



the Hollings Center
for international dialogue

Dialogue Snapshot
Foreign Policy and Competing Mediation
in the Middle East and Central Asia
July 2012

The political upheavals in the Middle East have shifted the foreign policy landscape in the region. States like Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia are implementing assertive foreign policies in a region that was arguably dominated for decades by U.S. foreign policy.

What comparative advantages do aspiring regional powers have? Will they compete with one another for influence? Is the role of the United States in the Middle East waning relative to Turkey and Gulf States? Are there any lessons to be learned from Central Asia, where the United States, Russia and China have vied for influence for over a decade?

To address these and other questions the Hollings Center convened a three-day Regional Policy Dialogue entitled, *Foreign Policy and Competing Mediation in the Middle East and Central Asia*. Held in Istanbul, Turkey the dialogue brought together a group of foreign policy experts, development practitioners, international organization officials and journalists from the Middle East, Eurasia and the United States (see participant list at end). The event presented a rare opportunity for participants to compare experiences across the Middle East and Central Asia, regions that are treated separately by pundits and policymakers, despite interesting comparative dynamics.

While some participants saw Turkey's role in the Middle East as ever-expanding, others thought its influence may have limits because many post-revolutionary Arab states themselves would like to play an influential role.

This report presents a snapshot of the dialogue and three themes that readers may find essential in thinking about the Middle East and Central Asia:

- Aspiring regional powers have a bumpy road ahead. Soft power cannot compensate for a lack of vision or capacity to mediate regional conflicts.
- Rising nationalism across the Middle East and Central Asia will frustrate all regional powers and their foreign aid programs, not just those of the United States.
- Don't ask will the Arab Spring spread to Central Asia; ask will Central Asia be a sign of things to come in the Middle East.

Many Regional Powers, Few Regional Plans

After years of U.S. foreign policy dominance, a number of regional powers are eager to expand their economic, political or cultural influential in the Middle East and Central Asia. Yet a closer look reveals that the road to influence is a bumpy one.



An Egyptian journalist, a Turkish research institute director and a Turkish-U.S. political scientist discuss the “new Arab order.” Photo: Jonathan Lewis.

The dialogue revealed different streams of thought on the issue: One perspective argued that rising powers are likely to compete with one another for influence. Saudi aid to political groups in Egypt may fray ties between Riyadh and Washington. Relations between Turkey and Iran have downshifted over divergent positions on Syria. Qatar has competed with Turkey to establish itself as a meaningful mediating site for the conflict in Afghanistan.

Another view was that countries that aspire to lead and influence the Middle East and Central Asia are likely to do so in ways that build on comparative

advantage and accommodate one another. One participant noted that some policymakers in Washington have eagerly talked about finding partnership opportunities with Turkey in the Middle East.

A third stream noted that it may not matter whether or not aspiring powers compete or complement one another; rather, what matters more is whether their message resonates with the states they purport to influence through aid, trade, soft power or political mediation. This third stream of thought triggered intensive discussions.

States that aspire to lead—be they part of the region or acting from outside of it—may find their maneuvering room limited. In some instances this may be due to a lack of capacity to implement a proactive foreign policy. One participant noted that the legacy of Turkey’s long-term engagement with the EU and the West has left it with a dearth of Arabic-language competency in the foreign ministry. Another participant argued that Turkey’s size and economic power outweighs other countries, while another noted, “Turkey does not yet have the levers or networks necessary to become the region’s chief mediator. It is going to take Turkey a while to develop those.” Algeria, for example, played a key mediating role in the region in the 1970s and 1980s but did so by painstakingly developing a diplomatic infrastructure that was up to the task of mediating difficult conflicts like Lebanon’s civil war.



Will Turkey make the most of its neighborhood?



A foreign policy expert discusses the issue of soft power in the Middle East. Photo: Jonathan Lewis.

But capacity may not be the biggest obstacle to successful influence and engagement in the Middle East. Several participants noted a “rising tide of nationalism” in the Middle East that will spoil many attempts for regional influence. A number of states that have undergone revolution have registered a heightened sense of nationalism and eagerness to protect what their publics see as restored sovereignty. As one participant stated, “the Arab Spring has brought about ‘hypernationalism’ and pride and people don’t believe that aid or models from outside countries have much to offer.”

The discussion deepened when some participants proposed that Arab countries that experienced revolutions may have the best chance at mediating foreign policy crises in the region. For example, Tunisia’s *Ennahda* attempted to mediate between Iran and the Syrian Muslim Brothers. Although the attempt did not yield tangible outcomes, *Ennahda*’s revolutionary credentials allowed it to enter confidently and assertively into the Middle East foreign policy scene. One participant noted that Egypt will rise again thanks to its revolutionary credentials: “Egypt is central to everything and although it is in chaos, it is poised to retain its position as a regional leader.”

Nationalism Trumps Need: The Trouble with Aid

Despite the global economic crisis, an abundance of donors are intent on assisting states in the Middle East and Central Asia. In the Middle East, these donors include the United States, Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia and Qatar, Turkey and various international financial institutions. The trouble with aid is not a shortage of money, but an abundance of political sticking points.

First, governments that receive aid can shape it as they wish, often in ways that suit the government more than the broader needs of the societies they are meant to serve. Second, aid does not necessarily buy influence and friends. The United States may have benefited from regional stability and foreign policy influence through its massive aid to Egypt in the past, but its aid to Egypt has not had a positive impact on public opinion. A recent Gallup poll discussed at the dialogue indicates that Egyptians largely oppose all forms of future aid from the US, including economic assistance and aid to political groups and civil society. Interestingly, opposition to U.S. economic aid has increased in the past year, with 82% of Egyptians opposing aid now versus 52% in the wake of Mubarak’s ouster.

