

Turkey takes over the “Arab Spring”

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Finally. Crystal clear. Someone finally said it – what the whole world, except Washington and Tel Aviv, knows in its collective heart; the recognition of a Palestinian state is “not an option but an obligation”.

It did wonders that the man who said it was Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, in Cairo, at the Arab League, in front of all Arab foreign ministers and with virtually the whole Arab world glued to satellite networks scrutinizing his every word.

The current Erdogan Arab Spring tour – as it was billed by the Turkish press – comprising Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, has already rocketed him to the status of a geopolitical cross between U2’s Bono and Barcelona’s superstar Argentine footballer Lionel Messi.

Erdogan received a rock/soccer star welcome at Cairo’s airport – complete with “Hero Erdogan” banners brandished by the Muslim Brotherhood. He even addressed the crowd in Arabic (from “Greetings to the Egyptian youth and people, how are you?” to “Peace be upon you”).

Erdogan repeatedly stressed, “Egypt and Turkey are hand-in-hand.” But it’s the subtext that is even more incendiary. While Israel’s former good friends Egypt and Turkey are now hand-in-hand, Israel is left isolated facing a wall. There could not be a more earth-shattering development in the Levant – unheard of since the Camp David peace accords between Israel and Egypt in 1978.

A model campaigner

Erdogan’s tour is a realpolitik master class. He’s positioning Turkey as the forefront supporter of the Palestinian cause. He’s also positioning Turkey at the core of the Arab Spring – as a supporter and as an inspirational model, even though there have been no full-fledged revolutions so far. He’s emphasizing solid Turkish-Arab unity – for instance planning a strategic cooperation council between Egypt and Turkey.

Plus the whole thing makes good business sense. Erdogan’s caravan includes six ministers and nearly 200 Turkish businessmen – bent on investing heavily all across northern Africa. In Egypt, they may not match the billions of dollars already committed by the House of Saud to the military junta led by Air Marshall Mohammed Tantawi. But in 2010, Turkish trade with the Middle East and North Africa was already at \$30 billion, representing 27% of Turkish exports. Over 250 Turkish companies have already invested \$1.5 billion in Egypt.

Crucially, Erdogan told Egyptian TV channel Dream, “Do not be wary of secularism. I hope there will be a secular state in Egypt.” Erdogan was subtly referring to Turkey’s secular

constitution; and at the same time he was very careful to remind Egyptians that secularism is compatible with Islam.

The current Turkish model is enormously popular among the Egyptian street, featuring a moderate Islamic party (the Justice and Development Party – AKP) in power; a secular constitution; the military – albeit strong – back in the barracks; and an ongoing economic boom (Turkey was the world’s fastest growing economy in the first half of 2001). [1]

This model is not exactly what the regressive House of Saud wants. They would prefer a heavily Islamist government controlled by the most conservative factions of the Muslim Brotherhood. Worse; as far as Libya is concerned, the House of Saud would love to have a friendly emirate, or at least a government peppered with Islamic fundamentalists.

Erdogan also stressed that the “aggressiveness” of Israel “threatens the future of the Israeli people”. That’s music for the Arab street. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas met Erdogan in Cairo – and confirmed he’ll go ahead with Palestine’s bid to be fully recognized as a state by the United Nations Security Council later this month.

Palestine will definitely be accepted as a non-voting state by the UN General Assembly floor. The problem is the extremely non-representative Security Council – which sanctions full UN membership with state voting rights. It’s a done deal that Washington will veto it. The fractured European Union (EU), true to its character, still has not decided on a unified vote. There’s a strong possibility Britain and France will also veto the Palestinian bid at the Security Council.

Yet even with the consolation price of “only” becoming a non-voting state, Palestine strikes a moral victory – aligned with world public opinion. Moreover, Palestine can become a member of the International Criminal Court and sue the hell out of Israel over its serial violations of international law.

Follow the leader

Turkey’s game goes way beyond “neo-Ottomanism” – or nostalgia to revive the superpower days of the 16th and 17th centuries. It’s a natural development of Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu’s policy of “zero problems with our neighbors” – moving to forge deeper bonds with most of these neighbors, and consolidating what Davutoglu himself defines as Turkey’s strategic destiny (see [Turkey: the sultans of swing](#) Asia Times Online, April 7, 2011).

