

Turkey on NATO's Role in the MENA: Perspectives from a "Central Country"

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Turkey's perceptions of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO's) involvement in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in the context of the military intervention in Libya and the Alliance's development of prospective partnerships and assistance programs in the region, especially in countries going through a process of regime change. The paper develops the argument that Turkey sees NATO's involvement through a "central country" prism, which has been at the core of Turkish foreign policy culture in recent years. Despite the rising importance of NATO in Turkey's security and defense policy calculations, the paper, moreover, points to domestic and regional factors that will set limitations on Ankara's support for NATO involvement in the MENA region.

Key Words: Turkey, Arab Spring, central country, NATO, MENA, Libya, Syria

NATO'nun Ortadoğu ve Kuzey Afrika'daki Rolüne Bakışı: 'Merkez Ülke'den Yaklaşımlar

ÖZ

Bu makale, Libya'daki askeri müdahale ve İttifak'ın bölgede, özellikle rejim değişikliği sürecinden geçen ülkelerle, geliştireceği muhtemel ortaklık ve yardım programları bağlamında Türkiye'nin NATO'nun Kuzey Afrika ve Ortadoğu'daki (MENA) rolüne dönük algısını incelemektedir. Makale Türkiye'nin, son dönemde dış politika kültürünün ana kavramı olan, 'merkez ülke' perspektifinden NATO'nun rolünü değerlendirdiği tezini ileri sürmektedir. Ayrıca makale, kendisinin savunma ve güvenlik politikalarına dair değerlendirmelerinde NATO'nun giderek önem kazanmasına rağmen, Ankara'nın NATO'nun MENA bölgesindeki rolüne vereceği desteği kısıtlayacak iç ve bölgesel faktörlere de bakmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Türkiye, Arap Baharı, merkez ülke, NATO, MENA, Libya, Suriye

The central country, a concept Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu uses to explain Turkey's international positioning in his academic writings, refers to an actor that is geographically and geoculturally located at the intersection of self-contained regional systems. Davutoğlu believes that Turkey's unique geographic and geocultural position gives it a special central-country role, and as such, Turkey cannot define itself in a defensive manner. As a result, Davutoğlu expects Turkey to play a proactive role in shaping its neighborhood, for Turkey's security and prosperity at home necessitates the establishment of peaceful and stable orders in the immediate regions that surround it (Davutoğlu 2008).

As a corollary, this concept also leads Davutoğlu to advocate the notion of "regional ownership" (Davutoğlu 2011). Among other things, that concept implies that direct military involvement of external actors in Turkey's immediate neighborhood should be limited to the extent possible and that the management of economic and security affairs should be organized at the regional level. Though in recent years Turkish foreign policy has been framed in globalist terms—the so-called transition from a regional central country to a global actor—the behavioral traits associated with the concept of the central country undergirds Turkey's approach to its neighborhood (Kardaş 2010).

This central-country notion has also affected Turkey's perceptions of NATO in recent years. In line with the other key principles of its new foreign policy, such as pursuing zero problems with neighbors, utilizing soft power instruments, and building a peaceful regional order through dialogue, cooperation and economic integration among local actors, Turkey, under the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) rule, acted on the assumption that it had to abandon its "Cold War" thinking about NATO—that its only task was to agree or disagree with a set of policy proposals that it had no role in making. Turkey, therefore, increasingly asserted its right and determination to play an active part not only in the implementation of a predetermined agenda for NATO but also in the very formulation of the "new NATO." According to this new thinking, if the Alliance undertook new tasks, they would have to be in line with shared threat perceptions, including those of Turkey (Davutoğlu 2012).

Consequently, while the role of NATO in Turkey's foreign policy priorities has traditionally formed the backbone of Ankara's security and defense policy, it has been a matter of contention in recent years, which has paralleled discussions about Ankara's foreign policy orientation. On the one hand, public support for NATO within Turkey was very low, as the Turks diverged significantly from other allied nations in terms of threat perceptions. On the other hand, while Turkey's political elite remained committed to membership in the Alliance, they appeared to be prioritizing their positioning and interests in their immediate neighborhood over broader transatlantic consensus, and they wanted to make their voice heard in the determination of the Alliance's strategic agenda. As an extension of its drive for independent foreign policy activism under the rubric of the central country, Turkey more often than not found itself at odds with its allies on a number of issues, including the missile defense program, the election of

the Alliance's new leader, NATO-European Union (EU) security cooperation, and the troop surge in Afghanistan (Oğuzlu 2012).

