

# Turkey, Iran and the Arab Uprisings: The Failure of Political Islam and Post-Ideological Politics

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## Part I: Islamism in the Arab uprisings of 2011 and the role of the Turkish and Iranian 'models'.

It has been widely observed that none of the 2011 Arab uprisings were led by Islamists and that they were not pervaded by Islamist slogans and objectives. The uprisings demonstrated, if anything, that the Middle East is entering a post-ideological phase, where patriotism and an introverted, domestically focused politics will dominate.

It goes without saying that each uprising was very different and the roles of Islamist movements in Bahrain, Yemen, Syria and Libya were discrete. However, there were commonalities between Egypt and Tunisia. In Egypt, the leadership of the

Muslim Brotherhood took a cautious line with regards to the protests, until after it was certain that they were unstoppable (even though many younger members of the organisation took part in the growing protests, ignoring the leadership's instructions). In Tunisia, Nahda was banned so by definition could not take the lead.

Even so, the change of regime in Egypt and Tunisia will benefit the Islamists. As the political process opened up in the weeks following Mubarak's fall the Muslim Brotherhood created a political party, the Freedom and Justice Party, which has already been legalised, alongside the centrist Wasat (which had been denied legal status under Mubarak). Nahda was also legalised in Tunisia. It won 40 per cent of the votes in elections of 23 October. Although in the region

as a whole – for instance in Jordan – opinion polls over many years consistently suggest that moderate Islamist parties would secure about 30 per cent of vote, this percentage may increase as a result of the proven ability of the Islamists to organise effectively and the weakness of other parties in this respect.

In Egypt and Tunisia, Islamist movements have declared that they see the Turkish Justice and Development Party (AKP) as a model to be emulated. Saad el Katatni one of the leaders of the Freedom and Justice Party has said so explicitly. Nahda's Rachid Ghannouchi claims the AKP has in fact been influenced by him. Although many different variants of Islamism exist in the Middle East, with regards to what has been termed 'moderate' Islamism in the cases of Tunisia and particularly Egypt – important trendsetters, especially the latter - the recent Arab uprisings indicate that the Iranian model of Islamism is 'out', while the Turkish model is 'in'.

What does this mean for the prospects of political Islam in the Middle East?

First, that these two Islamist parties, The Muslim Brotherhood/Freedom and Justice and Nahda, accept that they must function within the parameters of a democratic, multi-party system. It is less clear what this desire to emulate the AKP means in terms of secularism. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan declared, in a television interview before he visited Cairo in September 2011, that Islamists must accept secularism. This apparently offended some Egyptian Islamists, while I would guess that their Tunisian counterparts are much more comfortable with the idea.

The debate on whether the Turkish AKP can be a model for Islamists in the Arab world is complicated. Some question whether Turkey wants to be a model at all. Others point out that Turkey's very particular historical evolution does not lend itself to repetition elsewhere. Yet more observers point to the fact that the Turkish 'model' is idealised and that Turkey is currently reverting to authoritarianism in many ways. For instance, there are now 58 journalists in prison in Turkey. Researchers and academics, among others, are persecuted and legally prosecuted for expressing their views.

However, I would argue that we must hold on to the big, bold idea of this comparison.

It is clear that the Arab uprisings have shown no interest in the Iranian model. Anti-Western, anti-American and anti-Israeli slogans were not prominent. Arab citizens cannot but have noticed the de-legitimisation of the Islamic Republic - which became apparent in the fraudulent elections of 2009 - and the suppression of the Green movement that followed. We can see the events in 2009 in Iran as a precursor of the Arab uprisings and as having many similarities with them.



*Nahda's emblem*

The Muslim Brotherhood/Freedom and Justice party and Nahda intention to emulate the AKP is an implicit declaration that religion and politics must be de-linked. As we all know, the AKP refuses to call itself an Islamist party and says that religion and politics do not mix. More importantly, when you observe the actual record of the AKP in office, its programme has nothing to do with Islam per se. Its authoritarianism is not inspired by religion: it has to do with the lack of maturity of democratic institutions in Turkey, its authoritarian political culture, which is shared by secular forces, and arrogance stemming from three massive consecutive electoral victories. What is distinctly Islamic about the AKP is its attention to the turban and its encouragement of conservative social values, not least with regards to women (and on this issue there are some very worrying trends in Turkey). However, this does not amount to a political programme.

The Turkish brand of Islamism is well-suited to the post-ideological phase that the Middle East region is entering. It is also confirmation of the view that Olivier Roy enunciated 20-odd years ago: that political Islam has failed to deliver a distinct and coherent ideological programme. This failure explains its concentration on, or dare I say obsession with, social and 'moral' issues.

### Part II: Turkish foreign policy

Let me now try to draw links between these comments on political Islam and Turkish foreign policy toward the Middle East and generally.


There are two different perspectives on this issue, as I see it. Although not mutually exclusive, they nevertheless contain different emphases.

The first is a perspective which focuses on ideas and identities in the formulation of Turkish foreign policy (very much in fashion in recent years in an International Relations discipline increasingly dominated by a constructivist

research agenda). It emphasises the degree to which Turkey is turning towards the Middle East as a result of the dominance of the AKP, and of the fact that its key leaders – Erdoğan and Ahmet Davutoğlu, if not necessarily Abdullah Gül – feel more 'at home' culturally in the Middle East. For instance it was pointed out that in the middle of the crisis of the Van earthquake, Erdogan went to Saudi Arabia to present his condolences for the death of Crown Prince Sultan. The backdrop here is the Orientalist, ahistorical assumption that, now that the 'true' nature of the Turkish people has come to the fore with the maturing of democracy in Turkey, they will inevitably want to be closer to their co-religionists.

