Middle East Regional Security Challenges: The View from Turkey

On November 13, 2013, Memduh Karakullukçu, President and Vice Chair of the Global Relations Forum in Istanbul, Turkey, spoke about “Middle East Regional Security Challenges: The View from Turkey” at the Academy’s Distinguished Speaker Lunch and Roundtable Discussion. The following is an edited transcript of his presentation.

The economic vision for Turkey’s regional politics in the last decade has been about ensuring stability and increasing trade with our neighbors. Turkey’s growth model benefited from the stability in the region, which helped our exports and our economic growth during a time of crisis in our traditional export markets.

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Introduction

Because events, disputes, and rapprochement come and go very fast in my region, any snapshot I give today will have a very short expiration date. Just a month ago, Turkey’s and Iraq’s central governments were at loggerheads. And now, after a recent visit by our minister of foreign affairs, the discourse has rapidly shifted and may shift back again. Syria has so many factions, and their alliances and animosities are so complex and in flux, that any facts I can offer will be either inaccurate or of very short-term relevance. The internal dynamics of the Kurds are equally complex. In the last few days, we learned that the Iraqi Kurdish leader, Mr. Barzani, will meet with the Turkish Prime Minister in Diyarbakır, Turkey, and that the Syrian Kurds and the Kurdish political party in Turkey are unhappy about this meeting. And this list of incessant twists and turns in the region goes on.

So rather than imposing on you the details of the never-ending shifts of the Middle East and trying to decipher them in their minutiae, let me take a more distant view and share how I am trying to make sense of it all.

Three conceptual models guide my thinking and analysis of the region as I watch the events unfold. The first relates to the internal dynamics of the Arab revolt. The second focuses on the role of the United States in the region. And the third concerns the Turkish role in the region.

Dynamics of the Arab Revolt

When the Arab revolts started, the question that preoccupied my mind most was whether this would be a “security” decade or an “economic and social development” decade, and what would determine that. At the core of the changes that we have been seeing is the gap between society’s, especially the youth’s, expectations and the delivered reality about life standards and economic prosperity.

The gap was probably there for a long time but the clear and vocal social expression of that expectation is the novelty in the region. Before this forceful expression, we simply did not know the magnitude even though the expectations had been accumulating over the years. What happened with the Arab revolts is that we now know beyond any doubt that the expectation gap is there, and the odds are it will be an enduring characteristic of the region for some time. How that gap between social expectations and delivery is managed will thus be the key to the region’s evolution.

I look at that gap – how it is evolving, whether it is narrowing or broadening – to project where we are heading. If it had been managed well and smoothly, this could have been a development decade. Instead, I think this will end up being a security, or rather an insecurity decade.

Sound and good solutions to addressing the gap require significant capital injection into the region, as indigenous growth rates and savings rates are bound to be low for
some time. If the world had found a way to channel capital into the region while gradually improving the local business environment, these two dynamics could have reinforced each other and I think we could have managed the gap peacefully. Alternatively or in parallel, we could have also economic agenda and garner public support at least from one side of the polarized society. If they cannot close the expectations gap because they do not have the financial/economic wherewithal to do so, politically there aren’t really many other viable alternatives. The scenario of offsetting or substituting the alternative paths cannot be contained, they lead to internal turmoil, erosion of internal security, and, possibly, the erosion of interstate security.

So, yes, I feel this decade is turning out to be a decade of insecurity. Of course, one needs to calibrate this framework for different countries. In places where sectarianism was already deeply ingrained, like Syria or Iraq, you start with a different basis. There it is a short step to instability if you don’t manage the whole process well. In places like Egypt and Tunisia, the fluctuations of instability can be contained for some time but not forever. This is where we are now.

Where was Turkey in all this? I have heard the Turkish minister of foreign affairs many times clearly articulating a regional development vision, which was aspirational and sincere. The economic vision for Turkey’s regional politics in the last decade has been about ensuring stability and increasing trade with our neighbors. Turkey’s growth model benefited from the stability in the region, which helped our exports and our economic growth during a time of crisis in our traditional export markets.

When the revolts began in the region, the Turkish hope was that these countries would be integrated into the world economy through democratic structures and that Turkey would take an active part in the process. Implicit in that belief was the assumption that our Western partners would not let the region slide into the state it is in today.

One can argue that was a high stakes gamble or an unrealistic assessment. When the region took a turn toward sectarianism, authoritarianism, and instability, Turkey was caught somewhat off guard. Arguably, everyone was hoping that somebody else would pick up the tab, so probably we were all caught off guard when nobody in the end did. In any event, Turkish foreign policy has been trying to manage the slide into unknown territory.