The disagreements Turkey was involved in were products more of Ankara's desire to have its voice heard than an attempt to block the functioning of the entire NATO machinery. It was in this light, for instance, that Turkey invited its allies to engage in more serious discussion about whether Iran really posed a threat to their existential security that might warrant the sort of precautions under consideration prior to the 2010 Lisbon summit. In the absence of this debate, Turkey expressed unease at sitting with the members of a club with whom it would have few common threat perceptions and shared interests. Granted, after every controversial posturing at NATO, including that over the missile shield, Turkey always managed to make last-minute compromises, underscoring the high premium Ankara placed on maintaining the Alliance's unity and avoiding being an outlier.

THE ARAB SPRING, LIBYA OPERATION, AND TRANSFORMATION OF TURKEY'S STRATEGIC THINKING

At the outset of the Arab Spring, Turkey acted as though it would continue on the same controversial course and diverge from its Allies, with Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, in line with Davutoğlu's ideas about limiting foreign military intervention in regional countries, vocally questioning NATO's likely involvement in Libya. As the events unfolded, however, Turkey eschewed dogmatic attachment to its initial position and managed to coordinate its policies with the broader transatlantic agenda. When the transfer of the military operation in Libya to NATO was up for debate, Turkey increasingly realigned its position. In a move reminiscent of its behavior in NATO summits in April 2009 and November 2010—where it seemingly emerged content with its ability to use veto power as an effective bargaining chip to have its reservations recognized by other allies—Turkey again mustered a deal in March 2011 which opened the way for NATO to take control of the UN-mandated coalition operation.

As is crystallized in its position on NATO's assumption of control of the Libya operation, Turkey reverted largely to the traditional pillars of its security and defense policy: valuing coordinated action with the West, refraining from acting as an outlier that jeopardizes the Alliance's unity, and taking advice coming from Washington seriously. At the same time, however, Turkey pursued two other objectives which had become an integral part of its foreign policy in recent years, in line with central-country behavior (Aras 2009; Kalın 2011): first, a desire to gain a greater say in the redefinition of the Alliance's core missions and threat perceptions; and second, a sensitivity to geopolitical and geocultural positioning, which first and foremost suggests an aversion to taking military action against another Muslim nation and a

desire to limit foreign military intervention. Turkey, therefore, insisted that NATO continue to explore diplomatic channels and that its military contributions be limited to noncombat missions, enforcement of no-fly zones, and provision of humanitarian assistance.

Overall, the trajectory of the military operation in Libya has had a major impact on Ankara's perception of NATO and the Alliance's place in Turkish security and defense policies.

Greater Receptivity Toward Hard Power

First, at the conceptual level, the Libyan experience is likely to affect Turkey's security culture. Due to an optimistic reading of the regional security environment in recent years, Turkish leaders renounced power politics and prioritized soft power and diplomacy. In Libya, besides other considerations, their objections to NATO's involvement and international sanctions were also grounded in the assumption that hard power and coercion were ineffective means to achieve the desired objectives and that a peaceful transition to democracy and the rule of law was possible. Therefore, even after agreeing to the military mission's transfer to NATO command, for some time the Turkish government operated on the same assumption. That was reflected in repeated calls for an immediate cessation of the conflict and the institution of a cease-fire, which was most clearly expressed in Prime Minister Erdoğan's three-stage plan announced in late April 2011. Moreover, Turkish government sources often expressed concerns about NATO's ability to succeed in toppling Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi, warning of the risk of protracted civil war.

Yet, it was the military option that finally succeeded in bringing about decisive change on the ground, which must have forced Turkey's reconsideration of its views on the utility of hard power instruments and thus *the value of NATO as an effective force projection instrument*. This change in strategic thinking is already under way, as attested to by Turkey's stance on Syria, which was considerably less divergent from that of Western powers when the issue of sanctions arose. Despite its rather dogmatic attachment to the principle of acting in concert with international legitimacy and its almost categorical rejection of any sort of sanctions as inherently undesirable, Turkey decided to implement a range of sanctions on Syria, also backed up by the West, even without the blessing of the United Nations (UN) Security Council.

