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The Obama Administration Must Help Strengthen and Support Turkish Influence in the Middle East

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LIANNA NICOLE FARUOLO, JUL 1 2011

Elliot Abrams claims the Obama administration has failed to pursue an appropriate Syrian policy in response to the crackdowns conducted by the President Bashar al-Assad regime.^[1] The U.S. Middle Eastern policy, according to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton^[2], has been one of not directly involving the U.S. in discussions regarding the region. Rather, the U.S. listens to the “behind the scenes” discussions between states such as Egypt, Syria, and Turkey as these actors attempt to find solutions. As a result of this policy, Abrams argues the Obama administration has effectively set a precedent which disregards the nation’s moral values. However, to most, the Arab Spring represents a region-wide rally for independence and liberty. Therefore, one could argue the Obama administration may very well be doing exactly what is necessary- allow the Middle East a chance to sort out its own problems. But certainly for a situation so complex and dire, this policy is not sufficient.

In my opinion, the administration’s policy is not necessarily a failed one as Mr. Abrams suggests, but rather an incomplete one. In addition to listening to the region, the Obama administration must pursue a stronger policy which includes, but is not limited to, talking with and assisting the “neighborhood people” to find effective diplomatic solutions. By “neighborhood people”, I specifically refer to Turkey. Consistent with its increasingly independent role in international affairs, Turkey has taken a prominent role in the Arab Spring and the Obama administration ought to encourage an even stronger Turkish presence in Middle Eastern diplomatic affairs.

With turmoil and unrest overshadowing all else in the Middle East, Turkey is one of the only stable and reliable partners of the West. Israel is in no position to mediate and lead diplomatic affairs in her own backyard. States such as Iraq and Iran do not officially recognize her existence and many Muslim states, such as Syria, hold limited or no diplomatic relations with Israel. Saudi Arabia, while having the monetary resources to buy certain degrees of influence, does not possess its own sufficient military power to give weight to high demands. Finally, the region’s traditional power player, Egypt, continues its struggle to regain domestic stability. This leaves Turkey and Iran as the last standing – and most capable- regional power players. We can all agree on which state the Obama administration would rather have wielding the most regional influence.

The changing nature of world affairs, especially in the Middle East, has encouraged Turkish leaders to become more involved in regional affairs. Furthermore, Turkey has been seeking new and independent policy strategies as their national interests change with times. As Sinan Ulgen points out, Turkey is no longer living in the midst of a Cold War where a defense guarantee by the West is one of its highest priorities.^[3] Instead, Turkey is now able to broaden its diplomatic reach and enhance its soft power.

In recent years, Turkey has enjoyed several important and successful diplomatic exchanges, not the least of which being the 2009 skillful mediation between Bosnia and Serbia^[4] conducted by Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu.^[5] However, Claire Berlinski describes Turkish diplomacy as being built on grand fantasies of Ottoman-style prowess. Using Turkish-Iranian relations as a stark example, Ms. Berlinski claims AKP policymakers have exhibited bouts of “delusional optimism” and “overconfidence”. James Traub adds to this analysis, pointing to several missteps which resulted in diplomatic tensions, especially with the U.S.^[6]

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Regardless of Turkey's perceived or actual diplomatic skill, a stronger Turkish position on Syria is expected after the recent parliamentary re-election of the AKP. As a result, some feel it will only be a matter of weeks before the take-down of the Assad regime.^[7] However, this cannot be done without the guidance of American policymakers and diplomatic experience.

Those in "the free world" are hoping today's devastating uprisings and subsequent crackdowns will result into blossoming new democracies. Many expect this for Syria. For example, Elliot Abrams claims there already exists a comprehensive framework to found a new Syrian democracy upon.^[8] Should Abrams' and others' expectations prove to be a coming reality, American policymakers must fully recognize and utilize Turkey's indispensable role as a model and supporter for successful democracies in Muslim societies.

With thousands of Syrian refugees crossing into Turkey's borders, we can expect defectors from government and security forces among them. Fantasies aside, this could prove to be a strategically significant situation. Turkish and Western policymakers might recognize this as an opportunity to help foster a Syrian democracy- even if it is done a few meters outside of Syrian territory.

This potential to help create a viable democracy out of the rubble of an oppressive authoritarian regime is the strongest and most important argument for changing U.S. Syrian policy from one of "listening" to a one of guiding and supporting the regime's diplomatic players- especially Turkey. By doing so, the Obama Administration may be able to pursue a more effective policy when dealing with not only Syria, but other problem states as well. Thus, the Obama administration could potentially meet the nation's highest policy goals of supporting democracy and its principles worldwide, projecting U.S. power through diplomatic means with Turkey and others, and ultimately (hopefully) achieve peace and prosperity for her allies and neighbors.

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Lianna Nicole Faruolo recently graduated with a B.A. in International Relations from the State University of New York at New Paltz. Her focuses are on the international political economy, conflict and security studies, and developing areas. She speaks Spanish and is currently studying Mandarin in Taipei at the Mandarin Training Center at the National Taiwan Normal University.

^[1] Elliot Abrams, "Syria: Follow the Region?," Council on Foreign Relations: Think Tank, June 12, 2011, <http://blogs.cfr.org/abrams/2011/06/12/syria-follow-the-region/>.

^[2] Hillary Clinton, interviewed by Chris Maroleng, Interview on Africa 360, June 11, 2011, Lusaka Zambia, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2011/06/165941.htm>.

^[3] Sinan Ülgen, "NATO and the New Turkey," Project Syndicate, June 14, 2011, <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/ulgen1/English>.

^[4] James Traub, "Turkey's Rules," The New York Times, January 20, 2011, www.nytimes.com/2011/01/23/magazine/23davutoglu-t.html.

^[5] Claire Berlinski, interviewed by Michael J. Totten, "Ottoman Fantasies," Pajamas Media, June 5, 2011, pajamasmedia.com/michaeltotten/2011/06/05/ottoman-fantasies/.

^[6] James Traub, "Turkey's Rules," The New York Times, January 20, 2011, www.nytimes.com/2011/01/23/magazine/23davutoglu-t.html.

^[7] M.K. Bhadrakumar, "More to Syria Than Meets the Eye — Major Power Battle Between Kremlin and US Underway, And the Stakes Are High," Asia Times, June 14, 2011, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/MF14Ak02.html.

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Elliot Abrams, "After Assad, Democracy in Syria" Council on Foreign Relations: Think Tank, June 10, 2011, blogs.cfr.org/abrams/2011/06/10/after-assad-democracy-in-syria/.