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The “Turkish Model” in the Middle East

GÖNÜL TOL

Most of the twentieth century was marked by mutual distrust between Turkish and Arab societies, the roots of which go back to the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the First World War. The 1916 Arab revolt led by Sharif Hussein of Mecca against the Ottoman Empire played a crucial role in the construction of mutually hostile Turkish and Arab narratives. After the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923, the Turks’ republican elite blamed Islam for holding back progress in the region, and turned the country’s face toward Europe. Many Turks saw Arab collaboration with the British as having stabbed the Ottoman Empire in the back. In the interwar period, many Arabs felt that Turks had turned their back on Islam, and after winning independence they blamed their ills on Ottoman misrule. Mutual hostility culminated in a Turkish policy of “noninvolvement” in Middle Eastern affairs and a lack of political support for Turkish causes in the Arab world.

Today, however, in a remarkable departure from its policy of noninvolvement, Turkey has become an active player in the region. Since the rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) to power in 2002, Turkey has cultivated close ties with Syria, Iran, and Iraq; engaged in mediation efforts in regional conflicts; forged strategic relationships with regional actors; assumed a leadership position in the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC); and become involved in other multilateral regional platforms.

This new activism has been accompanied by a change in Arab perceptions of the Ottoman past and of Turkey. Several surveys conducted in the Arab world in recent years reflect this transforma-

tion. Indeed, a study by the University of Maryland’s Shibley Telhami in 2011 found that Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan is now the most popular leader among Arabs, and the “Turkish model” is the most desired political system.

THE NEW IMAGE

Several regional and domestic factors account for Turkey’s vastly improved image in the Middle East. The decreasing importance of Arab nationalism in the pre-Arab Spring era and a deepening political and economic crisis led to a new receptiveness to Turkey’s example. Yet the Arab Spring has proved a mixed blessing for Turkey. It has forced Ankara to reorient its regional strategy, leading to delays and inconsistencies in response to the popular uprisings. In sharp contrast to Egypt, where Turkey was quick to call for regime change, Ankara initially stumbled on Libya and opposed NATO intervention. Likewise in Syria, Turkey sought to influence President Bashar al-Assad, until it finally joined the anti-Assad chorus in late August 2011. While Arab public opinion overwhelmingly views Turkey’s response to the region’s uprisings positively, an equally overwhelming majority finds the response “ineffective.”

Meanwhile, developments within Turkey, such as robust economic growth, improvement of relations with the European Union, reforms undertaken to meet EU requirements, and the AKP’s leadership of the country have led to changes in the way Turkey is perceived in the region.

The rise of the AKP, a party that rejects the anti-Islamic secularism and anti-Arab Westernism of the Kemalist elite, reconnected Turkey to its regional and Muslim past. Business, investment, and trade relations between Turkey and Arab countries have grown to unprecedented levels through official agreements as well as private initiatives. As part of its proactive Middle East policy, Turkey has

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encouraged state-to-state strategic cooperation and frequent contacts with neighboring governments. In 2009, it negotiated "High-Level Strategic Cooperation Councils" with Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon, and held annual joint cabinet meetings. Arab and Turkish officials shuttle frequently between Ankara and the Arab capitals, and Turkey has gradually become an important voice in regional political debates.

Turkey has also increased its profile in multilateral institutions and platforms. It has become an observer at the Arab League; hosted foreign ministers of the Gulf Cooperation Council in Istanbul; successfully promoted Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, a Turkish national, to lead the OIC; and contributed ships and 1,000 military personnel and engineers to support the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, marking the first time since the end of the First World War that Turkish soldiers have been stationed on Arab land.

Turkey's new activism in the Middle East has coincided with an equally assertive domestic trend: Turks are reconnecting with their Ottoman past. *Fetih 1453* (The Conquest 1453), a Turkish movie glorifying the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople, broke viewership records in Turkey this year. Ottoman revivalism manifests itself in various ways, ranging from interior design to culinary art, from soap operas to architecture.