The transition from U.S. engagement in global affairs to U.S. selective engagement in global affairs will not be easy. We have entered a phase where the United States and the rest of the world will have to develop and crystallize an understanding of that separation and, therefore, the U.S. role in the world.

sought ways to manage the expectation side of the gap by providing a long-term road map that could smooth out and moderate the intensity of the demands over a longer horizon. That would have removed some of the pressure.

Early on, there were some encouraging signals from senior figures in D.C. in the direction of injecting capital. Unfortunately, that did not materialize. And the Deauville process, through which the Western governments and some regional countries could inject capital into these economies, did not deliver very much.

Since the expectation-delivery gap is not being narrowed, the internal social and political dynamics of these countries will inevitably dictate their own outcomes. One alternative is for the political leadership to change the agenda from a focus on economic concerns to a focus on polarizing identity politics, which can be as an equally potent social/political force. By magnifying identity polarization and the associated demands that come with it through religion, sectarianism, and ethnicity – political leadership can shift the attention away from the impossible economic agenda with magnified identity politics is arguably what we observed in Egypt after the 2012 presidential election.

But the path of identity politics is difficult to sustain because the social frustration with the unresolved economic expectation-delivery gap is compounded by the disappointment of social segments that fall on the wrong side of identity politics. That leaves a third alternative for managing the gap, the more brutal one of simply suppressing it through renewed authoritarianism, which is the traditional approach in the region.

The problem with identity politics or authoritarianism is that they do not appear to be stable if we assume that the heightened demands of the society are there to last. Once the social demand is there, one might be able to play for time through identity politics or by suppressing the public’s demand. At some point, however, it catches up with you. What is more, the two solutions of identity politics and authoritarianism create and deepen fractures that make the original problem even more intractable. Eventually, if the consequences of these two
The republic’s traditional foreign policy has been to keep a healthy distance from Middle Eastern affairs, and the current government has been criticized for diverging from that position in some circles. My reading is that it was an error in calibrating the model I just outlined. Decision-makers hoped the region would rapidly move on from the benign development trajectory. In hindsight, the likelihood that the good outcome would prevail was probably always lower than what most of us thought or hoped.

The region is now fluctuating between identity politics and authoritarianism. In some countries the situation has moved beyond this and turned into a true security crisis. In others, the fluctuation continues. But why did the developmental trajectory fail in the first place and can it be rescued?

For starters, the expectation/delivery gap was probably unrealistically high from the outset, reflecting years of frustrated expectations. Reducing the gap through economic growth would require very high levels of capital, which were not forthcoming at a time of European and American financial constraints.

For Egypt and Tunisia, the Western actors arguably made a political miscalculation. Political leaders explicitly or implicitly decided that the wiser course was to wait for these societies to stabilize before embarking on any investment. The problem is that the gap was real, intense, and impatient. We did not have the luxury of waiting. Social dynamics would find other less than ideal ways to deal with the gap and they did.

Can we get back on track? I suspect that the expectations of the population are today being reconsidered, recalculated, and reduced as the societies live through this horrible turmoil. So if and when the region and the world are ready to take on a strategy of integrating these economies, the process will probably start with lowered expectations.

The U.S. Role

It is widely accepted and expected that the United States will rationalize its global engagements. Normally these decisions are cyclical and can easily be reversed with a new administration. That could be true here as well. But the changes this time seem to be a bit more structural and permanent, driven by political and economic priorities and constraints.

The implications of this shift are still not clear, and I think it will take time before we all adjust to its ramifications. The prioritization will probably require a separation of global security challenges between issues that relate to the workings of the global order and issues of a more regional nature. The global threats, which I will call the contour agenda, will almost certainly continue to receive the attention of the United States. On the other hand, the odds are that the United States will gradually try to extricate itself from the regional/local conflicts.

If the change is indeed structural and U.S. engagement in the world continues to be consolidated, rationalized, and prioritized, the implications of the shift need to be considered.

The problem with focusing on contour issues and letting go of the regional and the local is that the distinction between the sets is not clear. This situation was amply demonstrated by the chemical weapons problem in Syria. For a while we thought Syria could be formulated as a regional issue. When chemical weapons came into the picture, it became a global contour issue.

Moreover, actors who wish to gain U.S. support or who want to bring the United States into the game have all the incentives to blur the distinction. So the transition from U.S. engagement in global affairs to U.S. selective engagement in global affairs will not be easy. We have entered a phase where the United States and the rest of the world will have to develop and crystallize an understanding of that separation and, therefore, the U.S. role in the world. This phase will involve uncertainty and the confusion, disagreements, and disputes that go along with it.

