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Turkey's Foreign Policy After Arab Spring: An Identity-Based Approach – Analysis

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An identity-based approach to Turkey's foreign policy will be a better way to explain actions taken by this country subsequent to developments known as the Arab Spring. It means that Turkey's foreign policy actions at that juncture, like other actors in the region, were rooted in the country's identity. In fact, it was due to the influence of three-tier identity of Turkey, which has European, Islamic and Turkish components in it, that the country has taken such actions as taking part in a coalition of Arab and Western countries to overthrow the ruling regime of Syria. Other actions taken by Ankara that arose from that identity included expression of concern about the rising influence of Iran and other Shia groups in the region, having doubts about joining the anti-ISIS coalition despite Turkey's concerns about increasing power of this terrorist group, criticism of the West's double standards in the region, attaching importance to expansion of democratic and overarching governments in the region, and expressing concern over rising global popularity of Kurdish people.

Turkey's foreign policy actions following the developments that have come to be collectively known as the Arab Spring arose from the country's identity components, as has been the case with other regional countries. The most important of Turkey's identity components include its Turkish, Islamic and European layers. These three identity layers have been manifest in the policies of the Justice and Development Party as the ruling party. At the same time, they have

been evident in the action taken by social groups that support the party and which are currently considered as the most influential political, social and economic currents in Turkey.

From the viewpoint of the European layer of Turkey's identity, a change in the country's former policy of détente with regard to Syria following the wave of Arab revolutions, and alliance of Ankara with a large group of European states for the overthrow of the Syrian regime, were not unrelated to Turkey's efforts to attune its domestic and foreign policies with Europe. First of all, a change in Turkey's approach to Syria came about gradually and in early stages of Syria crisis when Ankara was trying to mediate between belligerent sides. By the way, the balance between security and freedom in Syria is currently turning into a very important discourse because this country sees its security hinged on the establishment of more democratic and broad-based governments in its periphery. Even within Turkey, despite some problems, we are currently witnessing gradual strengthening of a special discourse which is characterized by a more broad-based definition of governance. It is through such a discourse that Turkey considered regional revolutions as major efforts made by nations to get rid of their dictatorial rules. On the other hand, Ankara saw its own interests dependent on making efforts to help establish more democratic and more broad-based governments in its surroundings. In fact, from the viewpoint of Turkish officials, absence of broad-based nation-states in the region is one of the most important factors that have caused a wide gap between Shias and Sunnis in the Arab Middle East.

The Islamic layer of Turkey's identity has, for its own part, had remarkable effects on the regional policies of Ankara. Since this layer is mostly inclined toward Sunni Islam, Turkey feels alarmed about expanding influence of Iran and other Shia groups in the region. Secondly, this identity layer has made rulers of Turkey suspicious of the policies and goals pursued by the Western countries in the region. For example, a large group of the elites and politicians in Turkey have been slamming West for what they call Western double standards, including the inaction of the Western countries in the face of Israel's barbaric invasion of Gaza or their passivity in the face of what Turkey considers as the crimes committed by the Syrian regime against its own people. They consider such inaction and passivity as one of the main factors that have helped such terrorist groups as the ISIS to gain power. Another effect that this identity layer has had is on the model of governance that Turkish politicians proposed for the Arab world following the Arab Spring developments. Turkish officials maintain that their purposed model combines freedom-seeking with search for Islamic identity and, thus, can save citizens in regional countries from the purgatory in which they have to choose between the currently dominant totalitarian models, or the model offered by theocratic Islamists figures. For these reasons, Turkish officials believe that establishment and strengthening of ideas and institutions arising from Salafist and jihadist way of thinking and focus on reviving the old form of the Islamic caliphate will lead to the collapse of nation-states in the region and is, therefore, a major rival for Turkey's proposed model.

From the viewpoint of the Turkish layer of the country's identity, the most important issue is the link between recent developments in Iraq and Syria, on the one hand, and the issue of Kurds, as the most strategic security and identity-related problem for Turkey, on the other hand. During recent years, Ankara has been very intent on introducing a new concept of being Turkish, which would also include the Kurdish minority in the country. This process, which has come to be

known as “normalization of the Kurdish problem,” faced a serious challenge due to the sudden breakout of regional developments, which have been described as Arab Spring. In fact, as the issue of Turkey’s Kurds has been desecuritized in a step by step manner, the issue of separatist Kurds has been, on the contrary, greatly securitized. Reasons for this issue include establishment of a semi-independent Kurdish region in the northern part of Iraq as well as creation of independent Kurdish colonies in Syria.

There is also another important issue in this regard: Due to widespread involvement of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in the recent war against the ISIS terrorist group both in Iraq and Syria, Turkey has been finding it increasingly difficult to make a political and military decision about the involvement of Ankara in the war against the ISIS. This issue alone is a powerful sign of the concern that the ruling elite of Turkey has about the effect of the Kurdish fight against the ISIS in increasing the popularity and subsequent activities of separatist Kurdish groups. In the meantime, further expansion of nationalistic and socialistic ideas of the PKK and the Democratic Union Party (PYD) has also stirred a great deal of concern among Turkish officials. Such concern will further increase if Kurds manage to stabilize their position in northern Syria. The Turkish officials are also of the opinion that withdrawal between July and August 2011 of Syria’s security forces from northeastern and northwestern parts of the country and from cities and towns close to the common border between Turkey and Syria, was done with the goal of engaging Turkey in a conflict with Kurds and shifting Ankara’s focus from toppling the Syrian regime.

Attention to identity dimensions of foreign policy interactions of Turkey and other important regional players will help analysts have a more realistic understanding of foreign policy strategies of these players. This understanding will also help better understanding of regional coalitions and rivalry among such countries as Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia. It will specially help analysts have a better grasp of the nature of institutions which would be able to introduce a new regional order in the era that follows the Arab Spring. At the same time, attention to various layers of Turkey’s identity will lead to better understanding of various reasons behind Turkey’s concern about establishment of independent Kurdish political units. It also shows why Turkey is paying so much attention to the need for the establishment of more democratic and broad-based governments in the region, why it criticizes West’s inaction and double standards; why it is concerned about establishment and further strengthening of Salafist and jihadist groups; and why Ankara is so much worried about the expansion of the influence of Shia Muslims in the region, or why it is still in doubt about joining the anti-ISIS coalition.