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Is Turkey Pivoting Back toward the West?

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There is a surge of speculation in the media both here and abroad about the impact of the “Arab Spring” on Turkey’s foreign policy. Some analysts and pundits contend that Ankara was not only caught off guard (like most of the world) by the onset of anti-regime demonstrations in Arab countries, but that the development has undermined^[3] the basic focus of the government’s approach to regional issues and foreign affairs generally. David Rosenberg, writing in the *Jerusalem Post*^[4], argues that “the new Middle Eastern realities have caught Ankara flatfooted.” He adds that “the regional turmoil has upset Turkey’s new order” and notes that analysts believe that the unsettling events “may even cause it to turn again to the West.”

Such analyses contain a kernel of truth, but only a kernel. For the past several years, Turkish officials have strengthened their country’s ties to a number of neighboring regimes. Relations noticeably improved with such Arab states as Iraq, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and even long-time adversary Syria. Outside the Arab world, Ankara courted Iran to such an extent that speculation grew about a “Turkish-Iranian axis.” At the same time, Turkey’s foreign policy deviated more and more from the approach favored by its traditional NATO allies, especially the United States^[5].

The weakening of entrenched Arab regimes makes Ankara’s outreach program less certain and potentially far less valuable. And there are indications that officials are scrambling to adjust to the turbulence and reposition aspects of Turkey’s foreign policy. There are even a few hints that the Erdogan government may be flirting with making a policy pivot back toward its Western allies. Although Ankara initially opposed the NATO military operation against Muammar Gaddafi’s forces, recent statements have been far more critical of the Libyan dictator. Prime Minister Erdogan himself offered the harshest criticism during a May 3 news conference in Istanbul. Accusing Gaddafi of preferring “blood, tears and pressure against his own people,” Erdogan stated^[6] that he wished “the Libyan leader immediately withdraw from the administration and leave Libya for his own sake and the sake of his country’s future without leading to further destruction.”

There are also indications that the rapprochement with Iran has cooled in recent weeks. Tehran has not responded as Ankara wished to the diplomatic initiative that Turkey and Brazil offered last year that held some promise for a compromise on the nuclear issue. Instead, Iran took

measures to defy the system of international sanctions (including the ban on arms sales) in ways that embarrassed Turkey and other countries that had advocated a milder policy toward the clerical regime.

Nevertheless, it is decidedly premature to talk about a comprehensive pivot of Turkey's foreign policy back toward the West. Ankara's more independent approach to international affairs goes beyond the Middle East and reflects [7] important long-term strategic, political, and economic interests. The Arab Spring undoubtedly has altered some of the calculations in the foreign ministry, but it is more likely to produce modest tactical adjustments than a wholesale revamping of strategy. Those who see Turkey returning to Washington's or NATO's policy orbit are engaging in wishful thinking far more than a sober assessment of probable trends. Ankara will likely continue to be a difficult, frustrating power for the United States and its allies to deal with in the coming years.

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