

# THE EU AND TURKEY IN THE SOUTHERN NEIGHBOURHOOD: A NEW OPENING?

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## SUMMARY

Currently, the EU is facing two key challenges: internally, the euro crisis, and externally, the risk of a step back for the Arab Spring. Failure or success in dealing with these will determine the EU's position on the global stage in the very near future. It is profoundly in Europe's long-term interest, both economic and strategic, to see the Arab Spring succeed.

In this ambit, cooperation with Turkey is of key importance for the EU. Its significance derives from Turkey's rising leverage in the Arab world based on economic soft power, geopolitical clout and unprecedented popularity among Arab societies. The creation of the EU-Turkey strategic partnership would be considerably easier if EU Member States relaunched the Turkish accession process. A more positive stance of a new president of France on the Turkish accession process provides the EU with a window of opportunity to reinvigorate it in 2013.

This Policy Paper is part of a series entitled "[How to make out of the EU's vicinity an opportunity for the EU itself?](#)" which also includes contributions by Haizam Amirah Fernández (Elcano Royal Institute, Madrid) and Timo Behr (*Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute*, Paris), Michele Comelli (IAI, Rome), Christophe Hillion (SIEPS, Stockholm) and Lucia Najšlová (Europeum, Prague), Věra Řiháčková (Europeum, Prague), Olga Shumylo-Tapiola (Carnegie Europe, Brussels).

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Carnegie Europe, CCEIA, CER, CEPS, demosEUROPA, ECFR, EGMONT, EPC, Real Instituto Elcano, Eliamep, Europeum, FRIDE, IAI, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, SIEPS, SWP.

Four other series of Policy Papers deal with key challenges on defence, strategic resources, migrations and economic policy. The final report presenting the key recommendations of the think tanks will be published in March 2013, under the direction of Elvire Fabry (*Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute*, Paris).

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## Introduction

It is profoundly in Europe's long-term interest, both economic and strategic, to see the Arab Spring succeed. Its success would be facilitated substantially by the establishment of enhanced cooperation between Turkey and the EU in the Arab World. The creation of the EU-Turkey strategic partnership would be considerably easier if EU Member States relaunched the Turkish accession process. In a sign of a more positive approach to Turkish accession, François Hollande, the new president of France, declared that France will not block the Turkish accession negotiations, thus providing the EU with a window of opportunity to reinvigorate it in 2013.

**“ BOTH SIDES, IN THE LIGHT OF COMMON INTERESTS AND CHALLENGES, SIMPLY CANNOT AFFORD TO SHY AWAY FROM STRATEGIC COOPERATION ”**

Currently, the EU is facing two key challenges: internally, the euro crisis, and externally, the risk of a step back for the Arab Spring. Failure or success in dealing with them will determine the EU's position on the global stage in the very near future. In the case of the Arab Spring, cooperation with Turkey is of key importance for the EU. Its significance derives from Turkey's rising leverage in the Arab world based on economic soft power, geopolitical clout and unprecedented popularity among Arab societies. The Arab Spring has taken Turkey and the EU by surprise and shaken the organising concepts of their foreign policies: strategic depth and the ENP, respectively. As a result, a substantial convergence of agendas between Ankara and Brussels has emerged since 2011. Both sides adapted their foreign policy to new political circumstances by placing – at least in rhetoric – the democratisation agenda at the centre of their policy towards the Arab world (excluding the Gulf States).<sup>1</sup> The Arab Spring also brought serious common challenges for Brussels and Ankara, including turmoil in post-revolutionary states, civil war in Syria and Iran's policy aiming at regional domination. Last but not least, Brussels, Ankara and the majority of Arab countries assumed that Turkey can be a source of inspiration for the democratisation and modernisation of the Arab world.