Institutions Matter

Second, the manner in which Turkey succeeded in recalibrating its policy in Libya must have reminded Turkish leaders of the continuing value and *relevance of the Alliance*

for agenda-setting purposes. It was largely through its membership in this “exclusive security club” that Turkey managed to negotiate its way into the political mechanisms in which the future of Libya was discussed, such as the London conference—unlike the Paris summit—and the Libya Contact Group. It was again through this channel that Turkish leaders sought to constrain what they perceived as President Nicolas Sarkozy’s reckless pursuit of French national interests in the Mediterranean. Without NATO’s major functions as a military alliance and political consultation body, Turkey might have risked being sidelined in Libya. This new thinking is likely to dampen the critical voices coming from Ankara, which in recent years have viewed the Alliance as a constraint and liability rather than an asset that enhances Turkey’s room for maneuver.

As the Middle Eastern security environment becomes more volatile and risk-prone in the wake of the Arab Spring, Turkey will increasingly welcome a robust security actor such as NATO as a reliable anchor in its security and defense policy, and treat that actor as an effective instrument in its foreign policy toolkit.

TURKISH VIEWS ON NATO’S INVOLVEMENT IN MENA POST-ARAB SPRING

Turkey was supportive of NATO’s post-Cold War transformation from a collective self-defense alliance into a collective security organization responding to a wide array of threats arising from an uncertain security environment. Sharing mutual perceptions of the new security environment with its allies, Turkey went to great lengths to adapt to the new NATO so that it could maintain its place in the transatlantic security architecture. It thus made decisive contributions to the Alliance’s nonconventional operations in the Balkans and Afghanistan, as well as assuming a major role in the Partnership for Peace and other partnership mechanisms. It was against this background that Turkey was eager to see the expansion of NATO’s functions in the Mediterranean and Middle East, as was reflected in the supportive and encouraging role it played first in the context of the Mediterranean Dialogue and later in the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI), which was developed in response to calls for building partnerships with countries of the Greater Middle East in the first half of the 2000s (Karaosmanoğlu 2012).

Turkish officials acknowledge that, compared to the Partnership for Peace, NATO achieved only limited success in reaching out to potential partners through these programs, let alone in helping pacify the region.¹ From Turkey’s perspective, one major reason for the poor performance has been the regional receptivity toward NATO. Despite the Alliance labeling itself as a “political-military platform,” it still was viewed in the region largely as a military organization. Given the image of NATO as

1 The following section draws on the author’s interviews with several Turkish officials from Turkey’s security and foreign policy institutions.

an alliance reminiscent of the Cold War and serving American interests, the Alliance had been far from appealing.

In the wake of the Arab Spring, however, Turkey has seen better opportunities that need to be seized in order to put in place more effective partnership programs. While NATO's operation in Libya might be criticized for many of its shortcomings, the Alliance, at the end of the day, endured many challenges and managed to see the operation through to completion, which resulted in the liberation of Libya. It, therefore, managed to partly correct the Alliance's image in parts of the region, while the political support and military contributions from regional actors such as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates for Operation Unified Protector offered a test case for interoperability and infused the seeds of coordinated action. Overall, Turkish officials sense that countries in the region are expressing greater willingness to work with NATO.

The Format of NATO Involvement

For Turkey, the various partnership mechanisms that have been available under the "28 + N" formula provide a good starting point for channeling the Alliance's potential roles in the MENA region. While the Mediterranean Dialogue and ICI may provide a good foundation, Turkey believes bilateral partnerships, rather than region-wide or sub-regional platforms, might present a more viable way to establish cooperation with interested parties. This way, it would be possible to develop programs targeting the needs of individual countries on a case-by-case basis and based on their own merits, and it would allow them to proceed at the speed with which they would like.

