

Turkey in the Unpredictable Middle East

Written by Fadi Hakura

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FADI HAKURA, JUL 27 2011

Turkish election campaigns are renowned for their robust oratory and triumphant rhetoric. Mastery of style and charismatic personalities are constants of Turkey's celebrated leaders and incumbent Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan is no exception.

In his third election victory speech in June 2011, the prime minister was unabashedly Ottoman-esque :

"Sarajevo won today as much as Istanbul, Beirut won as much as Izmir, Damascus won as much as Ankara, Ramallah, Nablus, Jenin, the West Bank, Jerusalem won as much as Diyarbakir."

Mr Erdogan envisions Turkey as leader of the volatile and voluble Middle East, not playing second fiddle to any power. Why not? One might ask, if popularity is any indication.

According to Pew Research, an international pollster, the prime minister's favourability ratings are sky high: 78%, 72% and 64% in Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon respectively. Arguably, he is far and wide the most recognised figure in the region.

Nevertheless, riding the crest wave of approval ratings rarely translates into lasting influence without the delivery of results. Crucially, the Pew survey hints at that very possibility.

Only 35% of Gazan Palestinians expressed confidence in Mr Erdogan. That is a startling finding given last year's flotilla incident ostensibly attempting to break the Israeli blockade of Gaza. Of all places, Gaza should have been warmest to Turkey's confrontational attitude to Israel. Yet, it seems to be the most sceptical, if not cynical.

What explains this finding is not terribly difficult to discern. When Mr Erdogan made Gaza the *cause célèbre*, the expectations among Gazans shot through the roof. A few years later, they went largely unmet. Disappointment replaced euphoria as action failed to match Turkey's declarations of support.

More broadly, Turkey's citation of its relationship with Iran and Syria as exemplifying the "zero problems with the neighbours" policy is now in tatters. Damascus refused to heed the stark warnings by Ankara on reforms to forestall street protests and Iran does not trust the motives of its competing neighbour. This alliance of convenience masquerades as a strategic alliance no more.

Turkey relied extensively on former President of Egypt Hosni Mubarak remaining in power. Mr Mubarak adopted a staunchly pro-Washington line of close relations with Israel and antagonistic ties with Iran. Syria was naturally in the crosshairs of Egyptian counter-diplomacy.

Under these circumstances, Turkey navigated easily between Iran and its Arab nemeses in the Gulf. It also strengthened relations with Syria without adversely harming ties with Saudi Arabia. Mr Mubarak created a vacuum allowing Turkey to project regional influence.

With the removal of Mr Mubarak, the fundamental cornerstone of Turkish foreign policy disappeared. Egypt is re-

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emerging as the principal interlocutor on the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Moreover, the violent disturbances in Syria have pitted Turkey against the once-friendly Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad. Similarly, he is siding with Saudi Arabia against Iran over the matter of Bahrain.

Increasingly, Turkish attempts at a unilateral foreign policy appear forlorn. Take Libya. Prime Minister Erdogan initially condemned Western military action against Colonel Muammar Ghaddafi. He proposed a negotiated solution to no avail. He then rapidly fell into the Anglo-American circle by recognising the Libyan Transitional Council and breaking ties with Colonel Ghaddafi.

So, in a post-Mubarak era, Turkey needs to retool its foreign policy agenda. Improving relations with difficult neighbours is a worthwhile goal requiring adroitness, patience and quiet diplomacy.

To start with, Turkey is most influential when building issue-based variable coalitions. The Middle East is notoriously bereft of permanent alliances. Bilateral friendships today can disappear tomorrow and subsequently re-appear again the day after. Turkey assumed that its friendship with Mr Al-Assad was long-lasting and stable. Recent events proved that wrong.

Coalition-building entails that Turkey does not fall into any particular camp at the expense of another. It can straddle with skill – and admittedly with lots of luck – the multiple regional fissures, whether between Saudi Arabia and Iran, US and Iran or Israel and the Arab countries.

Similarly, Turkish public diplomacy should not bolster expectations that will remain largely unfulfilled. Modesty is normally a virtue, not a vice. Mr Erdogan's issuance of ultimatums on Mr Al-Assad created impressions that Turkey will resolve the Syrian conundrum. Ultimately, Mr Al-Assad's steadfast refusal exposed the limitations of Turkey's influence.

Turkey should also be very selective of the issue worthy of intervention, and only do so when circumstances are ripe. On many occasions, the best policy is a wait-and-see posture to pinpoint the right timing for intervention rather than rushing in at the wrong hour.

Turkey's approach in the aftermath of the 2006 Israel-Hizbollah war is a case in point. Mr Erdogan chose the perfect moment to contribute UN peacekeeping forces. He wisely coordinated with Israel, Iran, Syria and the US and won plaudits for skilfully manoeuvring between the protagonists and antagonists.

It is true that the combination of variable coalition-building, subdued public diplomacy and selective intervention may not capture the headlines. But what counts for an effective foreign policy is not noise but outcomes. With the right ingredients, Turkey will be in an enviable position to fully utilise its strategic geography, NATO membership and web of relations to advance Turkish interests in the region.

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