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Turkey and Democratization in the Arab World: Between an Inspiration and a Model

For several months, we have witnessed rapid change in the countries of North Africa. Researchers and politicians have raised questions about the future of Arab countries once the revolution has run its course. Will the new authorities attempt to build a theocratic state or will they follow the example of Turkey and implement democratic reforms? The latter choice is becoming increasingly popular in the Arab world. This article will address the key questions that come up in connection with Turkey and Arab countries, including: the source of Turkey's popularity in the Arab world, what do they have in common, what divides them and, finally, whether Turkey could become a model for Arab countries.

Causes for inspiration

Just several years ago, Turkish–Arab relations were not going well. Turkey was mired in a border dispute with Syria and had marginal economic cooperation with some Arab countries. Strong historical resentment also was noticeable among the Arabs. For many, the Ottoman reign which lasted for over 400 years, was considered one of the worst periods in their history. Turkey also was seen as a close ally of the United States and Israel.

However, this perception underwent a gradual, yet decisive change during the rule of the moderate Islamic Justice and Development Party (AKP) between 2002 and 2011. In the eyes of many Arabs today, Turkey is an island of freedom and democracy in the Islamic world. It can be argued that Turkey is to the Arab world what Poland was to Ukraine under Kuchma's rule—an example of successful transformation, a window to the West and a reference point for their own attempts to overcome system limitations. Such sentiments among Arabs are best illustrated by the statement of Rached Ghannouchi, one of the leaders of the Tunisian Islamic movement Ennahda (The Awakening). During his stay in Istanbul, Ghannouchi insisted: "We learn from the Turkish experience—particularly the peace that was achieved in the country between Islam and modernity; this is a true example (for the Arab world.) (...) The Turkish experience and success inspire the Arab world. Human rights,

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democratic freedoms and economic development of Turkey—this is the most important support that Turkey gives to the Arab world.”¹ According to a 2010 survey (“Orta Dogu'da Turkiye Aligsi 2010”) by Turkish think tank TESEV, as many as 80% of Arabs have expressed a positive opinion about Turkey. More than two thirds believe that Turkey could be a model for Arab countries and that it is an example of a successful union between Islam and democracy.²

Erdoğan—patron of the oppressed

Prime minister of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has played an extremely important role in developing a positive image of Turkey in the Arab world, where he enjoys enormous popularity and respect. In this year's opinion poll in Arab societies organized by the University of Maryland, he was voted the most popular politician, with 20 percent support.³ His positive role in the Arab world also is appreciated by many Arab leaders such as Prime Minister of Kuwait Sheikh Nasser al-Ahmad al-Sabah, who awarded him the prize for “outstanding personality in the Muslim world” in December 2010.⁴

Erdoğan's large popularity in Arab countries has been caused by several factors. First, he expresses support for Palestinian aspirations for independence. Second, unlike many European countries, Israel or the United States, he has adopted a moderate position towards Hamas.⁵ However, what makes the biggest impression on many Arabs is the Turkish prime minister's sharp rhetoric against Israel. His first strong criticism of Israel came in 2008, in response to the Israeli offensive in the Gaza Strip. Erdoğan spoke sharply about it again during the World Economic Forum in Davos in February 2009. Referring to the offensive in January 2009, which left 1,300 Palestinians dead and more than 5,300 wounded, Turkey's prime minister called Israel's actions “barbarism” and entered into a dispute with Israeli President Shimon Peres.⁶ Erdoğan's words reverberated throughout the Islamic world. After returning to Istanbul, he was greeted by crowds of people waving Turkish and Palestinian flags and banners reading, “The winner of Davos” or “Defender of the oppressed people.” The Arab street responded to Erdoğan's speech in a similar fashion. This was when true “Erdoğanomania” commenced. Turkish flags and pictures of Erdoğan appeared next to Arafat's face in many shops in Israel run by Palestinians. The Turkish prime minister became the hero of Arab societies primarily because he said what they had long wanted to say—he spoke about disappointment with American policies in the Middle East and the fact that the peace process had not brought any results. He also revealed the weaknesses of Arab leaders

¹ *Tunisian Islamist leader embraces Turkey, praises Erbakan*, Hurriyet, 3 March 2011.

² Paul Salem, *Turkey's Image in the Arab World*, www.tesev.org.tr.

³ Ibid.

⁴ *Kuveyt'te Erdoğan'a Ödül*, Aktif haber, 27 January 2011, www.aktifhaber.com.

