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Making sense of Turkey's cautious reaction to power shifts in Tunisia: Turkey adjusts its foreign policy in Europe's southern neighbourhood

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SWP Comment

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Making Sense of Turkey's Cautious Reaction to Power Shifts in Tunisia

Turkey Adjusts Its Foreign Policy in Europe's Southern Neighbourhood

Nebahat Tanrıverdi Yaşar and Hürkan Aşlı Aksoy

Ankara adopted notably toned-down language towards Tunisian President Kaïs Saïed's power grab and avoided calling it a coup, although it considers the course of events as a potential threat that could endanger its policies towards North Africa. In fact, Turkey revised its approach to Tunisia after secular parties became more prominent in Tunisian politics following the 2014 elections. This policy adjustment consists of developing a balanced network of relations by reaching out to secular parties on the one hand, but retaining close ties with the Islamist Ennahda party on the other hand. To this end, Ankara is giving weight to defence diplomacy and soft power. This tactful approach is in line with Turkey's efforts to strengthen its geo-strategic and geo-economic ties with the Maghreb countries and overlaps with on-going normalisation efforts between Ankara and Arab capitals. But this approach is limited to a pragmatic policy adjustment. Germany and other European states should see this as an opportunity to encourage regional de-escalation and contribute to a constructive regional dialogue.

On 25 July 2021, Tunisian President Kaïs Saïed sacked the government, suspended the parliament, and assumed executive, legislative, and judicial powers. The largest party, Ennahda, together with other political parties accused the president of staging a coup and called for popular support to restore the parliament's functions. However, many Tunisians — exhausted by a deteriorating economic situation that worsened with the pandemic — took to the streets and celebrated the measures taken by the president.

Surprisingly, Turkey reacted more cautiously than it had when the 2013 military coup in Egypt ousted President Mohamed Morsi. Initially, representatives of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) heavily criticised President Saïed's move. AKP Spokesperson Ömer Çelik, Parliament Speaker Mustafa Şentop, and AKP Deputy Chairman Numan Kurtulmuş all described the developments in Tunisia as a coup against the constitutional system and pronounced that Turkey is against any kind of coup. In contrast, Turkish President Recep

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Tayyip Erdoğan adopted a rather soft tone after talking to the Tunisian President and only called for a return to the continuation of the activities of the parliament. In a similar vein, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a diplomatically cautious message, which avoided using the term “coup” and called for the re-establishment of democratic legitimacy. This shows that Ankara is avoiding any confrontation that could potentially risk its relations with Tunisia. Turkey even stayed silent when President Saïed declared on 22 September that he will rule by decree, which seriously undermines democratic gains and structures in Tunisia. However, it is not the first time Turkey opted for measured rhetoric in its policy towards Tunisia.

A Changing Political Landscape in Tunisia

The rise to power of the Islamist party Ennahda in the 2011 elections motivated the AKP to reshape its Tunisian policy according to its political affinity with the party. This post-Arab Uprising policy was in line with Ankara’s regional strategy, which mostly focused on forming partnerships with Muslim Brotherhood-aligned political parties. These years marked the most intense period of diplomatic visits between Turkey and Tunisia, which resulted in the signing of a set of cooperation agreements. Ankara reaped the fruits of the close relations during the Ennahda-led Troika government (2012–2013). For instance, in 2011, the two countries signed a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, and in 2012 established a High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council for security and defence. The same year, Turkey’s leading cultural diplomacy institutions – the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) and the Yunus Emre Institute – opened their Tunisian offices. The diplomatic momentum also enhanced economic relations. Turkey and Tunisia had already concluded a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in 2005, but

the process of lifting trade barriers on many goods was fully completed in 2014.

But the 2014 elections – both presidential and parliamentary – changed the balance in Tunisian politics in favour of secularist parties and proved that the political landscape is multi-polar and consists of a polyphony of voices. Secular parties, together with civil society, enjoy solid popular support, which in turn requires a constant search for political consensus. This necessitated Turkey to develop a wider network of social and political actors, including secular forces, and led to a shift in Turkey’s approach to Tunisia.

Another dynamic that pushed Turkey to reshape its strategy was the increasing criticism from Tunisia about Ankara’s regional policies and its implications for Tunisia. The most apparent critique was the issue of Tunisian fighters in Syria and Libya, which caused security concerns in Tunisia. In 2015, then-Foreign Minister Taieb Baccouche accused Ankara of facilitating the transit of fighters from Libya to Syria and Iraq, where thousands of Tunisian citizens have joined the ranks of jihadist groups. This issue still shapes discussions about Turkey’s role today, since the increase in the number of Tunisian foreign fighters in Libya – where Turkey intervened militarily in 2020 – continues to worry Tunisian authorities. In addition, the Ennahda Party is now even more under the spotlight because it is accused of receiving foreign funding, not preventing political violence and corruption, and having close relations with Turkey beyond official diplomatic channels. The warm relations of the party’s co-founder and Parliament Speaker, Rached Ghannouchi, with the AKP especially stir a lot of controversy in Tunisia. Ghannouchi faced massive criticism after travelling to meet Erdoğan without informing the relevant authorities, which was perceived by his opponents in Tunisia as overstepping his prerogatives as the speaker of the parliament.

