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Assessment Report

Turkey's Position on the Libyan Revolution

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The Turkish position opposing the mounting international calls to impose a no-fly zone over Libya has led to a degree of apprehension among several international observers concerned with developments in Libya.

Turkey has described the call for a no-fly zone as “unhelpful and fraught with risk.” The Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has declared that “Military intervention by NATO in Libya or any other country would be totally counter-productive.” Unlike the Turkish position, several states, including the UK and France, have supported the no-fly zone while the US position remains unclear, especially in light of the absence of a clear position from other great powers such as China and Russia.

Arab and Western analysts have criticized the Turkish opposition to the no-fly zone, given that Turkey has previously participated in several NATO interventions, such as the intervention in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Afghanistan.

Examination of the current Turkish stance cannot be based on precedents in which Turkey played the role of instigator for international intervention. A scientific approach to the issue entails starting from objective examination of previous Turkish positions, placing them in their historical context while taking the international system, in which the national interests, considered the key determinant of a states' foreign policies, into consideration.

The self-definition and orientation of NATO after the collapse of the Warsaw Pact has formed the starting point for numerous discussions on the subject, particularly with the newfound optimism that accompanied the retreat of military organizations and alliances. NATO's new strategic orientation was spelled out after the 1991 Rome Summit, identifying the Organization's mission within the framework of “maintaining the balance of power in Europe.”

The crisis in Bosnia-Herzegovina reinforced the idea that Europe lacked the internal means to tackle threats to the strategic balance of power within the continent. The idea that the balance of power could not have been altered in Eastern Europe had it not been for NATO military intervention began to take hold. As such, it was necessary to find an internal (European) interventionist role for NATO. This was achieved through the 1995 Dayton Accord, through which NATO became the vehicle for UN intervention.

Furthermore, the intervention in Kosovo came after discussions on the renewal of NATO's strategic mission, especially when the Organization sought, together with the US, to fill the void in the strategic balance that resulted from the end of the Cold War in Central and Western Europe.

Turkey's relations with NATO developed in the context of these post-Cold War transformations, with the emerging and intersecting interests between Turkey and the US, Turkey and the EU, and the US and EU.

Turkey saw in its relation with the US an alternative to its relations with the EU when its negotiations with the latter stalled. Turkey depended on its NATO alignment to develop this relation with the US while the latter saw in Turkey an effective player in the Balkans, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East when primary US policies conflicted with those of European states.

The clearest example of this was NATO's intervention in the Balkans and the resulting international state of affairs in which Turkey attempted to create a balance between Bosnian and Albanian parties based on its perception of the importance of the future these two parties. By harmonizing its interests in this matter with those of the US, especially as they pertained to cooperation in central Asia and the petroleum-rich Caspian Sea, Turkey was able to convince the US to militarily intervene through NATO in Bosnia-Herzegovina and later in Kosovo despite the protests of several European states.

Turkey grew in importance after the attacks of 9/11, as both a key and "Muslim" player in what was known as the "war on terror" in which Turkey successfully adapted to the new realities of the international system in that period, resulting in increased logistical and intelligence cooperation with the United States. Turkey also supported the US course of activating Article 5 of the NATO defense treaty which obliges all NATO members to offer complete support to the state facing external aggression. Turkey also offered the use of its territory and airspace to launch the war on Afghanistan in October 2001.

Turkey's role earned it the appreciation and esteem of the United States which had morally and symbolically benefited from the participation of a Muslim state in the war on Afghanistan, particularly after Turkey contributed approximately 1,200 soldiers to provide assistance to the NATO force. Turkey continues to play this role by offering logistical support and training to the Afghan military and police.

With the coming to power of the Justice and Progress Party in Turkey, the determinants of Turkey's relationship with NATO began to take a new form, particularly in light of Turkey's attempts to define its role within the framework of a "multidimensional" policy in the different geopolitical circles, particularly the Middle Eastern arena which has seen a great deal of activity in the first decade of the 21st century.