⁵ Prime Minister of Turkey said in *Newsweek* in early 2009 that Hamas is a political party, not “the arm of Iran.” In similar words, Erdoğan spoke on 4 June 2010 during a rally in Konya. He said that Hamas is not a terrorist organization, but a resistance movement. Once again he spoke favorably about Hamas during the evening program “Without Borders” on Arab television outlet al-Jazeera on 12 January 2011. He claimed that peace cannot be achieved either in Palestine or in the region without the participation of the Islamic Resistance Movement, Hamas. A moderate approach by Turkish authorities to Hamas also was demonstrated during a visit by Khaled Mashaala, one of the leaders of the organization, to Ankara in 2009.

⁶ *Palestinians: 1,300 killed, 22,000 buildings destroyed in Gaza*, 19 January 2009, articles.cnn.com.

(Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and the president of Syria, Bashar al-Assad), who had not taken any measures to protect the Arabs.

An economic turnaround...

Turkey inspires the Arab societies not only because of the charisma of its prime minister but also because of its rapidly growing economy. Under the AKP's leadership, Turkey has undergone a period of economic boom and is now the 16th largest economy in the world.⁷ Thanks to the AKP's policies, economic cooperation between Turkey and Arab countries has improved. Turkey signed a free trade agreement with Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Syria, Palestinian territories and Tunisia. Similar deals with Lebanon and Libya are being negotiated. The effects of this cooperation already can be seen. Between 2001 and 2008, the value of Turkey's exports to MENA countries (Middle East and North Africa) increased sevenfold. Based on 2010 data, Turkey's total trade with Arab countries amounted to approximately \$24 billion. Arab investments in Turkey also have picked up. Towards the end of 2010 they totalled \$10.6 billion.⁸ In addition, Turkish authorities carried out a liberalization of the visa regime to intensify cooperation with Arab countries. In 2009, Turkey abolished the requirement for entry visas for citizens of Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, Jordan and Syria. Since then, the number of Arab tourists visiting Turkey has increased significantly. Awarding the organization of the World Cup of football in 2022 to Qatar may have some significance in the future, too. Kuwaiti authorities have asked Turkish companies for help in the preparation process. These companies may become involved in infrastructure projects, building airports, stadiums and other facilities.

...and a new foreign policy

Under the AKP's leadership, relations between Turkey and the Arab League have improved markedly. For years, Turkey was trying to obtain observer status within this organization. Its candidacy was rejected mainly because of the opposition of Syria and Iraq. As relations with these countries warmed, the League's attitude to Turkey changed. As a result, in 2009 Turkey gained strong support in the League for its efforts to gain a place in the UN Security Council for the 2009-2010 session. Also important, following the initiative of the Arab League and Turkish business, the Turkish–Arab Economic Forum was established. The first meeting took place on 28 March 2010. In addition and in order to strengthen Turkish-Arab cooperation, the League opened an office in Ankara. One of its priorities is to improve the image of Arabs in Turkey and Turks in Arab countries. As well, the new facility will encourage academic cooperation and the exchange of academic staff and students.

The adoption of the “soft power” model by Turkey, which led to drastically improving and strengthening ties with Arab countries, is largely the achievement of the current foreign

⁷ However we should keep in mind that Turkey's economic development is not only on the AKP's merit. In 2001, Economy Minister in the Bulent Ecevit government, Kemal Derviş, launched a three-year reconstruction program of the Turkish economy. The effects of these reforms already were evident during the first term of the AKP governments (2002–2007), see: *Derviş'in reformları ekonomik gelişimin temelini oluşturdu*, Hurriyet, 6 July 2011, www.hurriyet.com.tr.

⁸ Gökhan Kurtaran, *Qatar calls for Turkish investment ahead of World Cup*, Hurriyet, 28 April 2011, www.hurriyetdailynews.com

minister of Turkey, Ahmet Davutoğlu. Coming from Konya, which is one of the most conservative cities in Turkey, he seems to know and understand the world of Islam very well. His policy of “zero problems with our neighbours” has led to establishing relationships with neighbouring countries on the principles of peace and mutual security. He also believes that all obstacles that hinder the economic and cultural integration of the region should be removed. Moreover, Davutoğlu expresses the belief that Turkey is on the road to becoming a regional superpower. Deep historical links and geographic proximity with Arabs, Kurds, Persians, Central Asia, the Balkans and Caucasus should help Turkey carry out this task.

