

Changes the Arab Uprisings Promise for the MENA and Turkey

Sema Kalaycioglu

About the author: Professor of Economics, Yildiz Technical University (E) and TASAM(Turkish Asian Center for Strategic Studies)

(Turkey Tribune Photo)(Credit: Turkey Tribune)

Political regimes in the MENA had long employed oppressive measures to keep economically deprived and socially excluded peoples of the region, whose expectations of higher living standards, access to jobs, food, education and health services have hardly ever been fulfilled under control until uprisings brought tensions on surface from Tunisia to Syria and from Yemen to Libya.

In this paper I would like to evaluate, the current and prospective impact of changes from economic, social and political perspectives. I will also try to pinpoint whether the MENA uprisings could possibly change trends towards modernization instead of traditional structures; Promote regional cooperation instead of constant confrontations within and between regional countries.

I would like to analyse what Arab Spring means for Turkey in this paper.

Resources and Limitations

Peoples of geographies, where the flame of uprisings were kindled one after another chanted the same desire to eradicate corrupt and oppressive practices of officials, end political favouritism and provide employment opportunities for the unemployed masses. However, from Tunisia to Yemen and from Egypt to Syria all countries have more limitations than resources to count on than opportunities at the first instant. On the top of the limitations exists the limitations human resources constitute major challenges for the desired and promised change. The following table (Table 1) shows the human resources and employment performances of countries of the Arab uprisings.

Natural resources, physical, legal and institutional infrastructures also causes for the dilemma countries of revolt have to face and also constitute additional layers of impediment for change, unless they are immediately changed. Among the uprising countries, Egypt has the highest, Bahrain has the lowest populations. Depending on the income distribution efficiency per capita income values may not mean much even if the corresponding figures of per capita income in Libya and Bahrain may be higher than the ones in Syria and Yemen. Inequalities present an important limitation for social harmony and peace, as well as opportunities of access for health and education, which enhance the levels of human resources.

Internal resource limitations both in terms of human resources and infrastructure constitute obstacles for business opportunities to external economic actors, which may otherwise contribute to unblocking of prosperity challenges.

Table 1: Human Development Performances of the Arab Spring Countries 2011: A Comparison with the Developed and Other Regional Countries

Ind.	Yemen	Iraq	Syria	Palestine (WB&G aza)	Egypt	Jordan	Tunis.	Libya	Bahrain
HDI	154	132	119	114	113	95	94	64	42
Life Exp.	65.5	69	75.9	72.8	73.2	73.4	74.5	74.8	75.1
M. Years of School.	0.310	0.491	0.534	0.674	0.560	0.710	0.645	0.731	0.747
GNI PPP	2213	3177	4243	2656	5269	5300	7281	12637	28169
Inequality.	0.312	-	0.503	-	0.489	0.565	0.523	-	-
Poverty	0.283	0.059	0.474	0.005	0.024	0.008	0.293	-	-
Gender In.	0.769	0.579	0.021	-	0.599	0.456	-	0.314	0.288
Savings/GNI	-	-	-	-	3.1	3	14.6	-	10.6
Populat.	25 mil.	32 mil.	21 mil.	4.1 mil.	82.5 mil.	6.3 mil.	10.5 mil.	9.6 mil.	1.3 mil.
Unemployment % *	35	18.0	9.2	37.8+1 7.2	11.9	12.0	13.3	13.0	15.0

Source: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/> *

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_unemployment_rate

For all countries, which went under change following the uprisings by and large the following additional limitations also drastically apply:

- Lack of understanding for work ethics and professional ethics and even business ethics to induce the desired levels of progress.
- **From Yemen to Tunisia and from Syria to Egypt the MENA region depends on imported food to feed its people.**
- **Cereal imports are constantly rising, as economies of the region becoming weaker imports are becoming more expensive as well.**
- **Since 2008 one of the most important root causes of problems in Bahrain, Yemen, Jordan, Egypt and even Morocco is about food. “Bread riots” are likely to come back to countries if not to the whole regions soon.** There are food shortages because most Arab Spring countries are net food importers.
- Food subsidies do not function. It increases the budget deficits, generates waste and malnutrition.
- The continuing domestic political instability despite the toppling down of old regimes
- Complicated legal systems and still unobserved attempt to start reforms
- The heavy toll of bureaucracy erect
- Economic problems in extra-regional partners, which prevent uninterrupted financial support supply for especially Egypt and Tunisia
- Ideologically oriented financial aid provided by some Gulf countries, which tend to introduce deeper rifts to social segments in the aftermath of regime changes

Unless all those above mentioned limitations are overcome without falling into ideological, religious, sectarian and ethnic fragmentations neither Egypt, nor Tunisia, nor Libya, Bahrain Yemen and eventually Syria may find new paths for change and modernization. Current circumstances prove to be anything but optimistic.

