MDG#8: Global Partnership and International Peace

"SOVEREIGNTY AND LEGITIMACY AS THE BASIS FOR PEACE: ATATÜRK'S PRINCIPLES AND THE FUTURE OF THE ARAB SPRING"

HAMID AKIN ÜNVER, Ph.D.
*Kadir Has University, Department of International Relations,
Istanbul, Turkey.*

Saturday, April 20, 2013
College of Arts and Letters at the
Stevens Institute of Technology
Hoboken, NJ

In 1918, at the end of World War I, the breakaway states of the collapsed Ottoman Empire faced two choices of nation building. Amir Faisal, the leader of the 1916 Arab Revolt and a firm believer in the idea of Arab unity had hypothesized that the Arabs could establish their unified kingdom under one Arab ruled with the help and support of the Western powers. Once the victors of World War I would concede Arab independence and help them establish their local competence Faisal argued, the "*natural influences of race, language and interest*" would soon draw all Arabs into one people. Yet, Faisal requested from the Great Powers of World War I one thing; that they lay aside their thoughts of profit and their infighting: "*…we ask you not to force your whole civilization upon us, but help us to pick out what serves us from your experience*". In return he conceded, the Arabs could offer the Great Powers "*little, but gratitude*". The fate of the 1916 Arab Revolt and that of Faisal developed in parallel, eventually marking a lesson in history for the nations who outsource the shortcomings in their national-political unity to the goodwill of international third parties. And it shows us that, in the 'market' of diplomacy, 'gratitude' and 'goodwill' are not exchangeable commodities.

Atatürk's vision for unity and for Turkey's relations with foreign countries was fundamentally different. For him, a country must first eliminate all elements and methods of foreign involvement, then establish a self-sufficient state and security apparatus, on top of which a functioning industry, a bourgeoisie could ensure the safety of a representative political system – and only then establish equal diplomatic ties with foreign countries. The Republic of Turkey was the first independent and sovereign country emerging from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire, who also managed to sustain its sovereignty – the foundation of any state-building process – uninterruptedly until today. Indeed, complete Turkish sovereignty had come without any permanent reliance on foreign help, but emerged from resistance to all foreign involvement with a unified and concentrated effort of the people rallying around a leader.

A popular topic of late, the debate on the Arab Spring and the Turkish model tends to overlook the 'original' Turkish model, which includes in itself the fact that the elite that secured national freedom by fighting against Western colonial powers and their extensions, became pro-Western and pro-modernization forces of the new republic, proclaiming a multi-party democratic system after a long period single-party rule. Atatürk's insistence on full sovereignty in that regard, is truly a model for the Arab countries and the question of legitimacy and sovereignty is the most overlooked, yet absolutely critical component of the post-Arab Spring Middle East. Today, a century later, the Arabs are faced with a decision; to repeat the mistake of Faisal, by using an external force to overthrow an indigenous despot, just to be dominated and oppressed by the same external forces that it relied on earlier. The foreign ministries of the West in turn, have to understand that short-term 'Western friendliness' is an elusive concept that end up creating long-term hatred and resistance against the

value system of the West. The only way out for the Arab countries today therefore, is to find an alternative to reliance on foreign power and cultivate their internal strength instead. The West then, should not be worried about the Arabs' initial resistance against foreign influence, for a fully sovereign Arab system of states is absolutely critical for a cooperative and flourishing Middle East.

Therefore, the fate of what many call as the 'Arab Spring', lies between two legacies: that of Faisal, who outsourced the cause of his own people to superpower politics and ended up rendering his people subservient to British demands, whose fall-out created laid the foundations of modern anti-Western thought, and that of Atatürk, who led a nation, which demonstrated a single, all-out and all-or-nothing effort to achieve full sovereignty and then established close ties on equal footing with the Western countries.