According to Davutoğlu’s opponents, what is hidden behind the idea of “zero problems with neighbours” is Turkish “neo-ottomanism.” They believe that Turkey seeks this as a way to restore its influence from the times of the Ottoman Empire. They also argue that bilateral agreements signed by Turkey and Arab countries on free trade and the abolition of visa requirements are the beginning of the new “Union of Turkey.” In response, Davutoğlu claims that Turkey’s key priority remains integration with the EU. However, referring to the Ottoman tradition, he believes that the EU cannot and should not impede Turkey’s relations with its neighbours, because Turks have had close trade relations with Arabs since long before the birth of the idea of a united Europe. In addition, Davutoğlu openly acknowledges that he had taken inspiration for his concept from the doctrine of the founder of the Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, summarized as “Peace in the Homeland, Peace in the World,” and from the philosophy of Muhammed Celaledin-i Rumi. The latter was the founder of the Mevlevi Order, a great mystic and one of the most famous Sufi poets. His tomb, to which thousands of pilgrims come every year, is located in Konya, where Rumi spent most of his life. Davutoğlu, who comes from the same city, says that his message of peace, dialogue, love of God, human beings, respect for Islam, tolerance of other religions (mono and polytheistic) and respect for cultural diversity is reflected in Turkey’s foreign policy.

Turkish movies—winning Arab hearts and minds

Turkish films and television series are broadcast on several Arab television channels and play an extremely important role in creating a positive image of Turkey. One of the most popular Turkish soap operas has been the TV series “Noor” (“Gümüş” in the Turkish version), which is the name of the lead character of the show. According to research conducted by the Arab television station MBC (Middle East Broadcasting Center) in Saudi Arabia, three- to four-million respondents claimed that they followed the series every day. The final episode aired on 30 August 2010 and attracted a record number of 85 million viewers. What is most important, though, is that the Turkish TV series is bringing about change in the habits of Arab women. Many of them live in patriarchal families and tend to be surprised by the appearance of actors and actresses, who are dressed in European style despite being Muslim. Relations between the protagonists, Muhannad and Noor, are even more surprising. Their progressive relationship had not been arranged by their parents. Muhannad supported his wife’s career choices and advised her on matters such as clothing. The series also presented a liberal attitude to sex and abortion. Therefore, this “Turkish model” has appealed to many Arab women, and, according to reports in some Arab newspapers, many of them have been encouraged to file for divorce. On the other hand, the liberal model of life presented in the series was called into question by the majority of Muslim Arab leaders. They considered it anti-Islamic and called for its boycott. One of the prominent Saudi clerics,

Sheik Saleh al-Luhaidan, said that it would be acceptable to kill owners of satellite TV stations that emit “immoral” material.

A film about a Turkish special agent, “Murad” (in the Turkish version: “Polat Alemdar”), caused no less excitement and interest. Based on a television criminal series “The Valley of the Wolves,” it features a Turkish James Bond who goes to Israel with his associates in search of an Israeli commander responsible for the accidents on the Freedom Flotilla ship.⁹ Turkish agents take revenge for the death of their friends. The film also shows a lot of sympathy towards the Palestinians. In one scene, the protagonist is asked by an Israeli soldier what brings him to Israel, and he responds: “I did not come to Israel, I came to Palestine!” This anti-Israeli discourse in the film has caused a lot of tension between Israel and Turkey.¹⁰

There is no doubt that Turkish television series and movies shown on Arab television and in cinemas have led to a small cultural revolution in Arab countries. First of all, they create a positive image of Turkey among Arabs. They show Turks as a modern, pro-Western but also Islamic nation. They prove that Muslims can be reconciled with the values of the Western world. Moreover, Turks appear in the role of *abi* (elder brother) who defends the interests of the Arab community. Studies show that, partly thanks to such films, in 2009 more than a million Arabs decided to choose Turkey as their holiday destination. It is believed that this trend will increase as the popularity of Turkish cinema continues to grow.

