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TRANSFORMATION IN THE ARAB WORLD: THE VIEW FROM TURKEY

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About the author:

Bülent Arınç was born in Bursa in 1948. He graduated from the Faculty of Law, Ankara University. For many years he worked as a lawyer in Manisa. He was elected as the Welfare Party's Member of Parliament (MP) for Manisa in the 1995 general elections, and as the Virtue Party's MP for Manisa in the 1999 general elections. He served on several parliamentary committees. He was one of the founders of the Justice and Development Party in 2001, and was elected to serve as Group Chairman of the Party in Parliament. Between 2002 and 2007, he served as Speaker of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey. Following the 2007 general elections, he was elected as Head of the Turkish Delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (PABSEC). On 12 June 2011, he was elected as the MP for Bursa Province, and has been serving as Deputy Prime Minister for the 61st Government. Bülent Arınç knows English at an intermediate level, and is married with two children.

While discussing regional transformation in the Arab world, the first reality we encounter is that generalizations do not apply to this geography. Today's Morocco and Jordan, Egypt and Tunisia, Libya and Syria differ substantially from each other. At the same time, in this period of change sweeping the region, time has come to discuss the future of the Islamic civilization. Our region, which overcame great difficulties in the last century, is currently undergoing a process of dramatic change and transformation. The spirit of change in the Middle East, Africa, Asia and the Far East has lived through and survived many challenges. In order to keep the regional transformation going, it is necessary to clearly set out and discuss the visions for our region's future. Nonetheless, this region and geography does not solely consist of Muslims. Communities with different religious beliefs are also the essential and inseparable components of this region.



The Future of Transformation in the Arab World

The answer to the question about the future of the Arab world lies in this unity and integration. This geography is the heart of the world, and any pain in the heart signals a problem with the global order. The desire and strength for change is the product of a dynamic spirit which has the capacity to affect the whole world, not just Turkey. It is with this spirit that our region, the heart of the world, will ensure the healthy functioning of the global order by completing a healthy transformation process. Middle Eastern states and the Arab world will regain their place as a significant element of world balance.

The problem faced by the Arab-Islamic world is a prob-

lem of fair representation and stability in governance. Each country and region has requirements, priorities, methods and mechanisms of its own. What is essential is to ensure prosperity without oppressing and impoverishing people. We have seen and are seeing the possible outcomes of the failure to do so in the course of popular movements. The key feature of these movements arising in Tunisia in December 2010 and spreading to multiple countries was the search for rights and justice. Governments isolated from their people in Libya, Yemen, Egypt and recently Syria were outdated.

To look after one's people cannot be achieved solely by systems, named democracy. What is essential is to accomplish an order based on a

human-centred political understanding and governance as well as consensus between the government and the citizens. Syria has suffered and continues to suffer from an immense destruction and pain. It is not only humanity, but also a society and culture being destroyed in Syria. There is a process whereby international law is disregarded and the most basic humanitarian values are torn down. The massacre and torture exerted on women and children have already gone down as a black mark in the world history. In the current situation, it is not one country or the other but the whole global system that is left destitute in the face of the systemic massacre, torture and chemical weapons use.

While the Syrian issue continues to tear our heart out, the spring in Egypt has suddenly turned into winter and recently to a chilling climate prickling at our conscience. Incidents in Egypt not only mark the dissolution of a movement but also the end of understanding of civilization in Egypt. We have witnessed a deliberate coup under our very eyes. Hundreds are facing the threat of execution on political charges. The whole global order has remained silent or failed to react as requi-

red to the coup and executions. Nowadays, Libya is on the verge of instability and conflict. One had better see the incidents as the crisis of the global order and its failure to respond to the developments and adapt to changes rather than a crisis of the Arab Spring.