The Content of NATO Involvement

The Libya operation might remain an exception rather than the rule. In Turkey, while a nascent debate speculates on NATO's post-conflict role in Libya, no concrete ideas have been put forward outlining specifics or feasibility of such involvement. In all likelihood, NATO's involvement will be mainly in the realm of noncombat responsibilities devoted to the improvement of law enforcement capabilities in transition countries.

In this regard, the discussion in Ankara resonates widely with the ideas currently discussed in NATO circles. Given the risk of public misunderstanding, the idea of a direct NATO role involving a physical presence in potential partner countries is not welcome, and the cooperation might mainly take the form of training and educating relevant personnel. NATO's contributions could largely consist of assisting in the modernization of armed forces, security sector reform, development of strategy papers, reorganization of civilian-military relations to bring them in line with NATO standards, and so on. The programs that aim to increase the familiarity of military

officers from MENA countries with NATO, similar to the Mediterranean Dialogue and the ICI, could also be pursued.

NATO as the Main Security Actor

In the provision of such security tasks, the European Union is also a candidate and Turkish officials raise the possibility that some member states might prefer to refer these tasks to EU institutions. Turkey may not necessarily perceive a zero-sum competition in such a scenario, given its emphasis on the indivisibility of security. That said, as NATO is the exclusive institution in which Turkey has full membership rights, Ankara would prefer that the Alliance be given primacy in cases of overlapping areas of responsibility, given the ongoing problems pertaining to Turkey's participation in EU-led operations.

New Rationale for NATO?

Turkish officials also believe the Alliance's potential involvement in the MENA region might positively contribute to its own evolution. Pointing to the eclipse of the Afghanistan mission and the stabilization of the Balkans through greater EU involvement, they emphasize the need for finding new functions and rationale if NATO were to remain a military body. While NATO stresses its continuing commitment to the operation in Afghanistan beyond 2014, it will obviously also need new justifications to maintain the operational capability to conduct out-of-area operations that go beyond the core function of defense of member states' territorial integrity.

Turkey could actively work to make a case for NATO to take on greater responsibilities in the MENA region through the effective utilization of the various partnership mechanisms the Alliance has in place. Here, Turkish officials see room for cooperation with other like-minded members that have potential interest in leading the Alliance's involvement in the region.

Ongoing Relevance of the Bridge Metaphor?

Turkey's unique role as a major Muslim nation that is integrated into the transatlantic security architecture is seen as a major factor when Turkish officials discuss the Alliance's new roles in the MENA region. Most of NATO's post-Cold War military engagements involved Muslim communities in one way or another. While in many cases such operations have been undertaken in support of Muslim populations, NATO still suffers from a negative image in this part of the world. As a remedy, Turkey has been presented as a bridge to reach out to Muslim nations or a conduit to facilitate

NATO's engagement with them, as was vividly illustrated in the case of operations in Afghanistan.

For its part, Turkey has also acted cognizant of its civilizational identity and geocultural positioning, when, for instance, it expressed certain reservations prior to the nomination of Anders Fogh Rasmussen to head NATO. Many NATO nations have taken note of such concerns and have been willing to work through Turkey to benefit from the added strategic value it brings to the table in this regard. In the case of the MENA transition countries, too, some allies have reportedly already expressed interest in joint programs for training police forces in these countries.

LIMITATIONS OF TURKEY'S SUPPORT FOR NATO INVOLVEMENT

Turkey's support for NATO involvement in the MENA region is likely to be constrained by several domestic and regional factors. In both cases, while adopting an assertive policy, Turkish decision makers will not want to be seen as "subcontractors" to the U.S. political agenda. Given the ongoing reservations toward NATO both in the region and in Turkish society at large, the Turkish government will most likely weigh its position on NATO's future role against the political costs involved.

Domestic sensitivities

As referred to at the outset, Turkish public support for NATO had been very low, to the point of prompting NATO's public diplomacy division to undertake various activities to raise awareness about the Alliance. In the wake of the Arab Spring, no visible improvement in NATO's public image has been recorded. Turkish officials explain this situation by maintaining that NATO skepticism in Turkey is an outgrowth of general skepticism toward the West and the United States in particular, which has a more complex set of causes. Short of a major breakthrough in the Turkish public's views on overall Turkish-Western relations, ignorance about NATO will persist and the Alliance will likely suffer from low prestige. That will act as a constraint on Turkey's receptiveness to the Alliance's role in the region.