The political fragmentation can be transformed into peace only if political stability is resumed and economic recovery followed with equal opportunities provided to each fragments in the countries of the Arab uprisings.

To accomplish an economic breakthrough internal resource limitations both in terms of human resources and infrastructure must be overcome. Those countries, which regained relative stability, must start launching reforms to overcome fiscal, administrative, legal and institutional problems. Taking into account that there are also countries in the region, which had been and have still been under economic sanctions, there are limits to what the Arab uprising may offer to countries in question.

It will not be easy to see drastic changes towards modernization and progress as a result of the Arab uprisings at least in the short and the medium-run. However, if somehow civil unrests and confrontations end without falling into the traps of sectarian civil strife, destructions due to uprisings may prepare opportunities for upgrading the physical, legal and institutional infrastructures in Arab MENA.

Increases in their industrial capacity utilization ratios are likely to accelerate their economic growth ratios. However, to overcome difficulties they urgently need national consensus and organizational restructuring. Even then change will not be an easy transition in the MENA.

A Brief Anatomy of the Turkish -MENA Relations

Because of its geographical proximity and historical affinity with the MENA Turkey partly identifies itself with this region.¹ As Turkey has been facing strong disappointments in its accession efforts to the EU, in recent years it has changed the discourse of its international relations and its economic orientation towards the MENA area, even though its relations with the EU still remains to be very important. However, the Arab uprisings make the discourse of its foreign policy manoeuvres highly risky.

Just about the time when the financial crises started in the EU, one of the most important objectives of Turkey's new mission for the new millennium was defined as to increase its economic, cultural and political role and influence in the MENA. The MENA area has been primarily seen as a new trade and investment opportunity, but it has long been a source of energy products for Turkey. Therefore, MENA has increasingly become important for Turkey in recent years.

Turkey has been signing, ratifying and implementing free trade agreements (FTAs) with most MENA countries since 1996², some of which have been the most instrumental in increasing trade and the most functional in increasing economic relations of Turkey with the MENA.³ With many countries of MENA Turkey's trade relations have been dominated by the oil and the hydrocarbon trade⁴. Additionally, in recent years the role and importance of tourism, construction, transportation, education, health and media services in the Turkey –MENA trade have increased considerably as well. When only commodity trade is taken into consideration the following table shows the shares of regions and in Turkey's total trade volumes in 2011.

Turkey's intra-regional economic relation with the MENA has not been significantly larger than its relations with any other region. Nevertheless, it had investments in countries like Libya over \$30 billions before the uprisings started⁵ especially in construction and industrial infrastructure sectors and service industries.

Table 2: Shares (%) of Selected Regions in Turkey's Total Trade Volume

Regions	2011
Middle East	30.7
North Africa	9.4
Other Africa	4.9
Black Sea Economic Cooperation(BSEC)	27.0
ECO	16.1
CIS	20.9
Central Asia	5.0
Islamic Conference*	43.4
EU	84.7

Source: dtm.gov.tr, * Includes MENA and extra regional Islamic countries

Turkey's Regional Aspirations in the MENA

Through economic, diplomatic, cultural, demographic presence and somewhat military involvements Turkey had been trying to exert decisive influence on the region at large with a special emphasis on religious ideology in the form of constructing an area of Muslim solidarity before the Arab Spring.

There is certainly an element of strong religiosity in the Turkey's political mission to the MENA. With a more religious outlook and the discourse of the AKP governments, Turkey on the surface has been discovering a more hospitable environment in the MENA and even in the Sub-Saharan Africa. As an attempt of mild form of political cooperation, Turkey has been discreetly following a new political approach, which is often interpreted as "neoOttomanism".⁶

Since after the 2008 elections Turkey has seemed to adopt a newly defined policy approach of “zero problems with neighbors”. Although it contained elements of make-belief in a region with multiple problems this new definition did not conflict the traditional foreign diplomacy line of Turkey, which based upon the principle of “peace at home, peace in the world”.

