

**Wilton Park Inaugural Annual Address by H.E. Abdullah GÜL,
President of the Republic of Turkey,
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Check against Delivery

“HISTORIC TRANSITION IN THE MIDDLE EAST
AND ITS IMPACT ON GLOBAL POLITICS”

Dear Mr. Burge,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Academics,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a distinct privilege for me to deliver the inaugural speech of the newly introduced London Conferences of Wilton Park.

At the outset, I would like to express my appreciation to Mr. Burge and his team for bringing me together with such a distinguished audience.

As we host a series of Wilton Park conferences in Istanbul, we are first hand witnesses of Wilton Park’s important contributions to the exchange of fresh ideas on a wide range of topics.

I have attended Wilton Park Conferences several times and participated in the debates in closed sessions. The last one was in 2001 when I was a Member of Parliament. The conference was held in Sussex.

Though I was impressed with the pastoral atmosphere of Sussex, I highly commend the idea of bringing the Wilton Park Conferences to London. I am confident that the dynamic atmosphere of London will have a positive impact on the output of these series of Conferences.

Distinguished Participants,

The global agenda is currently full of important developments, among which the historic transition in the Middle East and North Africa comes to the fore with its potential global ramifications.

Thus, today I will focus on this historic process and its impact on global politics, as well as what needs to be done to keep it going in the right direction.

Let me start by sharing my views and analysis on what actually is happening in this region.

First of all, even before the events unfolded in this part of the world, we were aware of the need for change in this region, given the unsustainable nature of regimes in power.

I drew attention to this need as early as 2003 at an OIC Conference in Tehran and reiterated my call to the regional leaders on various occasions since then. Behind closed doors, I privately shared my views with the leaders as well.

Good-governance, rule of law, transparency, accountability, gender equality, respect for fundamental rights and freedoms and the need to undertake the necessary reforms were the key elements of my address.

What I urged was simply to put our houses in order. I pointed to the fact that, only if the legitimate aspirations of the people are heeded, positive socio-economic developments will follow suit.

While I was making these calls for change to the region, we were introducing ground breaking democratic and economic reforms in Turkey. Those reforms were well calculated policies. They were all written in the AK Party Election Declaration and the Urgent Action Plan of the 58th Government in 2002.

Therefore, our call for reform was credible and received as a voice from within by the people of the region.

Unfortunately, despite some reluctant steps, we witnessed no real reform process in the region during the past decade. It was either due to lack of will or shortsighted policies of the ruling elites.

Moreover, influential members of the international community preferred status-quo over change, fearing that fundamentalist regimes might take over. Consequently, they preferred to have friendly but undemocratic regimes in power and this was abused by the political elites for their own survival.

But in 2011, the winds of change have finally reached and started to engulf the entire region with home-grown dynamics. Led by the youth, people on the street organized mass movements in search of better living conditions and greater enjoyment of fundamental rights and freedoms. For them it was the call of destiny for a life in dignity. Thus, we think the region is now finally catching up with the natural course of history.

In fact, the dynamics of change in the region are reminiscent of the 1848 revolutions and the 1989 events of Europe. I think this resemblance puts a unique duty on the shoulders of the West.

In essence, democracy is about institutions, not about religion or ethnicity. And every experience in institution building can be valuable.

It is now high time for the West to erase the bitter memories of the past and offer sincere and genuine assistance to the countries in transition.

In this endeavor, however, the West should not be driven by narrow calculations of self-interest. Nobody should impose their own rights and wrongs.

On our part, Turkey has adopted from the outset a principled approach based on universal values.

Having unique historical, social and geographical bonds with the region, we take our rightful place on the side of the peoples of the region.

We stand ready to share our experience in democratization and institution-building, as well as political and economic liberalization with the countries in the region.

Actually, we have already taken some steps in this direction with the new and prospective leaders of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya.