## 1. Deadlock in the accession process

Paradoxically, the unprecedented convergence in foreign policy between Ankara and Brussels is taking place at a time when Turkey's accession found itself in a deadlock. This stalemate is regrettable considering that the accession process provides the EU with the optimal toolbox for the EU-Turkish strategic partnership in the CFSP. Equally important, the accession process played a key role in democratisation in Turkey and its reinvigoration would contribute most probably to the reinforcement of Turkish democracy which is currently backtracking in certain spheres (i.e. media freedom). This scenario could result in a permanent entrenchment of democratisation in the Turkish foreign policy agenda, which would lead to further convergence in foreign policy agendas between the EU and Turkey. Moreover, an indirect correlation exists between Turkey's democratisation and the transformation of the Arab world. On the other hand, in case of authoritarian policies of the Arab Islamist parties, the further deterioration of the Turkish democracy would result in a deepening divergence of opinions between the EU and Turkey on the policy towards them.

The recent impasse in the negotiations results from the unresolved Cypriot problem and a negative attitude towards the accession of Turkey, particularly on the part of France under president Sarkozy. In response to the deadlock and the need for cooperation stemming from the Arab Spring, EU High Representative Catherine Ashton and Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu recently established regular talks, coupled with an annual four-way meeting between Ashton, Davutoğlu, EU Enlargement Commissioner Štefan Füle, and Turkish Minister for European Affairs Egemen Bağış. Davutoğlu has also occasionally participated in the EU's

1. Probably the most symbolic expression of the emerging convergence of interests and values in the region between Turkey and the EU was the visit of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Erdogan to North Africa (September 2011). The main message directed towards the Arab revolutionaries during the visit was the need to build a secular democracy in association with free market reforms. "Başbakan Erdoğan: Laiklikten korkmayın", *Radikal*, 14.09.2011.

Gymnich meetings. In early October 2012 the EU delegation to Turkey, the Turkish Economy Ministry and the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey (TOBB) launched the EU-Turkey Global Business Bridges Initiative, a joint project for EU and Turkish firms to invest and trade in third countries, targeting Egypt, Tunisia and Palestine in the first stage. The Initiative aims to establish joint business ventures between the EU and Turkish companies in cooperation with local firms in these pilot countries. However, these initiatives are just small steps. An effective response to the tectonic shift underway in the southern neighbourhood should be a great leap, namely the establishment of comprehensive and institutionalised strategic cooperation between Turkey and the EU. Some experts suggest that cooperation of that kind can be established – despite deadlock of the Turkish accession process – because both sides, in light of common interests and challenges, simply cannot afford to shy away from it. The establishment of cooperation through backdoors seems highly unlikely, however, in situations where the CFSP constitutes an integral and important aspect of accession negotiations. Indeed, the 2012 Strategic Enlargement Paper published in November 2012 by the European Commission pointed out rightly that “the potential of the EU-Turkey relationship can be fully tapped only within the framework of an active and credible accession process which respects the EU’s commitments and the established conditionality”.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Turkish-French rapprochement

Nicolas Sarkozy, the former president of France was the most staunch opponent of Turkey’s membership in the EU. By default, during Nicolas Sarkozy’s term, both countries competed for primacy in the Arab World and their bilateral relations went from bad to worse. The most striking example of the rivalry in the Mediterranean was the unexpected visit of “supersonic” Sarkozy to Libya in September 2011 just before the arrival of Turkey’s prime minister. Considering its geographic position and economic priorities, France could be the most important economic partner for Turkey. Unfortunately, French-Turkish economic cooperation is far below its potential due to the abovementioned tensions. Overlapping of positions on key issues in the region provides more evidence that tensions between France and Turkey were irrational. For instance, within NATO, Turkey and France are the keenest supporters of Syrian opposition forces and the independence of Palestine.

Both countries are the main outside stakeholders in the southern neighbourhood. Therefore, improving French-Turkish relations is an inevitable precondition for the enhancement of cooperation between Turkey and the EU. The year 2013 provides the EU with a window of opportunity to reinvigorate the accession process because François Hollande replaced Nicolas Sarkozy in May 2012. As far as the new presidential team is concerned, Laurent Fabius, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of France has stated several times very clearly that “we are set to take the negotiations forward on Turkey’s accession in good faith, considering the past commitments without anticipating the future in all its details”.<sup>3</sup>