ZERO PROBLEMS

Under the rubric of "zero problems with neighbors," the AKP government has established economic and political alliances in the Middle East, taken part in regional initiatives, and sought to play an active role in the resolution of regional conflicts. The AKP continued normalization efforts with Syria initiated by the previous Turkish government. The two countries signed a free trade agreement, lifted visa requirements, held joint cabinet meetings, and intensified cooperation against terrorism. As part of the rapprochement, Syria shelved its claim to the province of Hatay, which was annexed by Turkey in 1939, and the two sides made progress in settling a long-running dispute over the division of waters of the Euphrates, which flows from Turkey into Syria.

In Iraq, Turkey has contributed to the state formation process. It has supported constitution

building efforts, Jalal Talabani's presidency, and general elections, and it has trained Iraqi diplomats and officers. Turkey has radically shifted its policies toward the Kurdistan Regional Government, including opening a consulate in the Kurdish capital, Erbil, and ending its attempts to use Iraq's Turkmen minority as a fifth column. A railway line between Turkey and Syria and Iraq has been reopened, and a fast train service has been added between the northern Syrian city of Aleppo and the Turkish town of Gaziantep. Ankara has also signed several trade agreements with Tehran, making Iran one of Turkey's most important trading partners in the Middle East. In 2008 the two countries signed a memorandum on security cooperation, and they have shared intelligence and coordinated military operations against the separatist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

After the US-led invasion of Iraq, Turkey sought to bring Sunni leaders into the American-brokered new order, hosting a meeting between the representatives of Sunni groups and US Ambassador to Iraq Zalmay Khalilzad on the eve of December 2005 Iraqi elections. Istanbul has hosted four rounds of trilateral meetings with Afghanistan and Pakistan—including economy, military, and security ministers—in an effort to create confidence between those two nations.

Turkey acted as a go-between in indirect talks between Israel and Syria, pursuing a settlement of their dispute over the Golan Heights. Following Syria's announcement in 2008 that Israel had offered to withdraw from the Golan Heights in return for a peace treaty, Turkey mediated in five rounds of indirect talks between officials of both countries.

In 2009, Turkish diplomats shuttled between Cairo and Damascus in an effort to broker a ceasefire between Hamas and Israel. In 2010, Turkey and Brazil proposed a deal to defuse the crisis over Iran's nuclear program and ease tensions between Iran and the West (though the United States dismissed the deal). Defying American efforts to isolate Iran, Turkey has voted against sanctions at the UN Security Council and abstained from a sanctions resolution at the International Atomic Energy Agency.

Despite its limited success, Turkey's mediating role in regional conflicts has won it favorable notice in the Arab world. Ankara's efforts to break

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the circle of isolation imposed on Syria and Iran by the United States were well received, contributing to Turkey's image as an independent actor that is looking after its own interests and willing to defy Western powers if necessary. The Turkish parliament's refusal to allow the United States to station troops on Turkish soil to open a second front against Iraq in 2003 challenged Turkey's old image as an American stooge and increased Turkey's credibility on the Arab street, where many were critical of their own governments' secret deals with Washington.

DEFYING ISRAEL

Another factor contributing to Turkey's enhanced regional image has been its dramatic distancing from Israel. After enjoying years of close cooperation in the 1990s, Turkish-Israeli relations suffered a heavy blow following Israel's December 2008 attack on Gaza, which prompted a hail of criticism from Turkey. Punitive actions by Israeli forces in the West Bank and Gaza filled Turkish press headlines.

Particularly annoying to Turks was the fact that the Israeli attack started only four days after Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert had visited Ankara; Erdogan described this as "an act of disrespect toward Turkey." A few months later, at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Erdogan strongly criticized Israeli President Shimon Peres on the matter and walked out of a panel meeting, vowing to never return. Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu canceled a 2009 trip to Israel when he was not allowed to visit Hamas officials in Gaza.

A further blow to bilateral relations came in May 2010 when Israeli commandos boarded the *Mavi Marmara*, part of a flotilla attempting to deliver aid to blockaded Gaza, killing eight Turkish nationals.

The UN Secretary General announced in August 2010 that a panel of inquiry chaired by Geoffrey Palmer, former prime minister of New Zealand, had been established to investigate the incident and resolve the ensuing legal dispute between Turkey and Israel. The Palmer Report, released in September 2011, concluded that Israel used excessive force and was legally and morally responsible for the majority of deaths, but that the Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip was lawful and could be le-

gally enforced against a humanitarian mission in international waters.

