

Turkey's engagement with its neighborhood: A "synthetic" and multi-dimensional look at Turkey's foreign policy transformation

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Abstract

Against the back ground of the uprisings in the Arab world a number of prominent personalities in Europe as well as the Arab world have been drawing attention to the need to learn from Turkey. There are even those who argue that the EU should pay closer attention to Turkey's capacity to be an inspiration for reform in the Arab world and that when reforming the EU's "flawed neighborhood policy" greater attention should be paid for developing projects "that could involve the EU and Turkey working together". What explains the growing awareness of the Turkish model, independent of whether the model is applicable or not? What is it that renders Turkey visible to those seeking or demanding reform in the Arab world? What are the channels/modalities through which this model is diffused or transmitted?

This paper will argue that this is at least partly a function of Turkey's "new" foreign policy and especially of Turkey's growing engagement of its neighborhood. Considerable attention has been devoted to discussing the transformation of Turkish foreign policy from being a "coercive regional power" to a "benign one". However, what seems to be missing in the literature is an appreciation and understanding of the larger picture that drives Turkey's ever deepening engagement of its neighborhood. It is this deepening of engagement that is attracting attention to Turkey. A synthetic look at different dimensions of Turkey's engagement with its neighborhood, be it movement of people, civil society interactions and economic exchanges, can enable one to gain a better understanding of both the broader context within which Turkey's foreign policy is changing and the precise modalities through which this transformation is taking place. Such a "thick description" can also provide insights in terms of the assessing the limits and prospects of Turkey's transformative impact in its neighborhood. This transformative

impact is important because it offers a range of opportunities from assisting neighboring countries, including the Arab world, to reform and modernize economically as well as politically to nudging the neighborhood to seek greater interdependence, dialogue and cooperation. This would be promising in terms of “win-win” outcomes for Turkey, the EU and the region. Such an interdependent and integrated neighborhood around Turkey could unleash economic, social and political processes that may eventually lead to a “democratic peace” even if it might be in the very distant future. However, a number of tough challenges from reinvigorating democratization in Turkey and revitalizing EU-Turkish relations to stubborn regional conflicts would have to be addressed. Governments as well as civil society, academia and the think-tank world ought to start think about what to do with these challenges.