This dynamic is already playing itself out in the Middle East. Certain parts of the region embed so much uncertainty as it is that the incremental uncertainty introduced by the changing U.S. role may be simply too much to bear. This is true for the Persian Gulf and for Mashriq.

Of course, as a Turk my threat perceptions may be conditioned to view the existing uncertainty as intolerably high in the region. And it may be the case that unless the United States tolerates these regional turmoils, it may never move to a new regional disengagement mode. This is precisely why it will be an uncertain period in everybody’s security and foreign policy calculations. This ambiguity is one of the key trends underlying the current picture; it shapes the sectarian calculations, and it shapes national security calculations and actions.

The geometry of trade interdependence is an important element that will shape Turkey’s thinking and thus the long-term stabilization of the region and its integration with the world.
If the United States successfully extricates itself and limits itself to contour imperatives, we will still need pillars of stability to anchor the region. Turkey, like everybody else, is struggling with the change in the U.S. role and the new demands that this shift will place on others. The Syrian situation, where Turkey expected and desired stronger U.S. engagement, is to some degree a reflection of that struggle. In Iraq, the U.S. withdrawal has created a context where balancing the relations with the central government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has become more relevant and complex.

The bottom line is that the reformulation of U.S. engagement appears to be a real process, which is creating incremental uncertainty in the region. Either we assume that this is a transition cost to a new equilibrium, which will be painful, or we decide that the Middle East cannot sustain this extra transition burden and that the resulting fracture and conflicts will inevitably turn into a contour issue for the United States. If it is the latter, the rationalization of the U.S. role in the Middle East may have to be postponed.

My hope is that the debate about U.S. engagement in or extrication from the region will be undertaken candidly with its allies rather than presented as a friendly fait accompli. We need to sit down and talk about it clearly. This is not happening. Transactional and immediate issues are taking precedence over the broader debate.

The Turkish Role

If the U.S. role in the region will be rationalized and if Turkey is potentially one of the key anchors of the trajectory toward integrating the region with the world, we have to take a realistic assessment of what Turkey can do, what it actually does, and what it represents.

Turkey’s economy has a regional bias. Trade with the region has grown rapidly in the last decade, with exports increasing from around 10 percent to nearly 30 percent of all Turkish exports. However, in recent months, exports have come down and, given the volatility, may continue to decline.

Nonetheless, the rapid shift toward the region has created increased Turkish aspirations and economic expectations. Our imagination for future economic growth is much more tied to the region than before. Fifteen years ago our aspirations were predominantly tied to the European market. Though that market is still our largest market, it has decreased as a relative percentage of overall Turkish exports.

On the upside, this rebalancing has served Turkey well after the global recession because it has allowed it to diversify away from Europe. As a result, the stability of the region has become not only a political prior-

The other element of economic geometry is energy. Turkey depends on Russia and Iran for 80 percent of its liquid natural gas (LNG) supplies. These supplies are not substitutable, because they are pipeline delivered and there is not sufficient LNG redundancy for us to be able to drop or replace one supplier with another. That interdependence also constrains Turkey’s outlook and unavoidably shapes reflexes vis-à-vis the region.

If Turkey is to play a role in the stabilization of this area and its economic progress, how we formulate its trade orientation and energy dependence will be critically important. From a strategic perspective, I think for Turkey to become a key actor in stabilizing and integrating this region with the world, Turkey has to be less regionally situated and more globally oriented.

If we want Turkey to have a substantive role in stabilizing and integrating this region with the world, it has to be free from regionally constrained hopes and concerns. A globally oriented Turkey will have a much calmer and much freer hand in dealing with the problems of the region.
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When thinking about Turkey’s role in and outlook for the region, one could conceivably argue that it would be better to maintain and deepen the current geometry of symmetric interdependence between Turkey and the region to ensure Turkey’s sustained engagement with the region. But after watching how the internal and external dynamics have unfolded as Turkey entangles itself with the region, I don’t think this alternative will serve the purpose. Regional dependence simply constrains, distorts, and burdens the Turkish outlook.

A geometry where Turkey’s orientation and economic stakes are global is likely to serve as a much more effective framework for the region’s stabilization and economic integration with the world. A regional actor that is structurally drawn into the intractable regional tensions and calculations can hardly serve as a force for constructive change.

Conclusion

The demand for better life standards in the region seems to be the new reality in the Middle East. Turkey has a positive regional vision for the Middle East but was caught off guard after it, along with others, misjudged the timing and uncertainty of changing U.S. engagement and the evolution of the crises. If we want Turkey to have a substantive role in stabilizing and integrating this region with the world, it has to be free from regionally constrained hopes and concerns. A globally oriented Turkey will have a much calmer and much freer hand in dealing with the problems of the region.