Not surprisingly, the report enraged Turkey and strained diplomatic relations further. Turkey expelled the Israeli ambassador from Ankara and downgraded diplomatic relations to the level of second secretary. It suspended all forms of military cooperation and demanded that Israel issue a formal apology, pay compensation to the victims' families, and lift the Gaza blockade in order to normalize relations.

Turkey's refusal to accept the findings of the Palmer Report and its stand on behalf of the population of Gaza have resonated throughout the Middle East and garnered respect for Turkey as a strong country standing up to Israel.

TOP MODEL?

The AKP's rise has signified the evolution of Islamism in Turkey and the potential for reconciling democracy and Islam. For the Islamists of the region, an Islamist-rooted party's coming to power through electoral politics without having to abandon its conservative agenda demonstrated that the Algerian case, in which the Islamic Salvation Front was banned and thousands of its members were arrested by the military in the 1990s, was not inevitable.

The AKP represents a form of Islamism that is compatible with democracy in a country that carried out the most radical secularization program in the Muslim world. For Arab liberals, the AKP's moderation has offered a third way between secular authoritarian governments and radical Islamists. It presents a model under which Islamist parties, through institutional limitations, can be moderated and engaged in the democratic process.

The success of Turkey's democratic experiment and its economic model of high productivity and export-led growth have contributed to the country's rising image in a region where authoritarian regimes and rentier economies dominate. Compared to its neighbors in the Middle East, Turkey has achieved considerable socioeconomic and political development. It has engaged in a civil reform process since the 1990s.

Under the rule of a coalition government led by Bulent Ecevit of the Democratic Left Party from 1999 to 2002, Turkey reduced police powers of

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detention, eased curbs on human rights, lifted the ban on Kurdish language broadcasts, increased civilian representation on the National Security Council, and adopted a civil code that introduced improvements in gender equality and freedom of association and assembly. In 2003, the death penalty was outlawed and instruction in languages other than Turkish was legalized. After coming to power in 2002, the AKP accelerated the reform process in its first term—though the process is now stalled, and concerns are mounting about the AKP’s commitment to civil liberties.

Turkey has built a productive and rapidly growing economy. It produces the equivalent of half the entire output of the Middle East and North Africa, where other big economies such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, dependent on gas and oil revenues, have not been able to raise productivity to global levels and create sufficient jobs. The AKP government has singled out economic interdependence as an important tool allowing Turkey “to gain depth” in its neighborhood and strengthen relations with Middle Eastern countries while generating sustainable economic development.

Total trade volume with Iraq increased from \$900 million to \$6 billion between 2003 and 2009. Turkish companies building roads, bridges, and other infrastructure projects and selling consumer goods dominate the Iraqi Kurdish market. With Syria, Turkey signed protocols on trade and development and quadrupled its exports until the Syrian uprising disrupted bilateral relations. Bilateral trade with Iran increased from \$1.25 billion in 2002 to \$16.05 billion in 2011, and the trade volume between Turkey and the Gulf countries increased by more than six times in the past decade.

Through this economic interaction, Middle Eastern consumers have had a first-hand experience of the Turkish economy’s success. This has boosted the nation’s image among the people of the Middle East, who identify economic problems as the most important challenge facing their countries, according to a Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV) study.

BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

Trade and investment have done more than enhance Turkey’s economic image in the region. Among the most influential exports to the Middle East are Turkish soap operas. In 2011, Turkey earned more than \$60 million from exporting television series. Last year, the final episode of Turkey’s rags-to-riches soap opera “Noor” drew 85

million viewers from Syria to Morocco. “Noor,” which tells the twists and turns in the love life of a rich Istanbul family, has turned into a social phenomenon across the Arab world. The characters in the show lead a Western life but they share Arab and Muslim values, which partly explains its success in the region.