Turkey, for some years now, had decisively abandoned an isolationist brand of Turkish nationalism. The country seems to have finally surmounted the trauma associated to its dream of joining the EU; for all practical purposes the dream was shattered by France and Germany.

As for the Israeli-Turkey alliance, in fact it kept the Arab world at bay and confined Turkey to a passive role of ineffective outsider in the Middle East. Not anymore. Erdogan can now afford to send multiple simultaneous messages to Israel, the US, the EU, assorted Arab leaders and most of all the Arab street.

Davutoglu has been relatively magnanimous towards Israel, saying it is “out of touch with the region and unable to perceive the changes taking place, which makes it impossible for the country to have healthy relations with its neighbors”.

What he could have added is with “friends” like that – Benjamin Netanyahu as prime minister, former Moldova bouncer Avigdor Lieberman as foreign minister, rabid settlers dictating policy – Israel does not need enemies; or rather fabricates enemies en masse. It is the Israeli government itself that accelerated Turkey’s rapprochement with Egypt – which is leaving Israel totally isolated.

The touch of genius in the whole process is that Erdogan represents a democracy in a Muslim majority country strongly supporting both the Palestinians and the real pro-democrats in the Arab Spring. This provides a direct connection between the Palestinian tragedy and the spirit of the Arab Spring (which has nothing to do, it must be stressed, with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) bombing Libya or a military junta running Egypt).

It will be crucial to watch Erdogan’s Islam-rooted AKP’s follow-up. It’s virtually certain that in the next Egyptian elections the Muslim Brotherhood will come out swinging. It’s also virtually certain the Brotherhood will press for a minimalist relationship with Israel, including a full revision of the Camp David accords. In theory, Turkey would be fully behind it.

Then there’s the Libya front. In his first public address in Tripoli, the chairman of the dodgy Transitional National Council (TNC), Mustafa Abdel Jailil, stressed Islamic *sharia* law would be the main source of legislation. But he crucially added, “We will not accept any extremist ideology, on the right or the left. We are a Muslim people, for a moderate Islam.”

There’s no evidence yet the TNC will be even able to hold the country together, not to mention promote “moderate Islam”. The (foreign) vultures continue circling. NATO’s secretary general, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, has been warning that Libya is in danger of falling into the hands of Islamic extremists who would “try to exploit” the current power vacuum. It’s unclear what role Turkey – a key NATO member – would have inside a NATO fully implanted in Libya.

Heavy metal birth pangs

And all this while the Persian Gulf petro-monarchies – horrified by the Arab Spring – have proposed \$2 billion in annual direct aid to Jordan so it will become part of the GCC, the Gulf Cooperation Council, also known as the Gulf Counter-revolutionary Club. As a monarchical club, the GCC wants Jordan and Morocco as new members. The icing on the cake, though, would be a monarchical Libya.

On a parallel track, the counter-revolutionaries have been forced by Turkey to step up – at least verbally – their support for Palestine. Even Jordan’s King Abdullah, staunch US ally and Israel’s only “friend” left in the Middle East, has claimed that “the future Palestine are stronger than Israel is today”.

Well, Israel did look for it – after the invasion of Lebanon in 2006, the massacre in Gaza in 2008 and the attack on the Turkish flotilla in 2010. In terms of world public opinion, Israel is toast – and even the Arab counter-revolution had to notice.

That includes the House of Saud. None other than former Saudi intelligence supremo Prince Turki al-Faisal wrote a New York Times op-ed piece stating outright, “Saudi leaders would be forced by domestic and regional pressures to adopt a far more independent and assertive foreign policy” if the US vetoes the Palestinian bid at the Security Council.

Prince Turki also stressed that everything must evolve around a two-state solution based on the pre-1967 borders, which every grain of sand in the Sinai knows Israel will never accept.

In the event of a US veto, Prince Turki threatened Saudi Arabia would be “opposing the government of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki in Iraq” and would “part ways with Washington in Afghanistan and Yemen as well”.

Now imagine the House of Saud lavishly funding a double guerrilla war all across the Pentagon’s “arc of instability” – Sunnis against Shi’ites in Iraq plus the already turbocharged Taliban in Afghanistan – while lobbying for an Islamist government in both Egypt and Turkey; and this while Egypt and Turkey for their part fully collide with an isolated and angry Israel. Now that’s what the “birth pangs of the new Middle East” are all about.

Note

1. [Robust private sector gives Turkey fastest H1 growth worldwide](#) Zaman, September 12.

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