Sovereignty and Legitimacy in practice

During Atatürk's time, Turkey initiated several attempts towards establishing regional cooperation systems, such as the Balkan Union and Iran – the reason why the same couldn't be done with Turkey's Arab neighbors was the fact that none of those neighbors were sovereign – and in Atatürk's mind, cooperation or peace – internationally or regionally – wouldn't materialize with authoritarian regimes. More importantly, under a strong mandate rule in the region, Turkey's policy towards any Arab country would first have to go through either Paris or London, which prevented the establishment of a genuine 'Middle East policy' during Atatürk's period.

The foundation of Atatürk's vision for regional peace and Turkey's role in it, can be summarized as follows:

- **Engagement and socialization**: Interaction is key to communication. A peace-seeking country has to maximize its interactions with its neighboring countries in the form of high-level visits, diplomatic exchanges, trade and tourism agreements to create a sense of regional community and establish an elite-level mutual trust. Such sense of community and trust are fundamental aspects of greater regional cooperation. In the absence of interaction, doubt, worry and mistrust breed and create problems that can otherwise be avoided. Socialization and constant interaction is key to peace and stability. These principles are reflected within Atatürk and Venizelos' move towards Turkey's peace with Greece soon after the War of Independence, as well as Atatürk's close relationship with Shah Pahlavi of Iran, King Faisal of Iraq, King Alexander of Yugoslavia and King Zogu of Albania, all leading to regional cooperation initiatives such as the Balkan Pact and the Baghdad Pact.

Such active socialization and interaction is not often seen in the Middle East, especially between the post-revolutionary Arab regimes. A permanent sense of mistrust, sectarian differences and hidden agendas define the politics of post-2011 Middle East. There is a dire need for a culture of interaction and socialization, which can lay down the foundations of future cooperation in the Middle East.

- **Refrain from military alliances**: Alliances of military nature create their antithesis by definition. For any alliance, there is counter-alliance. As one alliance strengthens itself, it creates what the international relations theory refers as 'security dilemma' where a country's strength leaves its rival less secure and creates a drive for arms buildup. This eventually leads to uncontrollable proliferation, and is especially problematic when nuclear weapons are concerned. Atatürk always had distaste towards military alliances and asserted that they must be avoided unless Turkey's existence and territorial integrity is threatened (which gives a scholar liberty in thinking he would support Turkey's NATO participation, given Stalin's direct territorial threats).

In today's Middle East, organizations such as the Arab League by definition creates a security deficit in non-Arab countries and Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC) cause a perception of energy threat in non-Arab countries that need oil resources. These identity-based interest groups then create a sense of mistrust in countries that remain outside of these institutions' designated participation and lead to discriminatory non-Arab organizational institutions, which fuel sectarian and religious tensions in the region.

- **Sovereignty, legitimacy and independence**: Countries that are not sovereign face domestic security crises and those that are not independent, can never formulate an autonomous, genuine foreign policy. Lack of sovereignty and disagreement over the type of regime is a chronic source of conflict in the Middle East. Through 1918 till 1940s, dependence on foreign colonizers and their control over figurehead monarchs defined the political character of the region. Then 1950s onwards, prematurely independent Middle Eastern states witnessed successive young officers' coups that brought down these foreign-supported monarchs and replaced them with military or quasi-military regimes that faced legitimacy crises due to their insistence against a transition to a more democratic and representative system. When a country is not independent, it becomes the breeding ground for hatred towards foreign countries, which makes the establishment of a regional cooperation initiative with those countries impossible. Such defensiveness against foreign interaction always defines the foreign policy of those countries, making hostility and mistrust a permanent character of those regimes. Furthermore, lack of legitimacy distorts a society's fabric and creates long-term radicalism and

extremism. If large segments of a society feel left-out and excluded from the decision-making and-or voting system, that country becomes a breeding ground for radicalism and extremism, both of which disrupt a country's peaceful cooperation within a regional initiative.

