

TURKEY AND THE ARAB UPRISING: A MIXED RECORD

It is likely that countries in the Middle East will develop along the lines of their own particular histories, politics, and cultural idiosyncrasies. This does not mean that they have nothing to learn from Turkey but, in this moment of national empowerment, when Arabs in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Yemen, and perhaps Syria are throwing off decades of dictatorship, they will likely – despite an interest in Turkish political and economic development– seek their own solutions to the problems they confront.

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With all the discussion in Turkey and abroad about Ankara's role in the Middle East a year after the Arab uprisings began, it is fair to ask how Turkey has fared given Ankara's ambitions for leadership in the region. Ankara's record, thus far, is decidedly mixed. That is to be expected, given the dynamic changes in the Middle East. However, it hardly tracks with the triumphalism of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and those in the West who now regard Ankara as the key to forging a soft landing for those Arab countries currently reeling from uprisings.

At the outset, it seemed that Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan intrinsically understood the changing political dynamics of the region when he was the first international leader to call on Hosni Mubarak to listen to the demands of the Egyptian people for their longtime dictator to go. Yet Ankara stumbled when it came to the uprisings in Libya and Syria, places where Turkey had invested considerable diplomatic efforts and financial interests over the previous decade. In both countries, Ankara was significantly behind the curve of events and the desires of the Libyan and Syrian people when it sought negotiated ends to the crises that would have left both Muammar Qadhafi and Bashar al Assad in place. In time, however, Prime Minister Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu recovered from their missteps and were able to refurbish Turkey's bruised image among some in both Libya and Syria.

The problems in dealing with Libya and Syria were the direct result of Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's "zero problem" policy. This vision laid down with this policy hinges on the notion that if people are getting richer, they are also getting happier, and satisfied people will not seek to undermine the status quo. This was a potentially genius way of dealing with Turkey's Kurdish problem. Drop trade barriers, visa requirements, and invest in Syria and Iraq and the economic and political benefits to Turkey's southeast would be enormous. With the economic development that would take place as a result of the zero problem policy, the Kurds in the area along the border with Syria would be less inclined to make cultural and national demands on the Turkish state. For a little while, this policy seemed to work. As cross border trade and investment increased, there was concomitant development, though there is scant evidence that this growth had an impact on the political outlook of the Kurds in the area.

Regionally, the weakness at the heart of at the zero problem policy was that it had no commitment to any particular kind of government. As a result, it was bound up in the Middle East's old political order.

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Turkey's efforts to forge a more constructive relationship with Syria were based on sound geo-strategic thinking and pre-date AKP's rise to power. However, the zero problems policy led Turkish diplomacy and Prime Minister Erdogan to invest their prestige heavily in the Assad regime. For some time, it worked. Ankara was a strategic bridge between Damascus and Jerusalem throughout 2008, presiding over indirect talks between Syrians and Israelis until those negotiations came to an abrupt end with Israel's late 2008 incursion into Gaza. Still, for Turkey, the benefits of ties with Syria were primarily economic and focused on a central domestic political question that had vexed Turks for decades –how to incorporate the Kurds of southeast Anatolia into the country in a way that did not threaten Turkey's social cohesion. The outreach to Qadhafi was again not a policy innovation of AKP but Erdoğan and Davutoğlu perceived valuable economic benefits from upgrading Ankara's ties with Tripoli.

The problem was that once these regimes faltered, which, again in all fairness to Ankara hardly seemed inevitable, the zero problem policy ran up against its own central contradiction. Although Turkish leaders never explicitly stated so, for political reasons, before the Arab uprisings, they nevertheless believed that Turkey was a model for the Arab world. Yet it was hard to be an avatar of democracy in the Middle East if Turkey was actually pursuing a policy that was no different from any other major powers that were all too willing to do business with the likes of Assad and Qadhafi.

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In light of new realities, Erdoğan and Davutoğlu were forced to tack hard against their own policies. The zero problem policy is now dead because it became unsustainable as Qadhafi massed forces against Tripoli and Bashar al Assad decided to quell the Syrian uprising through mass violence. The combination of deft public relations, the help of some parts of the national press all too willing to engage in national self-aggrandizement, and an emerging consensus among international foreign policy elites about the benefits of the "Turkish model," has rescued the AKP's foreign policy from the gap between Ankara's principles and its actual conduct in the region.

These efforts were so successful that Erdoğan undertook high profile visits to Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia in early September 2011, where he was greeted as a

hero in all three countries –though his departure from Egypt, in particular, was low key. At each stop, the Prime Minister Erdoğan offered political advice based on the Turkish experience; and, in Egypt, he struck a deal to create a “High Level Strategic Cooperation Council” that was aimed primarily towards boosting Turkish investment from 1.5 billion dollars to five billion dollars per year. In Tunisia, Erdoğan encouraged the Islamists of the Ennahda party to run on a platform indicating the compatibility of Islam and democracy. And, in Libya, talks included how Turkey can play a role in the country’s economic development, and, importantly, how it could be a model for the Libyan transition.

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Indeed, this issue of being a “model” has become a consistent theme of any discussion regarding Turkey’s role in a changing Middle East. There is good reason for observers to have often invoked the Turkish experience when trying to project good political outcomes in the Arab world. In 2003-2004, the AKP –a party of Islamist patrimony–led a wide-ranging set of political reforms that made Turkey more democratic and seemed to place it on the path of liberal democracy. Surely, there have been

setbacks in Turkey’s democratic transition but AKP’s reforms seemed to resolve two major problems in Arab politics. Firstly, Arab liberals, who often supported the authoritarianism of the regime out of the fear of what might happen if Islamists replaced the authoritarians, would no longer face this dilemma with the emergence of Arab AKPs. Secondly, the success of the Justice and Development party provided a pathway for the accumulation of Islamist political power in a way that held out the potential for more democratic politics and prosperous economies in the Arab world.

Turkish leaders have every reason to believe that AKP and Turkey’s development over the last decade could, in fact, be a model primarily because they were taking their cues from influential Arabs themselves. When a group of young Muslim Brothers broke from the movement in the early summer of 2011 and established the Egyptian Current, they stated specifically that the AKP was their model. Other Arab political activists have sought not just the advice of the Justice and Development Party but also have asked to study the Party’s platform in an effort to shape their own approach to politics. Moreover, when Tunisian Islamist leader Rachid Ghannouchi emphasizes his close ties to Prime Minister Erdoğan in an effort to reassure anxious Tunisians and Europeans about the future direction of his country, there is reason

for Turks to believe that the Turkish model –a concept that AKP had previously rejected– was real.

Yet, for all the talk of a Turkish model, it is likely that countries in the Middle East will develop along the lines of their own particular histories, politics, and cultural idiosyncrasies. This does not mean that they have nothing to learn from Turkey but, in this moment of national empowerment, when Arabs in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Yemen, and perhaps Syria are throwing off decades of dictatorship, they will likely –despite an interest in Turkish political and economic development– seek their own solutions to the problems they confront.