The Turkish Position towards the Libyan Revolution

In the first weeks of the Libyan revolution, Turkey was careful not to issue any official position aligning it to either of the two sides. In its treatment of the Libyan crisis, Turkey charted a course based on a principle of "avoiding a reaction." Despite wide support among the Justice and Progress Party's constituency for the February 17 movement, the political and media campaigns against the Gaddafi regime that emerged particularly after the initial massacres of Libyans did not bring about a change in the Justice and Progress Party-controlled government's posture.

The past decade witnessed the first actual shift in Turkish foreign policy away from the western – Atlantic and European – orbit, especially with the occupation of Iraq and the emergence of Turkish security concerns on its southern border. It was from here that Turkey's geostrategic lens

was focused on the Middle East arena as an active one in its (multidimensional) policy. Turkey was thus able to take qualitative steps in developing its relations with the states of the Middle East and North Africa, especially on issues on the level of commercial exchange and economic cooperation with these states with whom Turkey found popular acceptance for various cultural causes.

Turkey's orientation was reflected in its relations with Libya. The volume of trade between the two states reached 9.8 billion dollars in 2010, and Libya announced its intention to invest 100 billion dollars worth of investment in Turkish companies until 2013; they also announced that 15 billion dollars had been invested in Turkish construction companies. Since 2010, 160 Turkish investment projects in Libya have begun implementation.

On the political level, Turkey has engaged in relations with Gaddafi that can be described as historic. Among the important junctures in these relations have been Colonel Gaddafi's stance alongside Turkey during the latter's 1974 intervention in Cyprus, the strengthening of Turkish-Libyan relations during the reign of the Justice and Progress Party, with Libya's invitation of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan as an honorary participant in the 2010 Arab Summit in Sert, where Colonel Gaddafi tried to use the symbolism of Erdogan's presence to promote his tri-dimensional (Arab-African-Islamic) policy.

For this reason, and as a result of Turkey's growing role in North Africa, at the expense of traditional powers such as France, Turkey interpreted NATO's quest for military intervention as an opportunity for great powers – France in particular – to regain their influence in North Africa. This formed a threat to Turkish interests and Turkey's role in this region, especially in light of France's role as the primary challenger to Turkish membership in the EU. This is evidenced by Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Dawud's statement at the end of last year in which he claimed that "we are the new Ottomans," indicating the expanding role of Turkey in North Africa at the expense of the great powers. In language abounding with defiance, on November 24, 2010 Dawud Oglo stated that "I have given my orders to the Turkish foreign ministry that [French Prime Minister Nicola] Sarkozy, whenever he raises his head in Africa, sees a Turkish embassy with a Turkish flag."

The Justice and Progress Party government recognizes that its position vis-à-vis developments in Libya will lead to a negative reaction on the part of the Turkish population who largely support the February 17 revolution, especially given Erdogan's support for the Egyptian revolution as one of the first international leaders to call for Mubarak's resignation, a position that sprang from the massive Turkish popular support for the January 25 revolution. This position was taken despite the likelihood that Egypt's return to its natural role in the Arab world will have an effect on Turkish influence in this region.

The Turkish position on Libya is not likely to be appreciated by Turkish public opinion, which in itself will have repercussions in Turkish political life. Secular parties – the Popular Republican Party (CHP) and the National Movement Party (MHP) in particular – will find in this position a pretext to mobilize public opinion ahead of parliamentary elections in the coming June.

The Justice and Progress Party is accused of disregarding the importance of the Western arena as one that can protect Turkish political and geostrategic interests while supporting “dictatorial” regimes in the Middle Eastern arena.

In sum, the pragmatism of the Turkish position is based on the realism of Turkish foreign policy that seeks, as Western powers do, to balance the potential gains and losses affecting its national interests before producing an interventionist policy towards Libya. Thus, if a no-fly zone is imposed on Libya, Turkey may call for the activation of the “Istanbul Initiative” for cooperation between NATO and the Arab Gulf states, ensuring Arab participation in any NATO intervention in Libya. These Arab states have previously confirmed their willingness to participate without the need to return to the Istanbul agreement.

There can be no doubt that the Turkish government's current position towards Colonel Gaddafi and the revolution in Libya has damaged Turkey's image at the popular level in the Arab world, a retreat that contrasts with the significant progress made during the premiership of Erdogan himself.