## 3. Turkey as a stakeholder in the Arab world

The rise of Turkey in the Middle East and North Africa started well before the Arab Spring. Turkey’s exports to Arab countries increased sevenfold between 2002 and 2010. In the same period the value of construction contracts awarded to Turkish companies in Arab countries reached a level of around 80 billion USD. Turkey gained the status of key economic partner for several Arab states (e.g. Iraq, Syria, Libya). Following the Arab Spring, Turkey lost its economic “assets” in Syria but boosted economic relations with Egypt (Turkish exports to the country nearly doubled between 2010 and 2012) and the Gulf states. In order to support economic

2. European Commission, *Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2012-2013*, October 2012, p. 16.

3. “Laurent Fabius, France and Turkey: New horizons for a long-standing relationship”, *Hurriyet Turkish Daily News*, 11.12.2012.

recovery in the post-revolutionary environment, Ankara allocated almost 3 billion USD in low interest loans, grants and other forms of financial assistance for Egypt, Tunisia and Libya in 2011-2012. With regard to Libya, which is facing serious security challenges, Turkey contributed substantially to its stabilisation by providing its police, judiciary and armed forces with equipment, uniforms, training and pledges to restore their infrastructure (police stations). Turkey also plays a key role in the Syrian uprising as a main supporter of the insurgents. Since autumn 2011, Turkey has been sheltering the Free Syrian Army and offering the group bases of operation. Turkey has also provided the rebels with training, intelligence and military equipment. Almost 140,000 Syrian refugees have found a safe haven in Turkey. The war has confirmed that no country possesses a stronger influence in Syria among Sunni Muslims – the largest ethnic and religious community in the country (around 60% of the population) – than Turkey.

The most important outcome of the Arab Spring in geopolitical terms has been a spectacular rapprochement between Turkey and Egypt. Their relations are heading towards an establishment of a new axis in the region. The best indicator of a new era in Turkish-Egyptian relations is the fact that Ahmet Davutoğlu, the Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs has visited Egypt ten times since February 2011. The most solid foundation of Turkey's influence in the Arab world is the widespread support it receives from the Arab population. According to many opinion polls, Turkey became extremely popular even before the Arab Spring, winning the battle for Arab hearts fought with other regional and global actors. A successful modernisation and democratisation undertaken by a post-Islamist party created an image of Turkey as a source of inspiration for Arab societies. The Turkish model won the largest following among mainstream Islamists which emerged from the Arab Spring as key players in politics. However, even local Christians consider Turkey a substantially better model for their countries to follow than Iran or Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, Turkey's geopolitical leverage in the region depends to a large degree on the course of events in Syria. The civil war in this country is partly responsible for an intensification of Kurdish guerrilla warfare in Turkey, incited by Damascus and Tehran, and a serious aggravation of relations between Turkey and the so-called Shia Axis comprising Iran, Syria, Maliki's government in Baghdad and Lebanon (Hezbollah).

## 4. Turkey: a bridge and a source of inspiration

### “THE MENA REGION NEEDS A “NATIVE” STAKEHOLDER TO SOFTEN ETHNIC, RELIGIOUS AND SECTARIAN CLEAVAGES”

Sharp cleavages between different political, religious, confessional and ethnic groups as well as discrimination against women are the most serious challenges facing the Arab world. Turkey's internal problems, though generally less severe than in other Middle Eastern states, are similar in nature. Turkey is a partly free state where women are still discriminated against in a patriarchal society, the rights of national minorities (Kurds) are still not fully respected, members of confessional and religious minorities (Alevi, Christians) feel like second-rank citizens in comparison with the Sunni majority, religious fundamentalism remains in some parts of the country a challenge and the political scene is deeply polarised. On the other hand, Turkey has achieved the most visible and tangible progress in coping with the abovementioned challenges in the Middle East. As far as Turkey's internal stability is concerned, as well as its aspirations to play an inspirational role for the Arabs, it is crucial for Ankara to stay on track towards full democratisation. It will allow Turkey to maintain predominance over other countries in the region. On the other hand, the substantial progress of democratisation in Arab countries can have a positive indirect impact on Turkey by stimulating reform (a healthy rivalry).