- **The logic of conflict and peace**: Peace, in Atatürk's mind, was not just an idealistic notion. Countries must maintain peace as long as possible, so that they can pursue the ultimate goal of modernization and development, thereby joining the 'league of advanced civilizations'. Global peace emerges from regional peace attained in all of world's regions. Such peace can only take place between industrialized and legitimate systems, Atatürk had argued, which today sounds very similar to the international relations theory known as the 'democratic peace theory'; democratic countries do not go to war with each other. War, according to Atatürk, is a great waste of a nation's resources and should be avoided – only except when a country's survival is in danger. Wars waged without this existential and defensive component would sap a country's physical and mental resources that would otherwise be allocated to education, development and economic equality. When entangled in a constant web of conflicts, Atatürk believed that countries enter into a dangerous vicious circle where the country's material and manpower are extinguished by mutually dependent conflicts. This, in the long run would leave a country poor, undereducated, malnourished and unable to exert any weight in regional or international politics. By actively pushing for cultural and economic cooperation with its neighbors, The main reason why Atatürk emphasized peace so much is that this would ultimately allow him to pursue his real, developmental goals: such as income equality, increasing access to primary education, reduction of child mortality – and then moved onto more civilizational improvements such as environmental sustainability (one example is his model Atatürk ranch), gender equality and empowerment of women and creating a modern rural – as well as urban society through his Village Institutes and Public Houses.

Can the post-Arab Spring nations follow Atatürk?

The breakaway Arab states of the Ottoman Empire had struggled to achieve the primary pillar of nation-building: achievement of complete sovereignty. Dependent regimes with little domestic legitimacy, led to the state of chronic authoritarianism in the Middle East, rendering these regimes perpetually defensive towards their own society. Military in the Arab world, is long known to be a tool of domestic order maintenance, rather than a source of deterrence, (which is the basis of international relations) and these regimes could never improve much on any aspect of Atatürk's criteria for a modern welfare society. Lack of sovereignty and legitimacy breeds domestic crises and prevents nation-building, in the absence of a coherent 'nation', the state then becomes an oppressive control tool over a group of loosely tied communities that have no feeling of interconnectedness and sense of national

belonging. Such communities have a much lesser chance of supporting their leadership decisions in foreign policy making (cooperation agreements, policy initiatives) and this leads to an unpopular foreign policy and erratic diplomatic behavior of the country in question.

In Atatürk's Turkey, the centrality of legitimacy and sovereignty as the basis of peace and cooperation has been integrated into the Constitution of 1921 (Teşkilat-ı Esasiye Kanununu), which is the first Turkish legal text that emphasizes these principles. The parliament is also set as the ultimate source of power and legitimacy in the new republic, emphasizing representation and popular will over the state and executive branches. Popular legitimacy as the *raison d'etre* of the new republic was also re-asserted in the Constitution of 1924. In Atatürk's mind, the state, as the basic component of international relations, has to be completely free and sovereign – otherwise, the regional system within which non-legitimate regimes are abundant is prone to war and conflict.

Therefore, Atatürk's notion of international peace and a worldwide partnership for cooperation rests upon more democracy and representation. Atatürk in fact, formulated what today's academic literature would call as the 'democratic peace theory' during the 1920s – democracies don't go to war with each other, and the only political system that enables international peace and cooperation is democracy. Democracy can only live in legitimate state systems.

In today's Arab Spring, Arab societies rise up against their authoritarian systems that are by-products of post-World War I order. They want more democracy, better distribution of wealth and equal access to opportunity. That is why, Atatürk's understanding of legitimacy and sovereignty has to be the key litmus test with which we measure the success of Arab revolutions. If these Arab revolutions lead to sovereign and representative governments, a Middle Eastern peace could be an attainable objective.

Today, more than ever, Atatürk's understanding of sovereignty as the basis of international peace and cooperation is relevant – and discussion of the Middle East's future along these principles will determine whether regional peace and stability can materialize in the near future.

- . -