Turkey’s experience with democracy—a recap

Turks, unlike Arabs, have strong democratic roots. They began to adopt Western values in the *tanzimat* period. The most important results of these reforms were the equalization of the rights of all citizens regardless of differences in faith and limits on the power of the Sultan. The process of Europeanization and modernization accelerated during the rule of Kemal Atatürk (1923–1938). Although his rule can hardly be called democratic (in 1925 Atatürk banned all political parties, arrested enemies of the revolution and pushed through strong secularization of the country), it still made significant progress that brought Turkey closer to Europe (including the introduction of the civil code and the granting to women of active and passive voting rights). These changes were not the expression of the society’s will but were imposed by the state. Atatürk, known as Father of the Turks, claimed that Turkish society was not yet ready to fully adopt democracy. Further democratic changes took place after World War II. The two-party system was established in 1946 and four years later multi-party elections were held. Turgut Özal paved the way for further democratic change as a prime minister (1983–1989) and president (1989–1993) by introducing a series of neoliberal economic reforms that moved Turkey to the West. During his time in office, Turkey applied for membership in the European Communities. Despite the adoption of Western vectors of foreign policy, Özal did not want to cut off the country’s Islamic roots and believed that Turkey could integrate with the West without losing its traditions and values. In internal affairs, he was a supporter of free elections and a parliamentary system, but the issue of major democratic reforms was put off.

⁹ Sebnem Arsu, *Turkish Action Film Depicts Israeli Raid*, New York Times, 2 September 2010, www.nytimes.com.

¹⁰ Bert Rebhandl, *Wir haben ein Mandat in Palästina*, FAZ-Online, 3 November 2010, www.faz.net.

Big progress on Turkey's journey towards Europe was made by the centre-left government of Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit (1999–2002). Thanks to his efforts, in 1999 the EU accepted Turkey's candidacy for membership. Turkey was then obliged to adapt its legislation regarding human rights to EU requirements. However, the Kurdish problem has remained a point of contention. In this regard, Prime Minister Ecevit was not prepared to go to far-reaching concessions. He claimed that the Kurds were not a minority and he opposed the proposal to legalize the Kurdish language in education as well as establish television and radio programmes in the Kurdish language, arguing that such steps could lead to separatism and conflict.

The problem of serious democratic reform was finally taken up by the AKP. During its first term in government (2002–2007) and under pressure from the European Union, it introduced many democratic changes. Kurds were allowed to use their language and set up Kurdish language courses, the Armenian massacres of the early 20th century increasingly became a subject in public debates. Despite the implementation of reforms, in recent years Turkey's democratization process has slowed considerably. With 57 journalists in prison, freedom of speech is arguably the biggest reason for concern.

Turkish model—limits to adaptation

In spite of enchantment with "Turkish freedom," economy and lifestyle, it will be difficult for Arab countries to follow Turkey's path. The biggest problem remains the issue of democratic reforms. As early as the first half of the nineteenth century, the *tanzimat* reform (reorganization), conducted by the Ottomans in the period 1839–1879 and consisting of the transfer of Western values and their combination with Islam, ran into resistance on the part of some Arab intellectuals. Many of them argued that Western solutions contradicted Islamic values and could go as far as degrading the Islamic community. Many Muslim leaders responded in a similar way to the modernization carried out by the colonial powers.

Above all, this period left them with a sense of humiliation, trauma and aversion to Western values. Arab countries regained independence only after World War II. However, that did not bring freedom to most of them. A period of rule by satraps or military dictators, unable to face the challenges of modernization, was started. After the ousting of these rulers, there emerged new leaders who returned to the practices of their predecessors, typically after a brief political thaw that ended in the destabilizing of countries as a result of attacks carried out by radical Islamists (e.g., in Algeria and Tunisia). Therefore, due to historic experiences, democracy is associated in the Arab world primarily with loose discipline and lawlessness that was reflected in acts of terror.

Conclusions

In recent years, Turkey has become a model and an inspiration to many Arabs. However, Arabs are just at the beginning of the road Turkey decided to choose almost 200 years ago. Therefore, it seems that Arab democratization attempts need time to mature. Trying to accelerate this process might end in failure, as was the case with Algeria, Tunisia and Iraq.

In addition, Arab states will be missing the pressure of the European Union, which recently has helped Turkey introduce many democratic changes. Without these external stimuli, it is extremely difficult to carry out a transformation on the basis of European values.

Also important apart from time, it seems Arab countries need leaders—occidentalists who look to the future and see development in terms of reforms that bring their countries closer to the West. Such leaders would need to hold moderate Islamic views that combine Western and Eastern values, be able to introduce reforms with a heavy hand and prepare Arab societies for democracy.

At this stage, Arabs will probably focus on developing their own model, attuned to their traditions and customs. This argument has been confirmed by one of Tunisia's opposition leaders, Ahmed Chebbi Néjib, who said, "The treatment of Turkey as a model will not be the best solution for Tunisia, which strives for democracy in his own way."¹¹

¹¹ İpek Yezdani, 'Thanks, but we'll make our own model,' *Tunisian opposition leader says*, Hurriyet, 14 March 2011, www.hurriyetdailynews.com.