

Unrest in the Middle East, the Turkish response and the Turkish model

By Paula Sandrin*

T

he recent uprising in several Middle Eastern countries has caught the West by surprise and has left it unsure about which course of action to take. For too long, the West insisted that it (reluctantly) supported authoritarian regimes in the Middle East because it was the lesser of two evils. If democracy was allowed to flourish, Islamic fundamentalists would take power, and the whole of the region would begin to resemble Iran. With only these two options available, the West argued that, unfortunately, the divorce of interest and values was the only possible course of action.

With the collapse of the governments of Tunisia and Egypt and protests in other “friendly” countries such as Jordan, Bahrain and Yemen, it became necessary to look for alternative possibilities, beyond the dichotomy “authoritarian-but-pro-Western” and “democratically-elected-but-fundamentalist”. Turkey then began to be heralded as having the perfect template to be emulated by other Muslim countries. After all, the conventional discourse

goes, Turkey is a Muslim country which has traditionally been an ally of the West and a vibrant (albeit imperfect) democracy. It has managed to incorporate Islamists in the political process and prevent their radicalization. But does Turkey really constitute a model for other countries in the region?

First, let’s examine Turkey’s record of support for democratic values abroad. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan is increasingly popular among the population in the Middle East due to his frequent outbursts against Israel and his relentless defense of the Palestinians. However, Turkey has avoided a direct pro-democratization approach towards the Middle East, favoring instead the forging of closer ties with countries in the region, irrespective of their level of authoritarianism. The policy pursued by the Justice and Development Party (AKP), in power since 2002, has been one of “zero-problems” with neighboring countries, which means improving dialogue, commercial ties, and acting as a mediator in the case of regional disputes.



In other words, Turkey's main aim has been to improve relations with countries in the Middle East and to gain regional prestige. Support for human rights and democracy has not been at the top of Turkey's foreign policy agenda. This preference is most visible in the case of Turkey's support for the regimes in Sudan and Iran. Turkey has lent unconditional support for Omar Al-Bashir, Sudan's President wanted by the International Criminal Court for trial on charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity in the region of Darfur. Prime Minister Erdogan even questioned the charges against al-Bashir and said that "no Muslim could perpetrate genocide" [1]. In addition, Turkey was one of the first countries to congratulate President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad for his victory in the contested 2009 elections, and it did not voice criticisms against the regime's violent response to the protests in the aftermath of the elections.

When the recent upheavals in the Middle East began, the Turkish government initially adopted a cautious approach. The Prime Minister's pronouncements exhorting President Mubarak to listen to the will of the Egyptian people came rather late, and only after a telephone call from President Obama. In the case of Libya, the Prime Minister warned that "turning a blind eye to the people's demands for democracy and freedoms" [2] would be a mistake. However, it is important to remember that these words were uttered by the 2010 winner of the Moammar Gaddafi Human Rights Prize.

Therefore, Turkey's record of support for democratic values in the Middle East is rather poor. Turkish foreign policy prioritized the rapprochement with countries in the region and the pursuit of regional leadership through mediation of regional conflicts.

One might argue that, irrespective of the country's record of support for democracy abroad, Turkey constitutes a model due to its own democratic record and level of economic success. In fact, the representation of Turkey as a model of how to reconcile democracy and Islam is not new. The Bush admini-

stration already presented Turkey as a model within the framework of the Greater Middle East initiative and the AKP itself is pretty much willing to portray Turkey as a model. In a speech delivered at Harvard University in 2003, Prime Minister Erdogan said "I do not subscribe to the view that Islamic culture and democracy cannot be reconciled. As a politician who cherishes religious conviction in his personal sphere, but regards politics as a domain outside religion, I believe this view [i.e. of irreconcilability] is seriously flawed" [3].