Proud of its success of overcoming a major financial crisis in 2001, achieving high economic and industrial growth in successive years and finding itself among the “enlarged group” of top 20 economies as the 16th top one encouraged Turkey develop new aspirations regarding the geography, which it once had imperial relations until the end of the first World War. If among top global powers, why not practice regional power? If this cannot be done in the EU why not concentrates on the Arab MENA? Turkey not only became economically very active wanted to be at least equally active in regional politics.

To play this new and mostly self-propelled role of regional power⁷ Turkey had first started to identify itself with the region more so then ever before. It continued to exert influence by associating itself with the existing religious ideological streams; tried to raise its voice to set the political, security and even the military agenda of the region, and showed willingness to integrate itself with the MENA more by trade, business, investment and foreign aid. Frequent high level state visits, mutual exchange of friendship and brotherhood messages helped secure the new trend in relations.

Indeed every single treaty for more liberalised relations with its immediate MENA neighbours beyond the relations of the EU prescribed ones⁸ at the beginning had been taken as an initiative to reestablish the once integrated system of trade and commerce in the area primarily until Turkey started to react to existing problems of the MENA with political and ideological interest of power practice. Turkey first volunteered for mediation on one of the most complicated issues of the MENA namely the Middle East Peace Process.

Initiating and pursuing shuttle diplomacies to help conflict resolution between Israel-Palestine (and Syria) had limits from the very beginning. It primarily lacked one essential doze of reality: The recognition of the fact that those conflicts had existed long before Turkey launched the policy shift and many peace initiatives and road maps had been sacrificed or lost on the way long before Turkey decided to design the policy of “zero problems with neighbors”.

The tragic consequences for the flotilla incident of 2010 did not effectively relax the continental blockade Israel applied against Gaza. Turkey rightfully reacted to the violation of human rights. But the dose of reaction was exaggerated and its proactive approach was not

appropriate. For the sake of power practice over intensified relations with its Arab neighbors, Turkey showed too much and too obvious preference for ideological solidarity.

Turkey failed to be an honest broker, when it lost impartiality, neutrality and tranquility with the notion of being the protector and the voice of the oppressed by siding especially overtly with Hamas. At the end Turkey's ambition to increase its role as a regional actor on the Middle East Peace Process ceased to be functional at the expense of freezing its relations with Israel. Israel has been alienated to the point of establishing new coalitions in the East Mediterranean on natural gas exploration missions with Cyprus and making joint military manoeuvres with Greece. Turkey's effort of reacting or being proactive proved to be unrealistic, when it came to Israel-Palestine conflict.

When it came to Syria, at the beginning being "unaware" of all previous regime conducts in Syria Turkey intensified its relations with it to promote friendly and brotherly contact with Assad and his government⁹. There too while showing overt preference for the Syrian opposition later it oversaw the role of external actors like China and Russia and a regional actor Iran without analyzing the consequences.

Almost for every regional conflict in the MENA there had already been other extra-regional and regional actors identifying the same problems before Turkey took its part in the scene. Turkey at the beginning underestimated the role other regional actors like Egypt and Iran always aspired to play.

There have also been new actors from the region like Qatar and Saudi Arabia, with which Turkey formed a tacit coalition on ideological grounds. Turkey also acted the same manner towards Iraq, and helped Northern Iraq prosper beyond its relation with the Iraqi central authority to the point of antagonizing the Iraqi central authority.

When Storms Started to spring over the Arab MENA

Therefore the Arab spring started when Turkey had already been trying to increase its influence over countries of the region by increasing its trade and investment to the region, offering health and education services, granting visa exemptions to facilitate movements of people reciprocally to promote tourism and business involvements¹⁰ and exerting power practice with ideological preferences, which mainly based upon religious references and cultural affinity.

Turkey chose especially to be highly vocal, when the Jasmine revolution ignited the flame of uprisings in the Arab World with a domino effect and made pragmatic policy shifts against the dictatorial regimes, which it had claimed to have close brotherly relations until Arab Spring started to blossom in every corner. The subject of the first policy switch was Libya. When the Jasmine revolution of Tunisia spread across Libya and Egypt, Turkey's focus on the Arab Maghreb intensified especially towards Libya, where the country had and still has vested business and economic interests.

