

Egemen Bağış sets out why the Arab Spring strengthens Turkey's case for EU membership

As a wave of uprisings has swept across the Middle East and north Africa, Turkey's democratisation and socio-economic transformation has attracted extensive attention – and for good reason, because Turkey has emerged as a genuine source of inspiration for pro-change groups in the region.

Historical ties with the countries of the region dating back to the Ottoman era contribute to Turkey's popularity. The source of inspiration, though, is what Turkey symbolises today – that is, the possibility that a country can transform its society, economy and politics, and make itself a strong and democratic regional actor.

Turkey's firm anchoring within international structures has undoubtedly strengthened this dynamic and stimulated the consolidation of democracy. In the past decade in particular, Turkey has taken bold steps on a set of fundamental freedoms – of expression, of the press, of religion and of association. Privacy is protected. The death penalty has been abolished. Civilian-military relations have been normalised.

On the economic front, Turkey's remarkable growth since 2002 – a result of sound macro-economic policies and comprehensive structural reforms – has made it a favourite of foreign investors. The sixth-largest economy in Europe and the 16th-largest in the world, Turkey now has a per-capita income higher than that of several EU countries. Turkey's economy is growing faster than any sizable European economy. In the past ten years, the number of hospitals, schools and highways has tripled. There is no doubt that the EU accession process has been the driving force of this socio-economic transformation.

The pro-active foreign policy that Turkey has pursued in recent years has had the side-effect of making it a source of political and economic inspiration for countries from the Balkans to the Middle East and the Caucasus. Turkey is the only country that can hold the chair of the Organisation of Islamic Conference

Role model for democracy



and at the very same time pursue membership negotiations with the EU. Turkey's 'zero problem, limitless trade' policy with the countries of the wider region has made it a haven of stability, and, as a mediator, it has sought to resolve long-standing problems in the region.

When the uprisings in the region began, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was one of the first leaders in the world to urge regimes to heed the outcry on the streets. Today, his reputation is stronger than ever in a region stretching from Morocco to Palestine, from Egypt to Afghanistan.

The uprisings have brought Turkey to the forefront of Arab minds – and, in the process, have underlined how important is the integration between Turkey and the EU. When a Moroccan taxi-driver in New York or an Egyptian

waiter in London asks whether Turkey will some day be a member of the EU, there is now no surprise at the question. The people, media, and governments of the Middle East are following Turkey's EU vocation closely.

The Arabs who are trying to overthrow authoritarian regimes are seeking freedom and change today, and democracy and prosperity tomorrow. Turkey's accession to the EU would send a positive signal to them.

But it would also be a good sign for the millions who for centuries have felt marginalised by Western structures. In the Muslim world, the double standards that Turkey faces in its accession bid feed these old sentiments, and they keep alive questions about whether the EU truly represents a set of values or merely defines itself narrowly as a 'Christian

Europe'. Now, in addition, double standards risk sending negative messages to reformist movements across the region and encouraging doubts that the EU is sincere about the fundamental values that it espouses.

Alienating Turkey from the EU track because of political short-sightedness of some member states will discourage the millions who look to Turkey as a trailblazer for their own development and democratisation. It will also damage the credibility of a Union that aspires to be a normative power promoting universal values of democracy, cultural diversity and pluralism. It is for the EU to decide whether it wants to become a genuine global power.

Egemen Bağış is Turkey's minister for EU affairs and its chief negotiator in EU accession talks.

A depressing anniversary?

A review of four decades of EU involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict should prompt a revision of conventional wisdom, writes Anders Persson

On 14 May, the EU entered its fifth decade of involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Four decades ago, on 14 May 1971, the EU – or rather its predecessor, the European Community – issued its first official statement on what it had identified as "the problem of the Middle East". This, "the problem of the Middle East", was the Israeli-Arab conflict, and the European Community concluded "that it is of great importance to Europe that a just peace should be established in the Middle East".

Several wars and some peace agreements later, what was called the Israeli-Arab conflict is now referred to

as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Despite decades of mediation efforts by the international community, and billions of euros and dollars in aid to the Palestinian Authority and the government of Israel, the conflict continues, a fact that in itself indicates that neither the belligerents themselves nor outside powers such as the EU have been very successful in their efforts to bring peace to this troubled region.

But while the EU's involvement in the conflict can hardly be considered a success, the EU has made one important contribution to peace – it has successfully defined and legitimised the historical principles of a future peace. This began in 1973, when the European Community issued a statement that recognised for the first time the legitimate rights of the Palestinians, followed by the European Community's recognition of their right to a homeland (in 1977), self-determination (in 1980), a state (in 1999) and, finally, a state with Jerusalem as its capital (in 2009).

After decades of diplomatic battles, it is increasingly clear that the Israelis, the Americans, the Palestinians and other Arabs have all gradually moved

in the direction of accepting many of the ideas articulated in the EU's declarations. This has had a transformative impact on the ground in the West Bank, empowering the Palestinian Authority and laying the groundwork for Prime Minister Salam Fayyad to build functioning institutions and keep the prospects of peace alive among Palestinians. The value of the EU's vanguard role, leading the international community on new policy departures, is hugely underestimated in Europe.

The Israelis have long recognised the EU's normative power, even if, for political reasons, they tend to downplay its importance – but even that is beginning to change. One of the leading lights of the Israeli right, David Horowitz, has repeatedly stressed the need for Israel to invest in better relations with the EU, referring to the EU as "a kind of global barometer of legitimacy in international affairs".

The US too has realised the importance of the EU's normative power, a point that lends credence to reports in the US and Israeli press that claim that the US is secretly pushing the EU to be tougher against Israel and to lead the Quartet's diplomatic efforts in this direction. When the US hides behind the EU's normative power, the conventional wisdom that the US

leads and the EU follows appears no longer valid.

If, as is widely assumed, the Palestinians decide in September to ask the United Nations General Assembly to recognise a Palestinian state, the initiative may stand and fall with the votes of the EU's 27 member states.

Moreover, EU unity may prove very important in convincing the US not to vote against recognition – and while the US cannot veto Palestinian statehood in the UN General Assembly, a Palestinian state would be much stronger if its birth were not opposed by the US. If all EU states decide to support the declaration, US President Barack Obama will pay an enormously high political price if he does not do the same. If only a few EU countries decide to support the declaration, Obama will pay a much lower price.

Whatever the outcome of the likely vote on Palestinian statehood, it is time for Europeans and their leaders to realise that the Union possesses much more legitimacy than many might believe.

Anders Persson is a doctoral student at Lund University, Sweden. He is researching the role of the EU in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict within the framework of the Just and Durable Peace by Piece programme, which is funded by the EU.