This idea of Turkey as a model has been heard more frequently since the uprisings in the Middle East. Islamic movements in the region, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, could learn a great deal about how to be a legitimate player in the democratic process from the AKP's history. The AKP was founded in 2001 by the reform-oriented younger generation of Islamists, who, unlike their

predecessors, refrained from employing a religious discourse and espoused a pro-European Union membership stance [4]. The AKP argued that it was not an Islamic Party, but rather a conservative-democratic party, which means to be politically and economically liberal, whilst being sensitive to certain societal

values and traditions [5]. During its first term in office, the AKP seemed to live up to its promises, openly embracing the goal of EU membership and embarking in an unprecedented program of reforms, which, among other things, curtailed the power of the military.

The opposition in Turkey disputes this rosy picture of the AKP. They accuse the government of trying to silence its opponents, in the media, the judiciary and in the military. With regards to the press, some high-profile examples are the astronomical fines received by the Dogan media conglomerate for alleged tax fraud and most recently, detainment of Soner Yalcin, the founder of the news portal Oda TV, for alleged links with Ergenekon, a group of people accused of plotting to overthrow the government (more on this specific issue below). Furthermore, the prime minister seems to be unable to

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tolerate criticisms, having taken caricaturists and writers to court [6].

The manner in which the Ergenekon investigation is being conducted has also been questionable. Suspects are detained for a considerable amount of time without being charged, some of the evidence against suspects seems flimsy, and "the indictments are so full of contradictions, rumors, speculation, misinformation, illogicalities, absurdities and untruths that they are not even internally consistent or coherent" [7].

These recent trends in Turkey's political landscape have led some commentators to argue that "Turkey has been exchanging a military form of authoritarianism for civilian authoritarianism" [8]. The Economist warns that, even though elections in Turkey are free and fair and that the press is largely free and unrestrained "there is also no question that Mr Erdogan is getting bossier and less tolerant by the day" [9]. Thus, the worst case scenario is that "[...] far from being a model, Turkey has been becoming more like Egypt" [10].

In conclusion, although it is true that Turkey has been one of the most successful countries in the region, both in terms of its economy and its democratic standards, there are some worrying developments being witnessed in Turkey, which can severely undermine its credentials as a model for the Middle East. **PR**

Notes:

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1) Al-Jazeera (2009). "Al-Bashir cancels Turkey

OIC trip". 9 November 2009. <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/africa/2009/11/200911901841249470.html>

- 2) Hurriyet Daily News. 'Turkey warns Libya against 'mistake' of ignoring people'. 22 February 2011. <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=turkey-to-libya-avoid-violence-respect-peoples-demands-2011-02-21>
- 3) Meliha Altunisik (2008b). "The Possibilities and Limits of Turkey's Soft Power in the Middle East". *Insight Turkey* 10 (2), p. 41-54.
- 4) Cizre, Umit (2008). "The JDP and the Military – Recreating the Past after reforming it?". In: Cizre, Umit (ed.). *Secular and Islamic Politics in Turkey: the Making of the Justice and Development Party*. London: Routledge.
- 5) Yildiz, Ahmet (2008). "Problematizing the intellectual and political vestiges. From 'Welfare' to 'Justice and Development'". In: Cizre, Umit (ed.). *Secular and Islamic Politics in Turkey: the Making of the Justice and Development Party*. London: Routledge.
- 6) Nur Bilge Criss (2010). "Dismantling Turkey: The Will of the People?". *Turkish studies* 11 (1), 45-58, p. 49.
- 7) Gareth Jenkins (2009) "Between Fact and Fantasy: Turkey's Ergenekon Investigation" *Silk Road Paper*, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute. August 2009. p. 11. <http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/docs/silkroadpapers/0908Ergenekon.pdf>
- 8) Gareth Jenkins in Robert Tait, "Egypt: Doubts cast on Turkish claims for model democracy". *The Guardian*, 13 February 2010. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/feb/13/egypt-doubt-turkish-model-democracy>
- 9) The Economist (2011). "A Muslim democracy in action". February 19th-25th edition, p. 41.
- 10) Gareth Jenkins in Robert Tait, "Egypt: Doubts cast on Turkish claims for model democracy". *The Guardian*, 13 February 2010. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/feb/13/egypt-doubt-turkish-model-democracy>