Turkey's mixed approach towards Libya was justified by the AKP government on the grounds of protecting lives of approximately 25.000 Turkish workers and evacuated them safely out of the country. Turkey did not participate in the military mission and mainly used its naval forces to evacuate Turkish and other nationals from Libya, saved lives and procured humanitarian aid to the people of Libya. Guarantees for the future business opportunities for Turkey had been tentatively taken from the Libyan National Transition Council only after France had its own agenda set regarding construction tenders and petroleum deals.¹¹

Turkey followed far more rational policy during the Libya uprising than it has been following since the beginning of the Syrian uprising, even though the Turkish public failed to understand the logic behind the government action.

Turkey also became a keen observer of the Tahrir Square during the long process. It managed too lower its profile on the Gaza issue, and showed respect to the will of the Egyptian people, when Egypt under the most difficult circumstances insinuated to take the control of security dilemma Gaza imposes upon Egypt. Gaza being the once back yard of Egypt, it was sound to tone down Turkey's voice and insistence on Gaza and also encourage Egypt and Israel cooperation on the security of the Sinai Peninsula.

However, the much closer relationship of Turkey with the Assad regime of Syria prior to the intensification of the Syrian civil unrest did not truly justify Turkey's sudden support of the Syrian opposition. Turkey had allowed the Syrian political opposition to nest and grow within Turkey, before it finally reorganized itself in Egypt. It is difficult to prove Turkey's military support of the Syrian opposition. But Turkey started to play a risky game in a situation where it could not change global reactions because of the Russian and the Chinese resistance to any UN Security Council decision to permit military intervention to Syria. At the end the cost of Turkey's political choice with respect to Syria has started to jeopardize Turkey's domestic security because of the intensified terrorist activities in the country.

The Impact of the Arab Spring on Turkey

For all countries where the storms of the Arab spring have been felt for the last 2 years Turkey favoured change towards more democratic regimes with religious overtones. Turkey wished to see the stability resumed without getting directly involved in the process. Nevertheless, the Arab Spring has inevitable consequences for Turkey which can be classified as follows:

Economic Consequences of the Arab Spring on Turkey

The first impact of the Arab uprising in the MENA on Turkey has been felt through economic channels. From Libya alone Turkey had to evacuate near 25000 workers within two months. With families to support a new situation for unemployed workers and out of job contractors, Turkey has to face an economic contraction of an unexpected economic shock for a foreseeable future. Therefore, the Arab spring, which is short of blossoms in countries, where no hope return to normal exists for a long while means an unexpected economic down turn for Turkish entrepreneurs, workers and exporters at first instant.

During the process in which Turkey intensified its economic relations with the MENA, it had been trying to connect and reconnect itself with regional political establishments of the time, until the Arab uprising every where has started to shake them from their deep roots. While the old establishments especially in Libya and Syria meant certainty and continuity for Turkish business involvements, export sectors, investors and service providers, the interim situation means uncertainty and suspense for Turkey. Although the trade related consequences are not fully reflected in the export figures of 2012 yet, because of economic contractions and slow downs the Arab spring induced in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and now in Syria, Turkey's exports to those destinations have drastically fallen.

The stabilized Turkish- Syria relations had improved considerably until 2010, when in July 2010 a protocol between Turkey, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon was signed for the establishment of a sub-regional Free Trade Area between 4 neighbours in Istanbul, which helped improve trade between Syria and Turkey by 700% with respect to 1999¹².

With the Syria crises Turkey's exports to that country have gone down at least by 2.5 billion Dollars not only because of the sanctions apply to Syria, but also because of the ongoing violence in that country causing road insecurity and blockages. The cumbersome screening processes by customs and security services also generate additional nominal and real cost for the country. Turkey has been trying to accommodate approximately 130 thousand refugees in 8 camps around its Southern border without any international help since the beginning of the crises, which added an additional \$400 million on its national budget in 2012.