Similarities between the challenges in Turkey and in the Arab world and the rising leverage of Turkey in the region mean that a remedy found by Turkey would have a huge impact on the Arab World. The MENA region needs a “native” stakeholder to soften ethnic, religious and sectarian cleavages, especially between Shias and Sunnis. Turkey does not possess the capacity to achieve a permanent reconciliation between antagonistic fractions but it has the largest potential to build bridges between them. The best example is Prime Minister

Erdogan's visit to Iraq which took place at the end of March 2011 when he visited and prayed as the first Sunni leader to visit the most important Shia shrine in Najaf, Iraq. His speech in the Iraqi parliament, which underlined the necessity of friendship between Shias and Sunnis, met with a standing ovation from all the politicians. Unfortunately, the war in Syria is pushing Turkey into a sectarian zero-sum trap. Although Turkey supports the idea of reconciliation between antagonistic sectarian factions in Syrian opposition circles, the conflict is exposing shortcomings of Erdogan as a pious conservative Sunni Muslim who has attacked opponents using anti-Shia allusions and prejudices. Again, guaranteeing full equality to Alevi, a religious group whose members are Shia Muslims living in Turkey – one of the key preconditions of EU membership within the framework of the accession process – will make Turkish foreign policy immune from the instrumentalisation of religion by geopolitical interests.

## 5. How can the EU improve cooperation with Turkey in the southern neighbourhood?

- In 2013 the EU should seize the window of opportunity provided by France's new approach to the Turkish accession process and open new chapters particularly related to the foreign policy and energy. The latter are blocked unilaterally by Cyprus therefore the EU Council will need to convince Nicosia to change its position on these chapters.
- Brussels and Turkey should engage assertively in finding a solution to the Cyprus problem (firstly, simultaneous implementation of mutual promises and obligations related to the widening of the customs union and the trade embargo against Northern Cyprus, then launching of informal EU-Turkey negotiations on unification). The negotiations conducted under the UN umbrella should be treated as an additional platform for talks between both parts of the island. Any EU Member States which are sceptical of Turkey's accession must recognise that the Cyprus issue hampers the establishment of tangible cooperation between Turkey and the EU in the Arab World; finding a solution to the problem will not deprive them of instruments to control the outcome of the accession process.
- Despite all its shortcomings and serious failures, the Union for the Mediterranean, as a basic concept, remains a good idea. The Union should be revitalised by engaging in as many regional projects as possible between Turkey, the EU and Arab states in such fields as infrastructure, higher education and research and business development and by organising more summits. It should become the most important consultation forum between Turkey, the EU and the Arab World. The Union's success requires clear leadership. It seems that Turkey, Egypt and France, due to their potential and leverage in the region, are natural candidates to assume the role of locomotives.
- A holistic approach to the Middle East and the Arab World is needed. Therefore, the EU should establish regular summits with the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council and invite Turkey among others.
- Within the framework of the Union for the Mediterranean, Turkey, the EU and the Arab states should prepare a comprehensive plan for post-Assad Syria which will aim at establishing a new institutional framework, economic recovery and reconciliation between antagonistic fractions.
- Due to deepening political polarisation, Turkey and the EU should also start a mediation process between Egypt's main political forces.
- The rapprochement between Turkey and the EU should be placed in the wider Mediterranean context. The EU-Turkey customs union should not only be extended but also enlarged to include Arab states in the southern neighbourhood. The customs union is more limited than deep and comprehensive access to the

EU's single market, but as in the case of Turkey, it can more rapidly play a key role in the economic transformation of the region. The upgraded customs union could also provide Mediterranean states with the framework within which their intra-regional trade could most easily be beefed up.

- Turkey is currently conducting FTA negotiations with Libya and has launched initiatives to start similar talks with Algeria. In order to foster regional cooperation in the Arab world, the EU should encourage Turkey to launch negotiations on the FTA with the entire Arab Maghreb Union. (Turkey has already signed or started the FTA talks with several regional organisations).
- The Global Business Bridges Initiative should be widened and deepened. In particular, the deepening of French-Turkish economic cooperation in a bilateral capacity and in third countries would be more than welcome because - it would cement the political rapprochement between Turkey and France.
- The EU members of the "5+5" forum - France, Italy, Malta, Portugal and Spain, along with the Arab Maghreb Union - should invite Turkey to join this platform, which is dedicated to addressing security challenges in the Mediterranean.

Contributions to the TGAE series: "How to make out of the EU's vicinity an opportunity for the EU itself?"

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