The Transformation of Turkey and the Arab World

Turkey has been oblivious to the developments in the Arab geography all along. Turkey has gone through an exhaustive transformation to evolve into its current state. Turkey has thus developed a realistic approach towards regional transformation and avoided momentary assessments. With its strong relations and dynamic policies involved, Turkey is conveying a message of peace, prosperity and trust to the world. The momentum Turkey achieved in its relations thanks to the positive and humane foreign policy pursued in the Middle East and North Africa in the last 12 years has been a noteworthy development.

Domestic policy steps taken by the AK Party governments lie at the background of this foreign policy initiative. Leaving the status quo-o-

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oriented and static mentality of the past behind, Turkey has undergone a process of open and dynamic change under the AK Party rule. When AK Party came to power in 2002, it immediately took significant steps to protect the fundamental rights and freedoms and to ensure the rule of law. The first step taken by the AK Party government was to revoke the state of emergency in the South Eastern region, densely populated by the Kurds. Since then, reforms have been undertaken to transform the state, regulate military-civilian relations, protect human rights and ensure sustainable development. New regulations in more than eighty troubled areas have been introduced through consultations with the public. It has been ob-

served that these reforms have positive impact on the economic structure.

With this perspective, Turkey has improved ties with the Middle East and North Africa. Some countries that we had close relations later witnessed popular uprisings. Yet during the time that their relations with Turkey flourished, these regimes were not in conflict with their own people. Once the regimes resorted to violence to repress the demands of their citizens, Turkey chose to stand by the people of those countries.

Going through the most successful period of its 90-year Republican history under the AK Party rule on one hand, and maximising its economic, cultural, political ties with the

Middle East and North Africa on the other hand, Turkey upholds universal values and humanity in the hearts of people over interests. It expressed clearly that regimes disregarding human rights and particularly the right to life would not be tolerated and acted accordingly. Turkey sought diplomatic solutions to end the bloodshed when the regimes resorted to violence.

Turkey has adopted a very clear attitude towards change throughout the entire process. Turkey relied on three main principles. Firstly, every country must manage the process of change according to their region, country and conditions; in other words, relative change is a necessity. Secondly, the change should be realized under the scope of a political agenda embracing all segments of the society. Thirdly, measures must be taken to ensure that change occurs within a process, free of violence. Turkey has not uttered these principles as an outsider observing the process. Turkey has actually shared its own experiences through these principles.

In the meantime, Turkey expressed the view that the future of the region should be shaped by the people of the

region themselves; hence, opposed foreign intervention in consideration of the potential devastating consequences. Turkey only made the following recommendation to the leaders: “Listen to your people and pay attention to their demands.” What is essential is not just the name of the regime but its adoption of a governance mentality incorporating justice, economic development and human rights. Turkey argued that the transition to stable and legitimate political structures could only be possible by ensuring the balance between security and freedoms. We see the people of the region as our eternal brothers and regard it a duty to reduce sectarian tensions. In many cases in the recent past, Turkey has assumed a highly constructive role in this field.

From a different perspective, although it has been pleasing to see friendly countries willing to see it play a different role, Turkey never wished to assume an “elder brother” role, nor has it attempted to mentor these countries. Turkey will maintain its policies prioritizing human rights, justice and regional cooperation. Turkey also has lessons to learn from its Arab friends as well as the rest of the world. Turkey has

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considered this process of change to be a bilateral interaction. Turkey moved from the principle that exchanging opinions around the same table and preserving moral virtue is essential.

The Sustainability of Regional Transformation

Looking back on the past, we see that a lot of blood has been shed and is still being shed despite all the efforts. Yet, in the current situation, the Arab region is still leading its own adventure and will continue to do so. Despite all the turbulence, coups and massacres, the region has reached a point of no return. Moreover, the root causes of the popular uprisings in the Middle East are still there. The people de-

mand for justice and freedom, welfare and peace.

At the same time, compared to the examples of Egypt, Syria and Libya that are currently in a temporary bottleneck, we should pay attention to the examples of Tunisia, which ensured consensus and drafted its constitution successfully, and Yemen, which managed to sustain the process of dialogue despite all the problems. We should bear in mind that the reforms in Morocco and Jordan guarantee the future of these countries. In order to carry out reforms, the rulers need not to wait for popular movements. Changes in line with the universal norms provide an enormous opportunity for the regional countries to gain further strength and efficacy.



