



Turkey's Model and Emerging Role in the New Middle East



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March 21, 2012

As autocratic Arab regimes fell in a domino-like fashion this past year, many analysts continue to reference Turkey as a source of inspiration and a model for the future of these post-uprising societies. Turkey's "experiment" eventually produced a multiparty system, mixed economy, and an increasingly free enterprise system that has led to a powerful and resurgent nation. This experience has been successfully applied in the Muslim states of Indonesia and Malaysia – is the Arab world next? Is there a clear-cut path to institutionalizing this particular model across the region in a monolithic fashion? The complexities of the Turkish experience must be dissected across multiple aspects and examined appropriately based on specific case studies: from economic and political reform to the emergence of viable institutions throughout the new Middle East.

The Turkish model is defined by its successful experiment with an Islamist-rooted political party governing a nation founded on the principles of democratic secularism. However, secularism was initially imposed on society, often by undemocratic means, under the Turkish Republic's founder Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's vision of a modern and Western oriented nation. According to many observers, any type of foundational restructuring along the same lines would have to be implemented from a bottom-up approach in the Arab world. Under the current wave of Islamist successes in the region, a revolutionary social contract fashioned in terms of secularism seems remote to impossible. In this regard, the distinguishing feature of the Turkish model may not be conducive to the Arab world at the moment. However, various aspect of Turkey's experience should be explored as a source of inspiration for the region's existing contexts and emerging societies.

The civil-military engagement that characterizes modern Turkey cannot be simply implemented in Arab countries with historically distinguished relationships between the armed forces and society. Each state is characterized by a unique relationship with their respective military institutions which has translated into different outcomes throughout the uprisings. The absence of wider military suppression in Tunisia is contributing to a relatively smooth transition process, Egypt's political and military echelons continue to struggle for power, and the Syrian crisis will persist as long as the core of the armed forces remains well equipped and loyal to the regime. The Turkish military has historically represented the guardian of the Republic, enforcing the nation's secular nature by extending its influence over political developments while exploiting communist, secessionist, and Islamist threats. Through multiple coup d'états and subsequent returns to civilian rule, the military has served as the main check on the executive branch and other institutions during significant episodes of political gridlock.¹

Eventually, Turkish society developed sufficient confidence in the capacity of democratic institutions which led to a relatively diminished role for the military and allowed for the rise of political Islam. This experience suggests that it would be beneficial for the Arab states to embark on a journey to strengthen the credibility and efficiency of their institutions in order to achieve a more democratic social contract. The role of Turkey's professional bureaucracy was crucial during instances of political instability, leading to popular confidence in institutions and an increased tolerance of dissent. Arab societies may have a challenge to constrain elected Islamist governments without a professional bureaucracy and a lack of accountability and transparency amongst vital institutions, such as the judiciary and electoral commissions. Therefore, Turkey's relatively robust and durable democracy can be largely attributed to their historic state traditions. Perhaps a more democratic Arab world that increasingly depends on public opinion can look to Turkey and realize a more rational-legal political culture over time.

Turkey's separation of the political and economic spheres is another fundamental example of the country's success throughout its development. The process of economic liberalization led to the creation of an independent Turkish business community that became capable of criticizing the

government and keeping it in check. Such an arrangement improved the nation's democratic structure and facilitated the growth of nongovernmental sources of domestic funding, while significantly enhancing civil society.² These significant developments have led to a more conscious population that is confident in these rising forces to curb excessive governmental power, reinforcing democratic institutions and subverting the military's historic mandate. Arab states, on the other hand, promote a fusion between business interests and politics through patronage systems and associated lending, that stifles the rise of a more autonomous business class and therefore hinders economic development.³ Socio-economic factors, rampant unemployment, and income inequality were the main impetus behind the Arab uprisings and the region must examine Turkey's relatively successful privatization campaign in an effort to improve their respective population's standards of living.

Wherever the state failed in providing basic needs to Turkish citizens, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) filled the void in the form of charity and the people repaid them with votes. Their organizational capacity and grassroots efforts mirror the successful democratic campaigning techniques that have translated into electoral victories for Islamist parties across the Arab world. In this regard, the AKP constitutes a major source of inspiration and emulation amongst the region's emerging political powers. The Turkish Government has the potential to become the leading institution behind the development of the Islamist parties in the region, many of whom are explicitly seeking association with the AKP. This popularity and affinity creates an unprecedented opportunity for cooperation, as the AKP can advocate for the benefits of pragmatism and moderation in a pluralistic system.