My and Prime Minister Erdoğan's recent visits to these countries have shown clearly the affection towards Turkey in the hearts and minds of the people. It is obvious that Turkey is seen as a source of inspiration by the people in the region.

The people of the Middle East rightfully deserve a dignified life and the dividends of democracy and peace.

In fact, our well established policies vis-à-vis the Middle East have been driven by this incentive.

Turkey is sincerely supporting democratic transformation of the region in order to benefit from the dividends of peace. We believe that democracy is the ultimate guarantor of security and stability. We would like to see a true climate of peace in the region which in turn leads to prosperity.

Distinguished Participants,

Let me close the parenthesis about Turkey's policies and return to the situation in the region as we are now at a critical threshold vis-a-vis the future of the ongoing transformation process.

While Tunisia, Egypt and Libya move on to the second phase of their transition and grapple with building the institutions of democracy, the Syrians and Yemenis are yet trying to repeat the revolutions of these countries.

Certainly, democratic transformation will not be swift nor uniform. Everyone agrees that political reforms shall be accompanied by economic and institutional ones. But, yet there is no

successful political program fully elaborated and tested as to its ability to bring about real change.

Therefore, although there is no doubt about the irreversibility of the process of change, it is not certain whether the legitimate aspirations of those who ignited the revolts will be accommodated in a quick and sustainable manner.

The question mark emanates from the following set of risks:

One of the concerns arises from the attempts by extremists who seek fomenting sectarian, ethnic or ideological strife across the region to hijack the process.

In this regard, I observe a simmering threat in the region based on a Sunni - Shiite divide. This dangerous process which will squander the energy and the resources of the region must be prevented.

I would like to call upon all governments and organizations not to fall into the trap of such a primitive divide in the Muslim world.

It poses the greatest threat to the prospects of the Arab Spring and has the potential to catapult the Muslim World from the 21st Century into the darkness of the Middle Ages.

Another risk is about the remnants of the old regime trying to cling to power and slowly kill the spirit of revolution. So, we should work hard to show the people that their legitimate aspirations are to be materialized in a plausible time frame.

A viable democracy goes hand in hand with fast economic development and effective capacity building. Nevertheless, the negative impact of the current socio-economic problems of the region which inevitably got worse in these initial stages of the post-revolution is another source of worry.

Failure in restoring the economic order may eventually lead to chaos and turn the tides against the democratic transition in the region.

That is why, I have been urging the global financial institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF and major developed countries to launch a comprehensive economic restoration program to support the political transition in the Middle East. This support will particularly be crucial in Egypt and Tunisia.

In a nutshell, we have to be extremely careful and vigilant against those challenges. An accountable, transparent and participatory democracy is the only viable response to overcome such dangers.

The formation of healthy, functioning oppositions with a broad political base is crucial in terms of the success of this transformation process. Democracies cannot survive without pluralism. Pluralism cannot be achieved without effective opposition.

Those who unleashed the power of the street now need to organize themselves into functioning political parties, develop programs and build constituencies and should refrain from rhetoric and ideological fixations.

They need to shift from starting the change to institutionalizing it. The maintenance of public support for the revolution's objectives and actually achieving them will depend on this.

Furthermore, we should all keep in mind that the creation of an atmosphere of dialogue and consensus in the region is compulsory for a successful transition.

The forces of the revolution should not make the same mistake of their former leaders in trying to monopolize the power and exclude all those who think differently.

Democracy is not the rule of majority or the powerful. On the contrary, it requires leadership with humility and responsibility. Tunisia is the first country being tested on this account and they have so far given us hope for the future.

Distinguished Participants,

I regret to say that our neighbor Syria in which we have politically and diplomatically invested immensely in recent years has failed in correctly analyzing the developments in the region.

As Turkey, we always believed in the merits of engagement policy with Syria. In fact, the people of Syria has greatly benefitted from the engagement for the past ten years.