In this connection, it would be useful to emphasize an issue related to the structure of the global politics. After the Second World War, a bipolar structure arose in the global politics. The Middle East has witnessed various proxy wars of which it was not a direct party due to the conflict between these two poles. The states which found themselves in the middle of these conflicts had to take a side and sowed the seeds of a long-lasting hostility among themselves. We should also be aware of this threat even today. The incidents taking place in Syria and in Ukraine are signalling to a new Cold War. This time, we should be cautious against such a process in our region and we should not be caught in the middle but be mediators instead. The Middle East should not take a side but rather act as a balancing factor. We should exert every effort, so that this process does not face any more destruction and come to an end with positive results.

Arab Youth and Regional Transformation

The Arab youth represents the future of the region and should be taken into consideration. The future of the Arab

world lies in the hands of the youth. The effort exerted by the Arab youth to be able to express themselves should be appreciated. The societies which rely on their youth for a more prosperous future have surely found the key to success.

One of the most important assets of Turkey is the density of our young population. A dynamic, determined and enthusiastic Turkey against an aging Europe looks to the future with confidence. When we take the population of the Arab world of which 60% are under the age of 25, I am very hopeful for a common bright future.

All the riches of the world are worthless when compared to the youth that walks towards the future with confidence. For this reason, we should discuss the means through which the future of the Arab world, namely the Arab youth and the Turkish youth, can set sail to the future side by side. What matters here is to take the right side with our youth in the flow of history and to position ourselves in line with the future developments.

Within this framework, we host the youth from the Arab world in Turkey, organize programs for media representatives and bring the academics together. These programs which are

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based on mutual interaction strengthen the direct contact not only amongst the rulers but also amongst the different circles of the society and politics. I would like to emphasize that there is a wide cooperation area particularly in the areas of youth, media and university programs. These activities are conducted by the Office of Public Diplomacy. Turkey hopes to contribute to the mutual cooperation and regional transformation by enhancing youth and media programs.

Media and Regional Transformation

At this point, we should mention the media sector which plays an important role in regional transformation. The power of media and accountability are directly proportional. Media as the fourth power is the window

of societies which opens to the world. The exterior world will know you the way media outlets represent. In this regard, possessing powerful communication channels is very important for the world to get unbiased information.

There are many televisions and journals which conduct the profession of journalism in a very active way in the Arab world. When the sources become more diversified, one can have access to different perspectives and opinions more easily and thus prejudice and misdirection of perception will decrease, as well. We see that there is a friendly competition on this matter in the Arab world. The presence of competition in fact brings along development and quality even more.

The media sector in Turkey



is getting stronger and prospering day by day. There are currently 1059 radios and 256 televisions that realise terrestrial broadcast in our country. There are 293 satellite and 130 cable television channels that are currently broadcasting in Turkey, as well. The total number of national and local periodicals and journals is more than 7000. Turkey has a very vivid and dynamic media sector.

I consider media and communication as a crucial means of enhancing our relations with the Arab world. We established a channel which broadcasts in Arabic within Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT) to this end. We are still working on establishing a channel broadcasting in English. We have selected the Middle East and Africa as our primary area for the Anatolian Agency, the state-run news agency of Turkey. Anatolian Agency has opened 14 offices in the Middle East and around 500 staff is working in these offices. We are very pleased to see that our broadcasts in Arabic are followed with great interest in the region. We are working on bigger projects and plans in order to deepen our relations with the region regarding media and communication.

Deep Roots of Regional Transformation and need for Regional Solidarity

If we discuss the transformation in the Arab world, we should talk about permanent, long-lasting and systematic strategies rather than short-term, instant and rapid changes. For all these reasons, Turkey thinks that the region needs investments in youth, media and communications; good governance, in other words in social capital. All changes start in the bottom. One does not feel waves in the depths of seas. Once the sea becomes shallow, then the waves become greater, as well. The societies have similar deep structures in which absorption and change slowly occurs. If you shallow these deep structures, then you cause serious destruction on them.

