation and remove a repressive regime that is systematically massacring its civilian population. The Arab Spring in Syria reflects a legitimate grassroots uprising on the part of the people against a long-standing repressive regime. We understand the difficulties for the United States when both Russia and China disapprove of a United States intervention in that situation (Malashenko: 14). However, such a situation of multi-lateral tension over a crisis of this magnitude suggests the concerted efforts of the United States in cooperation with Turkey (and perhaps the other interested regimes as well) to come up with a solution. As a matter of international human rights, villagers in Syria should not be allowed to continue to suffer.

Likewise, Egypt is an excellent case, today, in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, of a state with leaders seeking to undermine the democratic movement of the Arab Spring in favor of a return to a 1950's style of autocratic rule as the ostensible solution to unrest. General Abdelfattah Said ElSisi (also transliterated in the press as al-Sisi) writes, in a paper for the U.S. Army War College (2006), "Is transitioning to democracy in the best interest of the United States, or is it in the best interest of the Middle Eastern countries?" Our answer is decidedly yes to both. The receptivity of Middle Eastern peoples to democratic forms of rule is much better reflected in countries like Turkey, Morocco, and Jordan (all very different types of regimes), as well as the long history of pre-1919 communal autonomy under the Ottoman Empire than it is reflected, as ElSisi suggests, by post-War Iraq.

Iraq, Syria, and Egypt are precisely the Middle Eastern regimes that never allowed even experiments with democratic institutions in the 20th century. They are the 20th century regimes of the region with both secular and authoritarian (and in some cases, totalitarian) rule, those regimes that gave “secularism” a bad name in the Middle East because of its association with brutally violent regimes willing to turn on their own people. A return to this type of rule is in no way a reflection of the bottom-up, grassroots uprisings that were and are the Arab Spring. Whatever the political positions of democratically elected parties such as the Muslim Brotherhood, toppling parties by military force is not reflective of democratic institution building. Political parties, including religious parties, must be worked with in the Middle East in any democratic solution. Anything else is simply a return to authoritarian rule in the Middle East.

If we are interested in democracy, we may need to moderate our tendency to be more suspicious of religious parties than secular parties. The 20th century in the MENA region (e.g., the secular authoritarian regimes of Egypt, Syria, and Iraq) suggests that, if anything, we should be taking the opposite stance. Despite current controversies around him, institutionally, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is a religious leader running a secular state and upholding secular, democratic institutions. It *is possible* to work, democratically and institutionally, with political parties such as the Muslim Brotherhood. Indeed, there will be no democracy in states like Egypt without them. We should turn to states like Turkey, and leaders such as Erdoğan, to mediate our relations with such political parties, institutionally, given our tendency toward inherent discomfort with them. From an ethnographic perspective, coming at established, Orthodox religious leaders of *any* religion in the MENA region with the expectation that they will suddenly take on the mantle of Western secularism will doom all of our efforts to failure. Such a “one size fits all” approach to the MENA region ignores the real, democratic needs and interests of legitimate and large sectors of the region. Dubai and Doha, for example, are Western and developed in the ways that they want to be Western, and they are non-Western in the ways that they want to be non-Western. Our goal in democratization should not be a *mission civilisatrice*.

Conclusion

First and foremost, we are arguing for a ***pragmatic approach*** to the MENA region on the part of the United States, Turkey, and other regimes within the region. We accept the estimation of some scholars that Iran and its alliances; Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and their alliances; and Israel make up the three major ***nodes of power*** within the MENA region currently. We argue that Turkey, as perhaps the only power in the region that has the manifested ability to work with all of these regimes, constitutes an important ***default power*** in the region.

And, we argue, the United States should take advantage of having this willing ally within the region and use Turkey for advice that will help the United States to unpack cultural, religious, historical, and other factors of local knowledge to make United States policy efforts in the region more successful. We suggest strongly that both the United States and Turkey need one another in their shared interest in democratization and human rights in the region. And we are arguing for *more* intervention in the region, not less, but done particularly for institution-building and in the context of **power sharing** with regional actors.

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