On the other hand, our track record is very well known when it comes to resisting the foreign pressures to change this policy. But, this time we cannot remain indifferent to the demands and pressure coming from the people of Syria.

Therefore, we exerted enormous efforts in public and behind closed doors in order to convince the Syrian leadership to lead the democratic transition. Despite all this, the Baath regime continues to use oppression and violence on its own people. Violence breeds violence. Now, unfortunately, Syria has come to a point of no return.

The fate of Syria is also important for the entire region, since the country sits on top of sectarian fault lines.

Defining this democratic struggle along the sectarian, religious and ethnic lines would drag the whole region into turmoil and bloodshed.

In fact, not only for Syria but for the entire region we have a responsibility to defend the territorial integrity and political unity of the countries at all cost. New and old divisions between and within the countries of the region should not be allowed to take root.

It runs counter to the human nature to support the dictatorships. However, if the alternative was to be chaos they would not hesitate to live in order under an authoritarian regime.

Therefore, the opposition in Syria must embrace all sectarian, ethnic and religious minorities and assure them that the new administration will not resort to revanchist or discriminatory practices after the collapse of the Baath regime. When this is truly believed by the people of Syria the job will be over.

Likewise in Libya, the transition Council must make sure that the new government is the government of all without any exception.

Only through such reconciliatory messages and measures can true democracy can prevail in those countries and set an example for all aspiring nations in the region and beyond.

On the other hand, the western countries must have realistic expectations about the nature of the Arab Spring. One should not expect the dissident movements in the region to adopt Westminster-like democratic agendas.

These home grown movements will certainly attach particular importance to their own values and traditions. Therefore, imposing “one size fits all” recipes on these societies is bound to fail.

It would be much better if the new political movements can build their own democratic institutions in harmony with their traditions and universal values.

Distinguished Participants,

All this becomes ever more important given the potential global ramifications of a successful transition in the Middle East.

Even at this initial stage, I think the Arab spring had its first global effect by encouraging the people all over the world to better organize themselves and voice their demands in a much more powerful and effective way because, a wall of fear has fallen not only in the region but also across the world.

In this regard, the Wall Street protests already spreading to different corners of the world to express resentment to economic and social injustices –are certainly inspired by the heroic acts of the Arab people who bravely took the streets against dictatorships.

Of course, this historic episode of democratization will inspire other peoples who seek accountable governments in other parts of the world.

Indeed, a thorough analysis of this effect indicates that, in the state-society equilibrium of governing structures, the pointer is shifting from state towards society. As such, people and individuals have moved back to the center of politics.

In other words, the transition from “society serving the state” to “state serving the society” is being accelerated.

With citizens becoming the main pillar and driver of politics, I hope and believe that there will be more space for freedoms all over the world.

All this once again proves that, in this era of raised awareness due to advances in communication technology; a state is sustainable only if it takes strength from its people.

To understand the real impact of the region’s transition on global politics, we should also bear in mind its vast human, natural and material resources.

Today, around sixty percent of Arabs are under the age of thirty and the region hosts two thirds of the world’s discovered natural resources.

Regrettably, leaders of the region preferred for decades, an economic system based on a few sectors and subsidized domestic needs with their rather limited resources. They have failed to diversify their economies for generating new areas of employment and entrepreneurship.

Now, the Arab Spring presents a unique opportunity for setting the scene for the development of the region, on the basis of a genuine market economy. Of course, this depends on the implementation of necessary political, economic and institutional reforms.

We hope to see an economic paradigm shift from a rent-seeking and rent-distributing economy to an efficiency based economic system in the region. This change will bring more transparency and accountability in economic life. Such a new economic climate will not only

lead to rapid economic growth for the countries but also to a fairer distribution of welfare in society.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Unlike the European continent, the Middle East lacks an efficient regional economic cooperation and integration mechanism. We all witnessed the role played by the European Union in facilitating the democratic transition in Central and Eastern Europe after the fall of Berlin Wall.