From a purely economic point of view Turkey needs the political certainty of regime changes. The political turmoil in Libya and Yemen and now in Syria resulted in destructions of physical infrastructures, loss of productive capacity and productivity. Land logistics and communication have been impeded or have become risky and expensive for Turkish exporters and truckers. In addition to the partial and hopefully temporary loss of previously ensured MENA markets, the rising oil prices also constitute a major threat to the Turkish economy by taking their toll on the high and risky current account deficit of the country, which is currently 7.6 % of the country's GDP in the third quarter of 2012¹³. Therefore the over all economic impact of the Arab Spring from Tunisia to Syria on Turkey has been adverse.

National Security Consequences of the Arab Spring on Turkey

First the Libya revolt imposed an additional security cost on Turkey, when participated in the NATO mission on Libya. Since the beginning of uprisings in Syria Turkey have been taking extra measures to guard its Syrian border against the flux of illegal immigrants, refugees and more importantly against the infiltration of terrorists and suicide bombers. Then Turkey had to take in approximately 130.000 refugees from all ages, provide them shelter, food, health, education and security services on daily bases.

Furthermore, Turkey's outright support of the Syrian political opposition, alleged arms and ammunition procurements to the military opposition¹⁴ and condemnation of the Assad regime have been generating serious internal security repercussions through increased terrorism. There are allegedly illicit operations of smuggling people, soldiers, ammunition, arms and terrorists across the border, which Turkey considers as a national security issue.

The PKK terror in Turkey, which had come under control after the 1998 Adana agreement with Syria once more have started to surge claiming lives of civilian and military people on daily basis since the tsunami of the Arab Spring hit the shores of Syria. It appears that the more claims Turkey has for regional leadership in the MENA in general and in the Mashrek in particular, the more security dilemma it seems to face in the region.

Political Consequences of the Arab Spring on Turkey

A Turkey showing clear preference to the region since 2002 has been what the MENA longed to see in Turkey with no promise to return the favor necessarily other than the appreciative

rhetoric often used by regional leaders. Now the old establishments are gone in Yemen, Tunisia and Egypt, what Turkey needs to do more to maintain the previously gained confidence is not certain. For Syria, the Bashar Assad administration has not lost the battle completely yet. If the regime is toppled down, assuming that the opposition will be shaped quickly without falling into confrontation among factions I content that Turkey hopes to resume relations with Syria to help restructure that country.

Nevertheless, the lack or inadequacy of democracy in the most, if not all of the MENA, will prevent us from learning how the Arab streets would perceive the role Turkey is willing to play in the region accurately¹⁵. Among its Muslim neighbors (but also among the domestic masses in Turkey), the Turkish government's policy of condemning Israel had been rewarding at least in the short and medium-run in Arab countries and Iran, until Turkey took the side of the Syrian opposition. I content that at this policy choice significantly altered Turkey's ability of using the anti-Israeli sentiments to cooperate with Iran as well.

Foreign policy Consequences of the Arab Spring on Turkey

The AKP as the third time winner of general elections of June 12, 2011 with an overwhelming majority wanted to assert itself as “a model”¹⁶ and a major regional actor in the Middle East. The reluctance and the prudence of the United States to have another direct and unilateral action against the increasing instability and violence in the region also gave Turkey inspiration to fill the gap in the power game, exert influence over events and promise a “common future” especially in the case of Syria, more than it could do and deliver.

Almost completely overseeing the Russian and the Iranian positions especially regarding Syria and disregarding the deliberate procrastination of a firm decision of the UN on that issue, Turkey chose to over associate itself with the Syrian political opposition, which may be getting more organised now in Egypt. However, what Turkey's previous and current support of the Syrian opposition promise to Turkey is unknown to the Turkish public. Turkey has been pursuing a risky foreign policy¹⁷ with not so clear national interest attachments. What benefits the new and non- conventional Turkish policy option may promise for Turkey in the short and the medium- run is unclear. But it seems to promise chaos for the country without promising any returns for its other problematic foreign policy issues.¹⁸