Economic Ties at Risk

A changing political landscape also had repercussions on economic relations between Tunisia and Turkey. First, the increase in trade volume between the two countries slowed after the 2014 elections. Turkey's exports increased from \$714 million in 2010 to \$1.029 billion in 2013; since then it has remained below this volume. The level of Turkey's engagement in the Tunisian economy is still low compared to the levels with other states in the region. For instance, in 2020, Turkey's export to Egypt (\$3.136 billion) Morocco (\$2.057 billion), Libya (\$1.653 billion), and Algeria (\$1.449 billion) were larger than those to Tunisia (\$928 million).

Second, Turkey's economic role in Tunisia has been the source of domestic debate since the trade balance is in favour of Turkey. Trade has been increasing every year, making Turkey the third-largest trade deficit partner for Tunisia after China and Italy. Tunisia imposed new customs duties on Turkish products for the first time in January 2018 after Tunisia's trade deficit with Turkey grew from approximately \$417.80 million in 2010 to around \$766.67 million in 2017. Yet, the measures taken by the Tunisian authorities were not enough to reduce the gap. The two countries have been negotiating to modify the terms of the FTA, while domestic calls for curtailing Turkish imports has put pressure on the Tunisian authorities to review, if not cancel, the FTA with Turkey. Ankara thus considers its economic relations with Tunisia to be fragile.

Turkey's Balancing Act

As a result, Turkey had to design a more balanced policy in its relations with Tunisia. After the Tunisian secular party Nidaa Tounes won the 2014 elections, Ankara showed its willingness to deepen relations under the new president and government led by seculars. President Erdoğan congratulated Beji Caid Essebsi — the founder of

Nidaa Tounes — for his victory in the presidential election. And former Turkish President Abdullah Gül visited him in December 2015. In May 2016, Tunisian Prime Minister Habib Essid came to Turkey.

The diplomatic efforts to forge ties with the new leading political forces intensified, especially in security cooperation. Turkey reformulated its engagement in Tunisia more around the security needs of the country by aiming to boost Turkey's role in Tunisia's military modernisation and arms market. During the visit of President Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu to Tunisia in December 2017, the two countries signed a series of agreements, which paved the way for the transfer of technology, joint production in Tunisia, as well as Turkish military training of the Tunisian military and security personnel. In 2020, the Tunisian Ministry of Defence signed a contract with Turkish Aerospace Industries for the purchase of ANKA-S medium altitude/long-endurance unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). The contract includes the delivery of three ANKA-S UAVs, three ground control stations, and the training of 52 Tunisian Air Force personnel. Tunisia also purchased armoured vehicles, tanks, and electro-optical systems from Turkey in late 2020. A significant amount of this purchase was financed by the Export Credit Bank of Turkey (Eximbank) in the form of interest-free loans. Tunisia has become Turkey's largest buyer of armoured vehicles — nearly 400 — in the Maghreb.

Turkey's balancing act is not limited to improving security cooperation but also includes building up secular cultural diplomacy in Tunisia by taking Tunisian political fault lines into account. While TIKA, the Yunus Emre Institute, and the Maarif Foundation focus on cultural, humanitarian, and developmental projects, the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) — despite playing an increasingly significant role in Turkish foreign policy — has a very limited reach in Tunisia and has only organised a few meetings between the religious authorities of both countries.

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Limitations of Turkey's Policy Adjustment

The goal of Turkey's engagement is to strengthen its geostrategic and geo-economic ties with the Maghreb countries. Ankara is thus eager to cooperate with the regional countries on economic and security matters. Turkey's balancing act in Tunisia reflects its interest-driven policy in Europe's southern neighbourhood. Yet, Turkey's policy adjustment in Tunisia should not be considered a substantial shift in its regional policy, but rather a pragmatic one.

First, Turkey faces a dilemma in its balancing act. On the one hand, Turkey's ruling AKP continues to maintain close relations with Islamist Ennahda, but on the other hand, it is portraying Turkey as a bipartisan and reliable regional ally that offers support in strategic areas such as security. Secular forces in Tunisia perceive Turkey's support for Ennahda as an interference in the country's domestic affairs in favour of Ennahda. This dilemma hinders a substantial change in Turkey's regional policy.

The second limitation is Turkey's lack of allies. Turkey's relations with its partners in the West as well as in the region have been experiencing ups and downs in recent years. Turkey has lately begun to deescalate its relations with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates and launched a charm offensive towards the West to repair deteriorated relations. Turkey's readjustment policy suggests that Ankara is aware of the need for change in its regional policy. Though the effects of this normalisation strategy are limited, and the strategy should be supplemented with a cooperative framework to contribute to regional stability.

Opportunities for Europe

Turkey's toned-down language and search for a new balance in its foreign policy with the momentum of regional normalisation provide a permissive environment for Germany and its European partners to cooperate with Turkey in de-escalating tensions in the region. For their part, European partners should overcome their reluctance to collaborate with Turkey in the Mediterranean. Europe should thus capitalise on this opportunity and encourage Turkey's diplomatic approach. The first window of opportunity to cooperate was that Turkey's official response in calling for the restoration of democratic legitimacy in Tunisia was in line with the European Union (EU) and its member states. This discursive realignment between the EU and Turkey would be a good starting point to find common ground in strengthening stability in the Mediterranean.

With the decreasing interest of the United States in the Mediterranean, Europe's role for the region has become even more important. If the EU aims to influence and reshape regional dynamics in its southern neighbourhood, policymakers should engage more politically and economically to avoid the risks associated with regional polarisation and enmity.

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