

CHANGE IN THE MIDDLE EAST PUTS TURKEY IN THE EYE OF THE STORM

The wave of anti-government protests sweeping the Arab world offers Turkey opportunities to enhance its position as a regional model of development but also highlights both contradictions in Turkey's foreign policy and shortcomings of its democracy. For the first time in its history, Turkey is emerging as a true bridge between East and West. Change in Egypt and Tunisia and unrest elsewhere in the region however puts Turkish aspirations and its ability to live up to expectations to the test.

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wave of anti-government protests sweeping the Middle East and North Africa that has already toppled two longstanding, authoritarian Arab rulers, shines a spotlight on Turkey in both favorable and challenging ways.

Turkey's success as the region's most democratic state and largest, most diversified economy looms large as Egyptians and Tunisians seek to forge a new future and Algerians, Libyans, Sudanese, Yemenis and Jordanians struggle to ensure that they too will have an opportunity to determine their own course. This unprecedented Arab display of street power puts Turkish aspirations of being a model of development for the Muslim world to the litmus test.

Debate over whether Turkey can serve as a model is no longer restricted to intellectual circles in Western as well as Middle Eastern capitals and policy and opinion makers in Washington, EU capitals and Ankara. It now takes place on the streets and in the parlors of Cairo, Tunis, Algiers, Sana'a, Amman, Manama and Tripoli where change is tangibly being affected. A recent TESEV (Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation) survey¹ showed that 75 percent of the Arab respondents considered Turkey a successful example of coexistence between Islam and democracy and favored a greater Turkish role in the region.

Turkish achievements in terms of democratization, putting its foot in the door of EU membership, electing in more than one poll a political party with roots in Islamist politics in a dogmatically secular political structure, building infrastructure, and liberalizing the economy are not lost on those who draw inspiration from the descendants of the Ottomans who once ruled them. But so is the pro-longed struggle that brought Turkey to where it is today as well as the warts—including efforts to restrain freedom of the Internet and the press as well as adoption of socially more conservative mores in government-owned establishments and yet unfulfilled recognition of minority rights—that have cast a shadow over Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's tenure and the state of Turkish democracy.

While Erdoğan's support for regime change will stick in the minds of Egyptians and Tunisians, so will Iranians remember his failure to support the Green Movement when activists protested in 2009 against allegedly fraudulent elections that returned President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad to office. Similarly, many Sudanese, and particularly those in newly independent, oil-rich South Sudan are unlikely to forget Erdoğan's embrace of wanted Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir. Nonetheless, in a world where popular revolt is more likely to produce more popu-

¹ "Arab World Favors Turkey, Sees As Model, Study Reveals", Today's Zaman, 18 May 2010, <http://www.todayzaman.com/news-210462-arab-world-favors-turkey-sees-as-model-study-reveals.html>

list rather than truly democratic rule, the very things about Turkish foreign policy that have conservative Western foreign policy analysts worried are the ones that resonate on Arab streets and that have substantially raised Turkey's profile in Middle Eastern public opinion, Israel excepted. Turkey's increasingly strained relations with Israel, emotional support for the Palestinians, expansion of diplomatic and economic focus to include the Middle East and its ability to balance NATO membership with a more independent foreign policy –as expressed for example in its failed Iran initiative in cooperation with Brazil– strokes with the foreign policy aspirations of mainstream Arab public opinion.

The absence of burning U.S. flags and Islamist slogans in Arab streets has come as a relief to Western policy makers and analysts. So, has the absence of a single attack on a Jewish institution despite the withdrawal of security at the beginning of the crises. Overlooked is the fact that at prayer time, approximately one third of Cairo's Tahrir Square bowed in the direction of Mecca, not as a political statement but in individual religious observance. In a traditionally conservative, authoritarian ruled part of the world where for much of its modern history the mosque and the soccer pitch served as release valves for pent-up anger and frustration, Turkey's marriage of a secular state with a vibrant economy governed by a moderate Islamist party is what cements its appeal. That appeal is bolstered by popular consumer goods sold across the region and television sitcoms that push moral boundaries.

