



# The Arab Spring Effect on Turkey's Role, Decision-Making and Foreign Policy

*By Fadi Elhusseini*

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The literature on Turkish foreign policy during the 2000s is voluminous. However, a lion's share of it deals with Turkey's soft power, trade, diplomatic and energy relations, with scant attention paid to the impact of the Arab spring in shaping and at times changing the role of Turkey in the Middle East. The Arab Spring Effect on Turkey's Role, Decision Making and Foreign Policy by Fadi Elhusseini, fills this gap. Instead of overwhelming the reader with detailed accounts of the history of Turkish foreign policy, Elhusseini skillfully unveils Turkey's various responses to the Arab revolts: adopting the role of an observer in Tunisia, a gambler in Egypt, showing hesitation over Libya, neglect over Yemen, and promoting transformation in Syria.

The book starts by defining basic concepts such as strategic depth, neo-Ottomanism, soft power, and clarifies Turkey's activism in the Arab world within the context of these concepts. Elhusseini assesses the hypothesis of a shift of axis by referring to scholars who find, in Turkey's inclination toward the East, a hidden Islamic agenda by the AKP and a systematic shift from Turkey's traditional Western course to an Eastern one. According to Elhusseini, however, Turkey's axis is not constrained to such a dichotomy. Firstly, it still pursues EU membership. Secondly, it remains an active member of NATO. For example, Turkey agreed to station a NATO-supported early warning radar system about 700 kilometers from the border with Iran. This made it possible to share the gathered intelligence with allies including Israel. Thirdly, Turkey has initiated extensive economic relations with Latin America, signing a strategic partnership agreement with Brazil. The African Union declared Turkey a "strategic partner" as Turkey developed her relations with sub-Saharan Africa.

Elhusseini points out that although Turkey became an exporter of ideas and the Turkish model - which as a soft power tool, attracts and persuades Arab regimes to adopt similar policies and agenda - many Arab intellectuals consider the motives behind Turkey's soft power with great suspicion. Turkish officials, being aware of the Arab states' suspicion, have repeatedly stated that Turkey does not harbor imperialistic aspirations and does not want to be a model for anyone.

Elhusseini provides intriguing information from opinion polls about Turkey in the Arab world, by comparing Arab views of Turkey before and after the Arab spring in Chapter Three, "Turkish Foreign Policy and the Arab World." The results of surveys in 2009 suggest that Turkey had a newfound positive image in the Arab world. Elhusseini also highlights a considerable increase in the positive image of Turkey among Arab populations in 2010, when compared with the results of 2009. 78 percent of the respondents, for example, thought that Turkey should have played a bigger role in the region and a mediatory role in the Israeli-Palestine conflict. When it comes to Turkey's role as a model in the region, 61 percent of the respondents felt Turkey could be a model in 2009, which later went up to 66 percent support in 2010. This increasing support was related to its Muslim background, economic power and democratic government. Elhusseini provides more detailed information about the reasons behind this, which varied from one country to another. While the primary reason for Palestinian respondents' (making up 27 percent) seeing Turkey as a model was about Ankara's unconditional support of Palestinians and Muslims, Egyptian respondents (making up 15 percent) designated the primary reason for their support to be solely Turkey's Muslim identity.

Explaining Turkey's reactions and responses to the Arab spring is the heart of the book, and it provides a brilliant summary of the determinants of Turkish position towards the Arab spring in different Arab countries on three levels: political, economic and security-based. The author skillfully analyses how Ankara responded to mass movements in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya and Syria with a special emphasis on how Turkey altered her policy from merely being a role model into one of direct intervention and from macro-level dealing to micro-treatment of each state.

Although Arab perceptions of Turkey in the aftermath of the Arab spring are the most fascinating part of the book, Elhusseini devotes very little space to this topic, probably due to the low number of opinion polls available. In a survey conducted in 2011 in 16 Arab countries with the participation of 2,323 people, answers showed that Turkey was "still" perceived by 78 percent of respondents as a "positive actor" and a "rising power" except in polls in Syria (from 87 percent in 2009 to 44 percent in 2011). Another survey that

sought the views of 2,800 people in 16 countries in 2012 featured a slight decline in Turkey's popularity with the sharpest drops registered in Syria.

Most interestingly, the survey held in 2013 showed that positive perceptions of Turkey in the Arab world decreased considerably. In 2011 and 2012, Turkey had ranked first as the most popular country among the Arabs at 78 percent and 69 percent respectively. However in 2013, the UAE ranked the highest in terms of positive perception with 67 percent, while Turkey only ranked fourth with 59 percent, dropping below China. Elhousseini concludes that "Turkey appeared, both in fact and in the eyes of Arabs, to be taking sides in each of the regional conflicts in clear contradiction to her previous "good neighbors" approach.

Elhousseini leaves the best for last, in the chapter titled, "Turkey's Role in the Arab World." He deserves praise for presenting a comprehensive and highly readable account of the challenges faced by Turkey in playing a role in the Arab world. He classifies these challenges into domestic (Kurdish question, the Gülen Movement - also known as FETÖ, coup and post-coup era and limitations of Turkish economic capabilities) and foreign ones (Arab perceptions, competition, chaos in the region). Finally, he analyses Turkey's involvement in the region with a special emphasis on its diplomatic power and soft power as the two outputs of Turkish foreign policy. His views about possible scenarios for Turkey's role in the Arab world and what can be done to improve Turkey's chances are certainly worth reading.

Light in terms of scholarly jargon, the book should be easily accessible to anyone seeking a better understanding of the impact of the Arab spring on Turkey's decision-making and foreign policy.