

On February 20, 2011, on the occasion of the third anniversary of its opening, the Brookings Doha Center hosted a policy discussion on “Turkey’s New Regional Diplomacy: Ambitions and Constraints.” Ömer Taşpınar, Director of the Turkey Project at the Brookings Institution in Washington D.C., and Birol Başkan, visiting professor at Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service in Qatar, discussed the current state of Turkey’s foreign policy in the region and beyond, analyzing the development of its ambitious reach and providing an assessment of future prospects in a fast evolving landscape. The event was moderated by Salman Shaikh, director of the Brookings Doha Center, and attended by members of Qatar’s academic, business, diplomatic and media communities.

Başkan began the discussion by addressing what he argued were misconceptions about Turkey’s foreign policy. He suggested that the perception of an “axis shift” away from the West and towards the East, in strengthening relations with Iran, Syria and other Arab countries, was misleading. Such a view ignores the real breadth of Turkey’s new foreign policy, which equally reaches out to other regions, including the Balkans, South East Asia, and Latin America. Rather, he argued, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s foreign policy has sought specifically to “transcend and capitalize on” whatever axes of power may exist.

Looking at the domestic conditions that have informed Ankara’s foreign policy, Başkan argued that security was “historically [its] main driver.” Freed from that constraint after the decline of Kurdish separatism, Erdoğan has turned to foreign policy as a means by which to secure his legitimacy, establishing a “high international profile” that would dispel public concerns or conspiratorial jabs about his Islamist credentials. Securing economic growth has been key in this regard, and Başkan asserted that this is the most important lens through which to view Turkey’s foreign policy. Riding on an export-boom throughout the 2000s, it has been the search for new markets, rather than any ideological program, that has driven what he called Ankara’s “merchant politics.”

Omer Taşpınar agreed with Başkan’s assertion that an appreciation of domestic dynamics is fundamental to understanding Turkey’s foreign policy. He suggested that the Justice and Development Party (AKP) had “ridden the wave of economic recovery” that followed the “lost decade of the 1990s,” when suppression of the PKK had significantly strained relations with the West and led to political and economic stagnation.

In explaining the perceived “axis shift” in Ankara’s regional approach, Taşpınar stressed that it was not ideologically motivated, but came about as part of the “zero problem policy” championed by Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu. This approach, based on seeking opportunities rather than avoiding threats, sees Turkey engage with all players in the region, often in the role of mediator (as in its efforts to broker a peace deal between Syria and Israel in 2008). It would not be possible however, argued Taşpınar, without the “independence and self-confidence” delivered by economic growth.

Turning to the constraints on Ankara’s ambitious foreign policy, Taşpınar pointed out that it could in fact prove “overambitious” at times. In a region rife with conflicts of

interest, realpolitik often dealt a blow to efforts to pursue an even handed approach with rivaling neighbors – as in the case of Armenia and Azerbaijan. Taşpınar further argued that this overambition was flawed in its neglect of certain issues, domestic and foreign, that continue to plague Ankara. He stressed that in order for Turkey’s “zero problem policy” to ring true, it must do more to resolve the Kurdish question, find a settlement in Cyprus, and successfully normalize relations with Armenia.

Following presentations from both speakers, the floor was opened for questions. Moderator Salman Shaikh asked about Turkey’s approach to the current wave of popular uprisings in the region. Taşpınar argued that similar to the US and EU, Turkey is afflicted by the conflict between interests and ideals, given its reliance on stability for economic growth, and its status as “the most democratic, secular and pro-Western country in the Islamic world.” He reasoned that Erdoğan is currently striking a fair balance, and is doing well to shy away from the Western tendency to tout “the Turkish model” – a move which would be “too naïve and arrogant.”

Asked about the relevance of the Turkish model, Başkan asserted that it does provide two essential components of successful democratization in the Arab world, namely a secular state structure and the “separation of political and economic powers.” He argued that the lack of the latter in Egypt may stall the process there. Başkan added that economic and political liberalization – with consistent pressure from the IMF and the negotiations on EU accession – have also been crucial in the Turkish case. Taşpınar argued that there were “two models” that invite comparison and debate, one relating to the role of the military as a “guardian of the system” and another relating to the integration of Islamist parties and the Muslim Brotherhood. He asserted that the latter model was more relevant, but emphasized that the Brotherhood would “have to learn that a Hamas-like agenda would not work” in foreign policy, adding that it did already seem to be showing signs of moderating and becoming more accommodating.

On the question of the integration of Islamist parties in democratic processes, Başkan argued that it was necessary for these parties to detach and distinguish themselves from the large grassroots organizations which they grow out of – as in the case of the AKP. Referring to the success of the process in Turkey, Taşpınar stated that it is now wrong view the AKP as an Islamist or illiberal force. He pointed out that the party enjoys much centrist support, and is criticized by its opponents as leaning too much towards the EU and US. The “secular-Islamist” divide is not applicable to Turkey, and continued democratization there is in fact more a case of shifting “from a radical to a moderate secularism” than it is a move away from Islamism.

One audience member asked about the implications of the Egyptian revolution on the Israel-Palestine conflict, and how Turkey’s role may change. Taşpınar said that recent developments made clear that “time is not on Israel’s side,” and that it must “abandon its maximalist stance on settlements” and quickly move towards a resolution in order to make sure it does not lose both Turkey and Egypt as potential partners. Başkan, meanwhile, argued that Egypt should in future join Turkey in “avoiding specific

alliances” and embrace a role – more credible than it may have been under Mubarak – of mediation.