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It is also boosted by a perception that Turkey under the AKP and a Middle East emerging from the assertion of popular will on the streets of Arab capitals are giving the death knell to competing ideologies –Kemalism and Islamism– that have proven incapable of catering to 21st century needs. The AKP's rise to power has deprived Kemalism of its monopoly as a roadmap toward modernity even if the party has yet to convince many that it can embrace those that were excluded by Kemalism such as the Kurds, Alawites and the staunch secularists. By the same token, Islamism has been forced to cede its monopoly on religion even if the West mistakes demands such as a woman's right to wear headscarf in universities as an assertion of political Islam. Those demands for the right of religious expression in public are couched in terms of human rights rather than religious hegemony. The discarding of ideological straightjackets gives Turkey a significant common

denominator with emerging Arab forces. It has also allowed Turkey to establish itself as a point of reference for Islamist and non-Islamist centrist forces in the region. Tunisian Islamist leader Rachid Ghannouchi, who recently returned from 22 years in exile, and Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, have said they would like to see their countries emulate Turkey. Yet, the limitations of Turkey as a model are likely to emerge as more open political systems develop in Egypt and Tunisia. Those limitations are evident in differences between Turkey's strictly secular vocabulary and religious terms that shape moderate Islamist discourse as well as its ban on the wearing of headscarves in universities and parliament, and criticism that the AKP has replaced military authoritarianism with civilian authoritarianism.

Contributing to Turkey's rise is a fundamental change in Turkish perceptions of the Middle East. As Turkey strived for much of its post-World War II history to be identified as European, Turks looked down on those they once ruled as the dominant colonial power. Perceptions of sustained European rejection of Turkey coupled with the country's assertion of its diplomatic and economic weight across the region and an increased interest in its Ottoman past have changed those attitudes towards Arabs who now are important markets and customers receptive to what Turkey has to offer politically, diplomatically, economically, and culturally. The sense of European rejection of Turkey because it is a predominantly Muslim nation has also garnered it Middle Eastern and North African empathy. Comparisons in economic performance leave no doubt why many Arabs look to Turkey for inspiration: under Erdoğan, average annual incomes in Turkey rose from 3,500 dollars to above 10,000 dollars. Egypt's per capita GDP of 2,160 dollars increased five dollars over the past two decades, according to IMF data.

Turkey's newly-found recognition as a modern day regional power capable of flexing its muscles and asserting its influence is in no small measure the result of a level of engagement with the Middle East and North Africa not seen in Turkey since the days of the Ottoman Empire. In doing so, it has benefited from being the one-eyed king in the land of the blind. Where Arab leaders have been reactive, be it to the breakdown of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, the Iranian nuclear crisis or the assertion of popular will, Turkey has garnered popularity by being proactive. As a result, Turkey, for the first time in its modern history, has created the building blocks needed to position itself as the bridge between East and West that it unsuccessfully asserted to be in the past. Accordingly, U.S. President Barack Obama appeared to acknowledge as much by phoning Erdoğan twice in the six days prior to Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak being pushed out of office. Yet, Turkey's successful projection of itself as a bridge is likely to increase the pressure on it to iron out its warts as well as to make a clear cut choice rather than picking and choosing between support of some assertions of popular will while effectively endorsing authoritarian rule elsewhere.

Post-Mubarak Egypt poses a particular challenge to Turkey and the testing of how far its commitment to change in the region goes. Erdoğan was one of the first leaders to openly call on Mubarak to resign in unambiguous terms in a speech that was broadcast on Arab TV and aired on Cairo's Tahrir Square. His speech represented a break with his foreign policy based on what his foreign minister describes as "zero problems with neighbors" that until then steered clear of democracy and human rights issues in favor of pragmatism and trade deals. To Erdoğan and the Egyptian military, the Turkish model means different things. The Egyptian military, which has effectively ruled Egypt for 60 years, most likely sees Turkey as a model of modernization and economic liberalization controlled by military tutelage that safeguards its political and economic privileges and ensures that Egypt continues to steer a pro-Western course. With other words, the Egyptian military endorses the very model that the AKP has been seeking to modify since its rise to power. If analysis of the Turkish model shows anything, it portrays it as a model of progress in democratization achieved in opposition to rather than driven by the military. Egyptians for now appear to put their faith in the military leading their country within six months to democracy. The lurking schism between the military's objectives and popular aspirations is likely to emerge sooner rather than later as it increasingly becomes clear that the military will seek to retain as much of the old structure as possible repackaged with elections and greater freedoms to ensure that it is domestically and internationally palatable.