Turkey signed cultural exchange agreements with Yemen, Egypt, and Tunisia in 2001, with Syria in 2002, with Palestine in 2005, with Jordan and Iran in 2006, and with Kuwait in 2007. Through these cultural exchanges, combined with tourism from the Middle East, Turkey has made inroads into Arab popular culture as the embodiment of a unique blend of Western and Muslim values.

Turkey’s European Union accession bid has also contributed to its regional image. The reforms undertaken by Turkey since the 1990s led to the EU’s decision to open membership negotiations with Turkey in 2005. Turkey’s reform process and the accession negotiations with the EU changed perceptions of Turkey in the Middle East at a time when Arab regimes were suffering from a governance and legitimacy crisis due to economic and political stagnation.

The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on America deepened already existing tensions between the Muslim world and the West. While Muslims came under increasing suspicion throughout the West, the United States launched a war in Afghanistan and later against Iraq, leading to a backlash in the Muslim world. In the highly polarized post-9/11 environment, a Muslim country seeking membership in what was perceived as a “Christian club” offered a fresh start for relations between Islam and the West. As an Islamist-rooted party with a pro-EU agenda, the AKP caught the imagination of the Muslim world, giving hope that through democratization there could be room in Europe for a Muslim country despite current setbacks in Turkey’s EU bid.

ARAB SPRING DILEMMAS

The popular uprisings across the Middle East have presented challenges and opportunities for Turkey, since it had invested economically, politically, and diplomatically in the pre-Arab Spring status quo. As popular movements started toppling the authoritarian regimes in North Africa, Turkish policy makers faced major trade-offs between securing Turkey’s interests and supporting the democratic demands of the uprisings.

When the unrest in Tunisia started in December 2010, Turkey remained quiet. With the spread of the protest movement to Egypt, a long-time rival in regional competition for influence, Erdogan was quick to call for President Hosni Mubarak to step down. Turkish President Abdullah Gul became the first head of state to visit post-Mubarak Egypt.

When the pro-democracy wave spread to Libya, Turkey found itself in a dilemma. Given vast economic interests at stake, as well as 25,000 Turkish workers in Libya, Turkey was caught between ethics and self-interest. Unlike its encouraging response to the Egypt uprising, Turkey did not take a clear stand supporting the rebellion against Muammar el-Qaddafi, and it opposed NATO involvement in Libya, arguing that US-led intervention had destabilized Iraq and Libya might experience a similar scenario.

This hesitant stand led to anti-Turkish demonstrations in Libya and drew strong criticism throughout the region. Once Turkish nationals were evacuated and the UN passed a resolution authorizing a no-fly zone, Turkey decided that isolation from the Western and Arab coalition would prove costly both in international and regional terms, and so participated in the NATO mission.

Despite Turkey's initial stumbling, the country's outright support for the popular uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya was very positively received in a region long suspicious of Ankara as the heir to the Ottoman Empire, which ruled over the Arab world for nearly 600 years. As the Arab Spring has given new urgency to old questions about the compatibility of Islam and democracy, Turkey's unique experience as a Muslim nation and democratic state, combined with its rapid economic development, has raised Turkey to the forefront of the region's debate about its future. The "Turkish model" features prominently in political discussions across the Middle East.

SHAKEN BY SYRIA

The Syrian crisis, however, has been a blow to Turkey's regional image. According to a TESEV survey conducted in 2011, while North African countries including Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya expressed a more positive view toward Turkey, its response to the turmoil seems to get a negative response from the countries of the Levant,

including Syria. Turkey's approval rating in those countries dropped from 93 percent in 2010 to 44 percent in 2011.

Syria occupies a central place in Turkey's regional and domestic calculations for several reasons. Regionally, Syria has been a key component of the Turkish government's "zero problems with neighbors" policy. As a country that almost went to war with Turkey in 1998, Syria has become the test case for Davutoglu's vision that aims to engage all regional actors, including former adversaries, through trade, investment, and political and cultural exchanges. Domestically, engagement with the Syrian regime ensured its cooperation with Turkey's three-decade fight against the PKK.