I believe that the establishment of a pan-regional economic cooperation mechanism in the Middle East would open up new opportunities for the entire world in a way that will turn the tides against global recession.

Political and economic stability in the region will also stabilize the oil markets and with that the global price levels of all the main commodities.

Reliable oil supply from the region and the increased energy security that comes with it will provide a huge relief on global economics and politics.

But even more importantly, as the region continues to make progress towards democracy, the level and nature of threat perception over the entire world would change in a positive direction.

To this end, we must also lead the formation of a regional “security architecture” in order to consolidate the achievements of the Arab Spring.

The region should no longer be a consumer of global security and instability, but will have the chance to produce security on its own.

As a result, one could also foresee growing cooperation on security matters within the region just like what happened in Europe after the Cold War.

I have always been a staunch supporter of an Organization of Security and Cooperation in the Middle East following the example of the OSCE in Europe. This new regional security architecture must encompass the creation of a “WMD-Free Zone in the Middle East” which includes Israel and Iran as well.

Now it seems more relevant than ever, although there is still a relatively long way to come to that point.

I believe this is an extremely important project worth pursuing with vigor and commitment. It would certainly help consolidate the gains of democratization in the region and make the whole world a safer place to live.

Distinguished Participants,

Another key element in this rather checkered picture is of course the future of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

It is extremely important not to allow this issue to be overshadowed by the Arab Spring. After all, without reaching a comprehensive settlement between the Arabs and the Israelis, no spring in the region can endure until summer.

More than any other country, Israel, must adapt to the new political climate in the region. Israel’s well-being will depend on an honorable peace with the Arabs. Such a fair and honorable peace cannot be achieved by merely imposing Israel’s own terms on the others.

In the past, Israel was able to deal with the Arab leaders. But, history has repeatedly taught us that a true, fair and lasting peace can only be made between peoples, not ruling elites.

As I mentioned on several occasions, democracy and demographics are the two forces that will shape the future of the Middle East.

Sooner or later, the Middle East will become democratic, and by definition a democratic government should reflect the true wishes of its people. These democratic governments

cannot afford to pursue foreign policies that are perceived as unjust, undignified and humiliating by their own people.

Moreover, Israel too, cannot afford to be perceived as an apartheid island surrounded by an Arab sea of anger and hostility.

Therefore, time and again, I called upon the leaders of Israel to approach the peace process with a strategic mindset, rather than pursuing short-sighted tactical maneuvers.

The more Israel keeps its inflexibility to calls towards a fair, viable and comprehensive peace and disrespects international law, the more it will become isolated.

Under these circumstances, it will be impossible for Israel to deal with the emerging democratic and demographic currents in the absence of a peace agreement with the Palestinians and the rest of the Arab world.

Distinguished Participants,

In conclusion, let me sum up what I have already told you.

First, the Arab Spring is merely the normalization of history in this part of the world. It was inevitable then, and it is irreversible now.

However, the road ahead is still a bumpy one full of potholes and possible wrong turns.

Therefore, the international community should do its utmost in helping the people and the regimes to remain on track and achieve their democratic aspirations sooner rather than later. This will make a hugely positive impact at global level in political, economic and security terms.

I should add yet another global dividend of the Arab Spring which has already proven that democratic values are not for a selected few in the West but that they belong to the entire human race.

I hope that this sheer reality will provide a strong response to those arguing for a clash of civilizations and promoting Islamophobia.

The world should now understand that violence, extremism and terrorism have nothing to do with a specific culture or religion and all human beings irrespective of their faith, ethnicity or creed, vie for the same goals.

Therefore, it is high time for the international community to heal the political and psychological damage inflicted upon us all by the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001.

If the Arab Spring can cultivate such an understanding and consolidate it through its progress, then the whole world will enjoy its blossom for many generations to come.

Turkey, which represents a living example that democracy, modernity and Islam are compatible, will certainly be a full partner in this honorable journey.

Thank you.