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An alternative view is that Turkey's opening towards the ME must be understood within the context of a more activist, resurgent foreign policy in general, not just towards its neighbouring region but also towards Europe and Central Asia and the Caucasus.

This perspective emphasises, not ideas and identity, but the resurgence of Turkish power. In this realist analysis, power is pursued for its own sake. The possibility of Turkey offering a model to the Islamic world and Islamist movements is not ignored but is seen as an exercise of 'soft power'. Alternatively – to use E. H. Carr's more suitable 

analysis – it is about ‘power over ideas’, a key element of political power, alongside the military and economic elements.

To my mind, this interpretation is more convincing. It accounts more fully for the continuities between the AKP’s foreign policy and that of previous governments from the 1990s on, and even more so from the late 1990s. In fact the shift to the Middle East is not unique but must be placed along side a broader opening or resurgence of Turkish foreign policy.

The architect of this resurgence was Turgut Özal rather than Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. It rests on the economic restructuring of the 1990s, which laid the foundations for an export-driven economic policy. It also rests on the key decision by Özal to place Turkey firmly within the pro-US, international camp in the Gulf War of 1991. An interesting point, much overlooked nowadays, is that Turkey was presented as a model both following the end of the Cold War and after 9/11.

Erdoğan and the AKP government are the beneficiaries of these foreign policies. There are rumours that Erdoğan would like to present himself as having the same stature of Kemal Atatürk. However, although a brilliant tactician, Erdoğan is not a strategist. His impulsive nature, in which many of the country’s foreign policy decisions appear to be rooted, may make him popular but they are not conducive to long-term strategic planning. His failed Kurdish and Alevi openings indicate that he does not have a vision for Turkey’s future. He and Davutoğlu have done a good job of building on some of the foreign policy successes of previous years (just as the AKP have been good stewards of the economic success story which the IMF put in place in 2001). The exception here is Europe with whom the relationship is faltering. However, the relationship with the United States is still a strong one, despite the various tensions and fluctuations. This now allows me to return to the Arab uprisings of 2011.

Turkey’s policy makers struggled to respond coherently to the Arab uprisings. The post-2007 AKP policy of ‘zero problems’ towards the country’s neighbours – yet again not part of a strategic vision - was thrown into confusion as Arab populations challenged their governments. Erdoğan supported the Tunisian and Egyptian popular revolts. However, he initially opposed Western military intervention in Libya although his government did eventually recognize the Transitional National Council as its legitimate government in early July and offered it active support. The case of Syria is perhaps the most difficult one for Turkey, given the investment of the AKP government in



building good relations with Bashar al-Assad over the last decade. Turkey tried to encourage reform and kept open a channel of communication - Ahmet Davutoğlu's visited Damascus in early August at the height of the Syrian crisis - but al-Assad's continuing severe repression has turned Turkey against his regime (with talk of sanctions and even intervention by Turkey, including the possibility of establishing a buffer zone, and support for the Syrian opposition).

If Turkey struggled to adjust to the new situation in the Arab world, the uprisings were undoubtedly bad news for Iran. As I said before, despite the hopes of the Islamic Republic's leadership, the uprisings did not articulate a desire for an Iranian-style system. The Arab insurrections also revitalized the Green movement. Mubarak's overthrow could mean closer relations with Egypt but also potentially greater rivalry with it in the long run, if it re-enters the Middle East arena as a more forceful player than hitherto. Above all, the situation in Syria has profound implications for the Islamic Republic. The possibility of al-Assad's overthrow, and the odious violence meted out by his regime against the people, are embarrassing for its Iranian supporters and for their common ally, Hizbullah.

It is also over Syria where the Iranian-Turkish relationship is experiencing its most serious tensions at present. While reducing the complex Turkish-Iranian relationship to simple antagonism is a mistake, the Arab uprisings seem to be pushing it in this direction. Now, for instance, Iran appears to be playing the Kurdish card against Turkey. Despite the anti-Israel stance of Turkey over the past few months and years, relations between it and the United States have reportedly improved over 2011. In October 2011, Turkey gave its approval for NATO to install an early warning radar system in its southeast, seen by Iran as being directed against it.

If, depending on what happens in Syria, the Arab uprisings further weaken the Iran-Syria-Hizbullah-

Hamas axis, this will, in turn, strengthen the US-led camp, of which Turkey is still a part. Turkey now is, of course, a much more independent player from the US in the Middle East that it used to be, particularly compared to the Cold War years and even the 1990s. Its alliance with the US is a loose one and it has considerable leeway. We see this in relation to the AKP's policy towards Israel. Nevertheless Turkey is still firmly in the Western camp. This is a fundamental premise of Turkish foreign policy which has not been challenged to date in a serious way.

So, to summarise my argument, the Arab uprisings seem to be strengthening Turkey's position in the Middle East on many levels,

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despite the initial floundering and serious security problems they have also caused. Conversely, they are leading to a weakening of Iran. The success of the Turkish 'model' and decline of the Iranian 'model' are part and parcel of this bigger picture. Talk of models is really a measure of a country's prestige and leadership through its ability to command power over ideas. What Turkey has to offer is more suitable for the post-ideological phase which the Middle East is entering.

**Note:**

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