Confronting a high-stakes crisis on its southern border, Turkey pursued a cautious approach when the uprising started in Syria in March 2011. Erdogan urged President Assad to carry out reforms, hoping that Turkey's decade-old attempt to break Western isolation of Syria and its own vast economic and political investments would give

Ankara leverage over the Syrian regime. After months of shuttle diplomacy without any progress, and under increasing regional and international pressure for standing by an Arab dictator against his own

people, Turkey finally joined the anti-Assad camp in August 2011 and called for Assad to step down.

Beyond its efforts to shelter refugees and increase international diplomatic pressure on the Syrian regime, Turkey took a proactive role in hosting and providing an organizational hub for the Syrian opposition. In retaliation, Assad granted several concessions to the Kurds, and to the PKK in particular. He allowed Saleh Muslim, the head of the PKK in Syria, who lived for years in Iraq's Qandil Mountains, to return to Syria. Assad also permitted the Democratic Union Party, the PKK offshoot in Syria, to operate freely and recruit new fighters for its campaign against Turkey.

Turkey's support for the Syrian opposition, which is dominated by Syria's Sunni majority, has drawn criticism from Shiites in the region and from Turkey's own Alevi community (a group related to Shiism, like the Syrian Alawites), which accuses Erdogan of pursuing a sectarian policy. Meanwhile, Turkey faces criticism from the Syrian opposition for not taking more forceful measures to help it.

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The Syrian crisis not only has shaken the guiding principle of Turkish foreign policy, “zero problems with neighbors.” It has also tarnished the image of a regional power that has the will and means to play a leading role in the resolution of regional conflicts. Turkey’s active involvement in the Syrian crisis has not yielded any results. When the uprising started, Turkey, relying on Erdogan’s rapport with Assad, attempted to persuade the Syrian leader to carry out reforms. After several meetings between Assad and Turkish officials, he disregarded the calls for reform and continued his brutal crackdown on the opposition.

Nor did Turkey succeed in its subsequent attempts to unify the Syrian opposition, undermining its image as a problem solver in the region. According to a TESEV survey, public opinion in the region views Turkey’s involvement in the Arab Spring as positive but ineffective. Especially among Shiites in the region, there has also been a perception that Turkey is pursuing a sectarian policy in Syria by supporting the Sunni opposition.

OBSTACLES TO SOFT POWER

Opinion surveys conducted in the Middle East indicate that the Arab view of Turkey is overwhelmingly positive. But efforts to sustain this sentiment confront a number of obstacles. Turkey’s rising profile in the region depends on its ability to solve its internal problems and consolidate its democracy. Currently the most pressing issue facing Turkey is the Kurdish problem. Without a democratic solution, it will undermine Turkey’s soft power in a region where the Arab Spring has empowered democratic actors.

The AKP’s democratic credentials are at the heart of the Turkish model debate. The party carried out important reforms in its first term (2002–2007),

making it a champion of democracy both among liberals and conservatives in Turkey and the region. But the reform process has stalled, and there are increasing concerns about freedom of expression and the drafting of a new civilian democratic constitution.

Turkey’s appeal in the Arab world also relies on its Western credentials, particularly its quest to become an EU member. Since the talks started in 2005, Turkey has opened 13 out of 35 policy chapters that all EU candidate nations must successfully negotiate to gain membership. Eight policy chapters have been frozen by the EU over Turkey’s refusal to allow ships and planes from the divided island of Cyprus to enter its ports and airspace, and France has blocked Turkey’s membership negotiations in five policy chapters. Turkey has successfully closed only one policy chapter, on science and research.

After Nicolas Sarkozy’s departure from the French presidency in May 2012, Ankara was keen to revive its bid. Turkey and the EU officially launched a “positive agenda” to put Ankara’s stalled accession talks back on track. But lack of future progress on the EU front might damage Turkey’s soft power in the Middle East.

Finally, increasing nationalism in the region might also limit Turkey’s appeal. Recent studies in the Arab world have found that more and more people identify themselves with their country rather than their Muslim identity. If the trend favoring local identities continues, the Turkish model might lose attractiveness. Yet, despite the challenges Turkey faces in the Middle East, the reshuffling of cards in a fast-changing region—with other key regional powers inhibited, isolated or involved—still offers unprecedented opportunities for Ankara to exercise leadership and find new markets. ■