Moreover, as was clearly seen once again in the context of the debate that followed Turkey's decision to approve the installment of NATO early warning radars on its soil, any issue that simultaneously involves the West and Israel is easily inflammable in a Turkish domestic context. In that regard, Turkey would prefer NATO's involvement in the region be decoupled from the Arab-Israeli issue. Part of the reason why Turkish officials would like to see NATO establish bilateral partnerships with regional countries is that they hope such a format would help decouple Arab-Israeli problems from

security partnerships. This way, not only would it be possible to circumvent a problem that bedeviled many multilateral cooperative initiatives in the past but it would also eliminate a major source of domestic objection.

Here, it is also worth recalling that in the Turkish body politic, the entire set of events commonly labeled as the Arab Spring is sometimes perceived as a U.S.- and Western-orchestrated plan to redesign the political map of the Middle East. Such views, at times enmeshed with conspiracy theories yet shared largely by even mainstream actors including the opposition parties, see NATO's operation in Libya, the tightening of sanctions on Syria, and democracy promotion rhetoric as part of this greater design. They charge that the Turkish government, which had similar policies, acted as a "subcontractor" of Western interests. The government has to confront these criticisms in order to pursue its new foreign policy in the Middle East in tandem with the broader Western agenda. For instance, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, while defending Ankara's policy throughout the Arab Spring, in particular the recent confrontation with Syria, during a parliamentary hearing on November 11, 2011, devoted a major portion of his time to refuting the "subcontracting" charges.

Regional Sensitivities

Similarly, Turkey will be equally sensitive to not being seen as advocating an outside agenda in the region. Regional receptivity toward NATO will, therefore, be another key variable. The Libya operation earned the Alliance plaudits, but Turkish officials believe the prejudices and antipathies toward the Alliance are still there. The forces seeking democratic transformation have welcomed Western intervention for the time being. Nonetheless, NATO's popularity in the region will come to hinge on whether "nationalist" or "democratic" forces shape the political currents in the region. Given the ongoing skepticism, to avoid spreading perceptions of the West imposing a political agenda in the region, Turkish officials believe NATO's involvement as well as the content of its role, even in the post-conflict phase in Libya, will have to be tailored to demands coming from the prospective partners.

Turkish officials also point to some negative repercussions of NATO's experience in Libya. In particular, they cite concerns raised by Russia and China as to whether the Alliance exceeded the original mandate from the UN Security Council that authorized the use of force to protect civilians and enforce a no-fly zone. Notwithstanding the merits of the legal debate, this experience has already affected international and regional actors' perceptions. Russia, a major actor that Turkey has to take into account, will not consent to the repetition of the same scenario, nor will other regional powers welcome NATO if it is seen as an intervening force enforcing regime change.

FUTURE OF NATO IN THE MENA REGION: TREADING THE FINE LINE

Despite the rising importance of NATO in Turkey's security and defense policy calculations, taken together, these domestic and regional sensitivities suggest that Turkey's cooperation with NATO might be constrained by some significant political considerations. Therefore, Turkey will not want to see more extensive involvement by the Alliance in the region and will prefer to limit it to the low-key functional areas in the security sector identified earlier. Even in the provision of limited security functions, there are grounds for keeping the expectations low, if one takes note of the allies' inability to assign greater security responsibilities to NATO following the invasion of Iraq and the currently declining appetite to take on yet another mission similar in scope to Afghanistan.

Beyond the functional areas of security cooperation, NATO's involvement might be both unrealistic overall and politically costly for Turkey. For instance, with regard to the political dialogue, Turkey may not welcome a more structured approach, such as the inclusion of political criteria like democracy and good governance as preconditions for partnership as in the case of the later participants to the Partnership for Peace. Given the nature of many of the regimes in the region and the challenges of democratic transformation and consolidation, Turkey would prefer NATO tread a fine line, so that it is not seen as advocating regime change and an open democratization agenda. The key principles guiding Turkey's position on NATO's involvement will be voluntarism, case-by-case partnership, and needs-based cooperation on loose bilateral forums.

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