It is clear that the AKP represents the preeminent role model for emerging parties of the Arab world; however the Turkish Islamist experiment arose in a drastically different context that cannot be replicated throughout the region. The AKP rose to power in a secular-democratic state operating within a neoliberal paradigm that encourages essential political and economic competition. Conversely, the Muslim Brotherhood is primarily a religious society, organized according to a strict hierarchy structured in the name of Islam, at times in conflict with political and economic considerations.⁴ This subordinate arrangement undermines the Freedom and Justice Party's (FJP) accountability to their Egyptian constituency and provides a contrasting framework that characterizes Turkey's flirtation with political Islam. The foundational secularist aspect of the Turkish model is not relevant to emerging Arab societies who now place a greater emphasis on the role of Islam in governance and public life.

Most importantly, Turkey's experience is very attractive to other countries because of the fact that it is also consistently evolving and improving its democratic institutions. Its level of political and economic development allows the Turkish experiment to serve as a significantly more relevant model for the Middle Eastern states than any other case. Turkey's proximity and cultural and religious affinity with the Arab world provides Turkey with a unique position as a credible role model, as opposed to successful cases from other regional contexts.

It must be noted that recent AKP domestic endeavors have stifled democratic reforms, as freedom of the press has been increasingly threatened, exemplified by the growing number of journalists in jail. Threatening the impartiality of the judiciary and the government's decision to revoke the independence of regulatory authorities further emphasizes a concentrated effort to expand executive power. In addition, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom references Turkey for "systematic and egregious limitations" on religious liberty, adding Turkey to a short list of countries of particular concern.⁵ These developments serve to undermine democratic progress. Nevertheless, the AKP's relatively moderate positions and successful track record in governance need to be examined for successful emulation across the Arab world.

Many analysts refer to the regional interest in the Turkish political system as the basis for its growing popularity; however, some observers suggest that Turkey's rising reputation in the Middle East is mostly attributed to its increasingly confrontational stance with Israel.⁶ Furthermore, Turkey is playing a major role in the Syrian crisis, hosting meetings for opposition forces that seek to bring down the Assad regime. It is also seriously considering the establishment of a buffer zone within Syria to accommodate the large influx of refugees, an endeavour that could result in a military confrontation with Syrian troops. Any form of intervention is unlikely with the absence of international support, unless Turkey perceives that Syria's increasing support for Kurdish rebels is sufficient *casus belli* to invade. Clearly, regional developments and the government's worldview have led to an evitable clash with Turkey's historic "zero problems with neighbours" foreign policy. Turkey's enhanced Islamic identity and increasingly assertive position on the global stage continue to improve its legitimacy throughout the Muslim world.

The Turkish model that is so often referenced in recent discourse regarding the new Middle East cannot be arbitrarily applied to the emerging societies in the Arab world. Rather, there are various aspects to the Turkish experience which can be individually referenced by certain countries that aspire to emulate key elements within the model – from private sector development and political reform to economic reconstruction and numerous policy adoptions. Turkey, with cultural and religious affinities to the Arab world, is itself a democratic project in progress that may constitute a foundational case whereby the region can draw from a unique source of inspiration as post-uprising nations embark on their own respective evolutionary trajectories. It is clear that the democratic wave spreading throughout the Arab world presents Turkey with an unprecedented opportunity to project its influence across the region and demonstrate its unique and historic status within the international community.

¹ Ülgen, Sinan. "From Inspiration to Aspiration: Turkey in the New Middle East." Dec. 2011. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. http://carnegieendowment.org/files/turkey_mid_east.pdf. Pg 7.

² Ibid. Pg 10.

³ Ibid. Pg 25.

⁴ Gumuscu, Sebnem. "Egypt Can't Replicate the Turkish Model: But It Can Learn From It." 12 Jan. 2012. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2012/01/12/egypt-can-t-replicate-turkish-model-but-it-can-learn-from-it/8z6z>

⁵ Radio Free Europe. "U.S. Report Criticizes Tajikistan, Turkey on Religious Rights." 20 Mar. 2012. Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty. http://www.rferl.org/content/tajikistan_turkey_religious_rights/24521456.html

⁶ Ülgen, Sinan & Marwan Muasher. "Can the Turkish Model Gain Traction in the New Middle East?" 19 Dec. 2011. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <http://carnegieendowment.org/2011/12/19/can-turkish-model-gain-traction-in-new-middle-east>