Fight, turmoil and conflict may bring no good to the Islamic world. The Islamic world should give peace, justice and serenity messages to the world. Whoever faces a problem, wherever there is a problem or conflict, the Islamic world should be there and support the needy regardless of their religion, language, ethnicity or colour. In this connection, we should jointly take the first step to stop the bloodshed

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in Syria and Egypt and to create a stable atmosphere for their development. It is time for the Islamic world to talk about the future and Turkey is ready to do his own part to achieve this aim. If the Islamic world shows a common will to this end, we can take decisive steps to bring peace and happiness to Myanmar, Syria, Egypt and Palestine.

The international organisations serving in the Middle East and North Africa have many responsibilities in this regard. The Arab League, Gulf Cooperation Council and Organisation of Islamic Cooperation need to play a more active role and provide solutions to the current problems more effectively. Strengthening these structures

should be among the primary issues to be dealt with for a brighter future.

The Economic Dimension of Regional Transformation

The economic perspective of the transformation in the Arab world is as important as its political perspective. Natural resources, particularly oil and natural gas, present great opportunities to many countries in the region. We should discuss the methods of the sustainable development in the region by turning this opportunities into advantages. If the economics is the art of managing the scarce resources, we should develop more effective formulas in order to direct the natural resources of the Arab world into unity

and permanent welfare. We also wish to use the energy resources which are depleted day by day in order to build a big island of welfare and security in our immediate surroundings.

Many countries in the Middle East, in which popular movements have occurred, do not have natural resources. That all these countries are struggling with economic problems points out another dimension of the issue. When the police officers usurped the mobile stand of a Tunisian street vendor, the vendor burnt himself which triggered the process resulting in the Arab Spring. This tragic incident shows the importance of the economic perspective in regional transformation.

When looking through this perspective, the countries that possess robust economies in the Arab world should develop policies so that economically weak countries can develop and enhance their welfare level. If the strong Arab capital invests in the region and neighbouring countries in such areas as technology, production and R&D, rather than providing cash-flow to the less developed countries, it will trigger integration amongst the countries and enhance the security atmosphere.

Politics and economy cannot be separated from one another. If we want to have peace, welfare and security on these lands, we should benefit from the great opportunities that the economy presents us. The great economies of Europe carried the weak economies on their shoulders for 50 years and this is still the case. If this model brings along regional stability, the Middle Eastern region should also be meticulously examined.

According to the data from IMF, there are only 3 Middle Eastern countries including Turkey among the top 20 economies of the world. These three countries and others have clearly different opinions concerning the future of the region. Apart from these differences, other countries' policies to achieve economic rents through political manipulations drags the region into an instability deadlock. The economies feel comfortable in environments where security, peace and stability prevail. Once the Middle East settles the security and stability problems, the majority of the top 20 economies will arise from these lands. An economic integration based on mutual dependence is needed to be able to reach this goal. Turkey welco-

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mes every kind of cooperation opportunities to this end.

Another promising development in the region is that the countries located on the North Africa and the Middle East have grown 5% in average in the last 10 years. This is a sign of the potential that this region possesses. For this reason, the export shares of these countries with Turkey have tripled in the meantime. We should ensure political stability and fortify the mutual political relations to enhance these figures. Removing the obstacles before free circulation and improving the transportation facilities will be complementary factors in this process.

Turkey is very optimistic about the future of the region. Turkey believes that the transformation process will be finalized successfully, the people of the region will be ruled by the governments which will take their demands into consideration and they will reach better living standards. Turkey wishes that the conflicts in the region will come to an end and the culture of coexistence based on mutual respect may reign in the region once again, without inciting further discrimination on the grounds of religion, ethnicity and sects.

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