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The Egyptian military's interpretation of the Turkish model is the model that Israeli forces as well as AKP critics are advocating for Egypt in a bid to curb the influence of the country's largest opposition group, the Muslim Brotherhood. "Should Egypt's transition to democracy follow Turkey's model, the military would take over the presidency and a civilian national unity government that shares power with the military would form. Mirroring Turkey's constitutional reform process, Egypt would draft a new constitution and prepare the groundwork for free and fair elections," says Soner Çağaptay, a Turkey expert at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.² It is an approach that ultimately prolonged and complicated rather than accelerated Turkey's moves towards greater democracy and would

¹ Soner Çağaptay, "Turkish Model for Egypt", *Hürriyet Daily News*, 4 February 2011, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=turkish-model-for-egypt-2011-02-03>

likely be perceived by many in the Middle East as an effort to stymie Arab efforts to shape their own future and formulate a foreign policy of their own. The Turkish government has so far remained silent on which stage of development of its model it hopes Egypt will look to for inspiration.

Overall, a comparison of what shaped Turkey's development of its model with circumstances elsewhere in the region does not bode well for Egypt and others in the Middle East. For much of their post-World War II history, Turks have insisted that they needed the straightjacket of association with the EU to achieve political and economic reform. Neither Egypt nor others in the Middle East have a straight-jacket to keep them on the right path. Ironically, Turkey's increasingly chilly relations with the EU fueled by Turkish frustration at perceived European attempts to keep it at arm's length may well have allowed Erdoğan to so far get away with his more authoritarian tendencies.

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Turkey's straddling of the democracy fence could also be put to the test if popular protests spread to the oil-rich Gulf, geopolitically a strategic region ruled by authoritarian families that see their countries as fiefdoms, but constitute important Turkish markets and sources of investment. While mass demonstrations in most of the Gulf states are unlikely, discontent in the region is bubbling under the surface. As

a country in which a Sunni minority rules a disaffected Shiite majority, Bahrain has already experienced the democracy contagion. Opposition forces in Kuwait are gearing up to take to the streets despite government efforts to buy off protesters with cash handouts. In recent weeks, Saudi Arabia's dismal soccer performance in the Asian Cup, unemployment, floods in Jeddah that killed at least four people and the granting of asylum to the ousted Tunisian leader have sparked protests and criticism on newspaper op-ed pages as well as on blogs and in Internet chat rooms.

Turkish policy decisions will have much to offer the United States, Europe and Israel as the West and Israel seek to come to grips with a Middle East that irrespective of its form of government will be far more responsive to public opinion than close allies were in the past. As a result, they will adopt policies that are more in line with Turkish foreign policy, including withdrawal of Arab, and particularly Egyptian support, of the blockade of Gaza and closer relations with countries viewed as hostile by the West and Israel such as Syria and Iran. To a degree, the West has

had a first taste of that in its dealings with the Erdoğan government. A changing Middle East, however, turns a Turkey whose foreign policy initially sparked discussion about how Turkey was lost to the West, into an asset with favorable access in the region that understands how to maneuver and can help the United States and Europe safeguard and further their interests.

The wave of anti-government protests sweeping the Arab world offers Turkey opportunities to enhance its position as a regional model of development but also poses spotlights contradictions in its foreign policy and shortcomings of its democracy. For the first time in its history, Turkey is emerging as a true bridge between East and West. Change in Egypt and Tunisia and unrest elsewhere in the region however puts Turkish aspirations and its ability to live up to expectations to the test.