Conclusion

1. Unless political stability is resumed and economic recovery followed with equal opportunities provided to every segment of societies it is not possible for Arab Spring countries to celebrate change.
2. Unless diversity is celebrated it is impossible to establish peace. Furthermore peace and reconciliation in the Middle East as a region are hard to be lounged and sustained unless countries define what they understand from a regional peace.
3. For the relations of and impact of the Arab Spring on Turkey are concerned the following may hold:
 - a. For all countries where the storms of the Arab spring have been felt for the last 2 years Turkey favored change towards more democratic regimes only showing overt or somehow hidden preferences for religious overtones.
 - b. It appears that the more claims Turkey has for regional leadership in the MENA in general and in the Masrek in particular, the more security dilemma it seems to face in the region.
 - c. Turkey must take the roles of traditional regional and extra-regional actors into considerations and carefully evaluate the roles of new actors to be a fair and smart player.
 - d. Further more the more it loses its calmness and impartiality on disputes, again the more security challenges especially with the PKK terrorist insurgency Turkey has to deal with.
 - e. Therefore it is wiser for Turkey to confine its role to a powerful economy rather than an economic or political power in the region.
 - f. Turkey should extend as much humanitarian aid and assistance it can to countries in need and encourage regional cooperation. But should not get militarily involved in any kind of intervention.
 - g. The Turkish government still plays the role as “the voice of the most oppressed” on both the Syrian and the Palestinian cases. However, no fruitful outcomes it must review its position, its rhetoric and try to resume its calm.
 - h. The exchange of missiles between Hamas and Israel, and between the National Syrian army and the opposition and the human tragedy they generate generates; Continued flux of refugees to the Southern towns of Turkey are full proofs of what cannot be done by Turkey alone.

- i. Turkey should extend as much aid and assistance it can to countries in need and encourage regional economic cooperation. However it must rebuilt and maintain its neutrality.

Notes and References

- 1 *In the rhetoric of the current Turkish political elites, the Middle East is defined as “our region”.*
- 2 *Mainly under the new neighbourhood policies of the EU and according to the EUCU membership obligations.*
- 3 *Sema, Kalaycioglu (2005) “Is the Outcome Worth the Effort? Turkey’s Free Trade Agreements in the MENA”, Middle East Studies Association Meeting, Washington DC*
- 4 *The total exports and imports of Turkey in 2009 were respectively \$26.662 billion and \$13.137 billion. They reached \$30.362 billion and \$20.000 billion in 2010. See dtm.gov.tr*
- 5 *In Libya alone Turkey has investment of \$25 billions before the regime fall.*
- 6 *Abmet, Davutoğlu rejects the definition of 'Neo-Ottomanism as the current Turkish foreign policy vision, yet he argues that Ottoman history plays a vital role for today's Turkey for its identity and political status. See <http://yenisafak.com.tr/English/?t=18.01.2010&i=236159>, 18 January 2010*
- 7 *Sema, Kalaycioglu (2011) “Can Turkey become a Regional Economic Power?”, ISA, Washington DC*
- 8 *As a result of Turkey’s EU customs union membership*
- 9 *It signed many new treaties with Syria in recent years to promote closer relations with that country and abolished visa requirements reciprocally to allow freer movements of people.*
- 10 *Visa exemptions have been granted to Syria, Yemen, Jordan, Lebanon, Greece, Azerbaijan and Georgia agreements have been reached to include Kuwait and Qatar in the same scheme.*
- 11 *Sema, Kalaycioglu (23.08.2011), “Libya Petrolleri ve Abdülcelil’i Bekleyen Kâbus”, tasam.org*
- 12 *Rüstem, Yanar (2010) “Türkiye’nin, Suriye, Ürdün ve Lübnan ile Ekonomik Entegrasyonu”, <http://www.sde.org.tr/userfiles/file/EKONOMIK%20ENTEGRASYON%20ANALIZ%202012%20SAYFA.pdf>*
- 13 *“Economic and Financial Indicators, Economic data (September 15, 2012), The Economist*

14As is claimed in some national and international media

15Even though some studies indicate that MENA countries seem to support and appreciate Turkey in general and the intermediation role it volunteers to play in regional political disputes between regional countries and/or vis-à-vis the global community see “Dış Politika Programı, OrtaDoğuda Türkiye Algısı 2010 (Foreign Policy Program, Turkey Perception in the Middle East), TESEV, Istanbul

16The Turkish democracy has its own problems to correct. The secular democracy is the only pride Turkey may emphasize on. Liberal market economy is by no means a Turkish creation.

17Sema, Kalaycıoğlu (August 2011) “Bir Avrupa Rüyasından, Bir Orta Doğu Kâbusuna”, tasam.org

18Turkey’s new policy choice does not ensure any Arab support on unresolved issues like Cyprus.

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