One American participant stated, “The US would not lose much if it sat this one out. The US is funding development and security-sector reform projects across the Middle East and Central Asia while other countries like Turkey and China focus on finding export markets for their goods.”

Aid rejectionism in the Middle East is not only directed at the United States. Indeed, there was doubt that aid necessarily buys influence and proximity no matter who the donor is. A participant noted that Turkey has ramped up its international assistance programs, but another participant responded that Arab publics are wary that Turkey's Middle East foreign policy is concerned mostly with exporting Turkish goods and capturing markets. And despite having higher approval rates as a source of aid, Gulf Countries have also hit bumps. Some Egyptians have criticized Gulf Aid as having strings of its own, of being given opaquely and of its failure to materialize consistently. One participant to stated, "Egyptians are not expecting much from emerging powers like Qatar."

Given the perverse consequences of aid, a number of suggestions were made. One suggestion was that the US withdraw from the aid pool in the Middle East and Central Asia for a couple of years and re-enter only when rejectionist pressures have abated. Another suggestion directed to Turkish policymakers is that they act cautiously as they ramp up aid in the Middle East. They should take stock of the U.S. experience and carefully weigh the benefits of giving aid against its consequences.

What the Middle East and Central Asia Have in Common

When it comes to Middle East-Central Asia connections, the usual question asked is whether the revolutions of the Arab Spring will inspire similar upheavals in Central Asia's authoritarian republics. The discussions at the dialogue turned this question on its head. Struck by the discussions on Central Asia, a Middle East expert asked whether Central Asia is a harbinger of the Middle East in years to come. In the course of the three-day dialogue, participants made a number of observations that suggest Central Asia may be a forerunner of political development in the Middle East:

- *Backsliding authoritarianism and growing nationalism follows revolutions in both regions:* In this respect, Kyrgyzstan is similar to Egypt. After two revolutions in 2005 and 2010, Kyrgyzstan experienced heightened nationalism and increased sentiment against foreign aid and influence. Meanwhile other Central Asian regimes watching Kyrgyzstan's revolutions took steps to prevent political upheaval at home. Similarly in the Middle East, states that have not undergone revolution are frightened by the prospect and are taking measures to insulate themselves from political upheaval.
- *Influence is harder to come by than states outside the region assume:* In the 1990s, Turkey had grand plans to greatly expand its political, economic and cultural ties with the Central Asian republics. These plans did not come to fruition, partly because Turkey's foreign policy infrastructure was not able to lead an intensive and sustainable economic and political engagement with the region. There are potential parallels here



National guard stands watch in Bishkek.

with the Middle East. Powers like Turkey should consider what foreign policy tools they need to hone in order to build sustainable influence in the Middle East.

- *Aid is getting diverted towards more discretionary, security-oriented projects that donors and recipients can live with.* Central Asian regimes prefer security-sector assistance and projects that fund large-scale brick and mortar development projects. They are generally against aid that targets human rights, democracy and civil society. For the better part of a decade they have become increasingly adept at limiting the latter type of aid and encouraging the former. Donors like the US and China have not resisted this trend. Central Asia could be a sign of things to come in the Middle East.

Syria's Civil War & the International Response

The conflict in Syria received particular attention at the dialogue. Participants debated the internal dynamics of Syria's civil war, international mediation attempts and the role of Russia.

The discussions on whether mediation attempts can bring an end to the conflict were largely pessimistic. One participant noted that, while rhetoric on a peaceful resolution is abundant, in reality both the warring factions and a number of international players have little interest or ability to end the conflict. Syria's internal opposition, though factionalized, feels that time is on its side. The Assad government also has little incentive to compromise. One participant noted that if Assad decides to compromise, he would likely be disposed of by others within the Alawite ruling complex, which is unwilling to accept a power sharing agreement.

These dynamics necessarily affect the standing of mediators such as the United Nations, Turkey and Gulf Countries. Concerning Turkey's role, one participant argued that "escalating rhetoric from Ankara on Syria without military action has impact on Erdoğan's standing." Other participants disagreed and argued that the Turkish government has dealt pragmatically with Syria. Ankara ultimately has longer-term concerns, such as what regime will replace Assad's and what this will mean for Syria's ability to control outlying regions that border Turkey. Turkey's experience with post-Saddam Iraq weighs heavily in the minds of Ankara's policymakers and many are aware that an election-focused, economically-lashed US is unlikely to assume the burden of a state-building mission in a post-Assad Syria.

Discussions also touched on the much-maligned UN mission led by Kofi Annan. One participant agreed that the mission did not unite the Syrian opposition towards a cease fire but noted how the mission shifted to more viable tasks. In June, UN monitors negotiated an agreement that allowed state examiners to enter a rebel-held town besieged by Assad forces so that students could take their Baccalaureate exams. Unable to bring about a cease fire, the UN mission worked on more marginal, micro-level forms of mediation.

The dialogue took place in the wake of Hillary Clinton's growing pressure on Russia and on the eve of Prime Minister Erdoğan's Moscow visit. While some participants argued that Russia has impeded mediation, others noted that Russia's stance has little effect on what happens on the ground in Syria. One participant gave a fascinating takedown of Russian foreign policy, arguing that its Syria policy has little to do with competition with the United States. Rather, Moscow's support of Assad stems from a desire to protect authoritarian regimes that engage in cosmetic reforms—regimes that resemble Russia's.

Dialogue Participants*

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* This snapshot does not necessarily represent the views of the Hollings Center nor does it represent a consensus among the participants.



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