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Debating the Merits of the “Turkish Model” for Democratization in the Middle East

Paul Kubicek*

Abstract

The “Turkish model” has been upheld as a positive example for Middle Eastern countries, particularly in light of the Arab Spring. While Turkey is, in many respects, successful—it has a dynamic economy and in recent years has made great strides toward political liberalization—and the current Turkish government has high standing in the Arab world, this paper will argue that the applicability of a “Turkish model” to other settings is limited. In part, this is due to confusion over what the “Turkish model” precisely is or should be. For many years, the “Turkish model” was taken to be Kemalism, or a statist, authoritarian, secular order imposed “from above” with the goals of modernization and Westernization. More recently, the “Turkish model” would mean embracing a more moderate-type of political Islam, exemplified by the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). While the AKP has proven to be successful in Turkey, it came to power in conditions very different than those that prevail in the Arab world at present. In particular, the AKP has evolved to reconcile itself to secularism in Turkey and embraced a program of Europeanization through accession talks with the European Union, an option not on the table in Arab states. Finally, a comparison of the political culture of Turkey with that in much of the Arab world reveals significant differences in values and priorities between the two cases.

Key words: Arab Spring, Democratization; Turkish model; political Islam

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Introduction

In his post-election victory speech on June 12, 2011, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan suggested that the outcome of the Turkish election meant that in “all friendly and brotherly nations from Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut, Cairo, Sarajevo, Baku and Nicosia...[t]he hopes of the victims and the oppressed have won...Beirut has won as much as İzmir. The West Bank, Gaza, Ramallah, Jerusalem have won as much as Diyarbakır. The Middle East, the Caucasus and the Balkans have won, just as Turkey has won.”¹ This speech gave a strong signal of the Turkish government’s intent to integrate itself more deeply in Middle Eastern affairs. Not coincidentally, the events of the Arab Spring have offered new opportunities for Turkey to play a pronounced political role in the region. This was highlighted by the “victory tour” Erdoğan himself made to Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya in September 2011. One report suggested he was welcomed like a “rock star,”² a reflection perhaps of the fact that he ranked as the most admired world leader in 2010 in a poll conducted in six Arab states by Zogby International.³ A headline from the 2011 version of the same survey was that Turkey was the “biggest winner of the Arab Spring,” with respondents in five Arab states stating that Turkey, among all international actors, played the most constructive role during the political upheavals in the region.⁴

In conjunction with more active Turkish political, economic, and cultural engagement in the Middle East, some have suggested that Turkey could serve as a model for Middle Eastern countries, particularly those like Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya which have the opportunity to build more open, democratic systems in the wake of the “Arab Spring.” Erdoğan and other Turkish officials, it should be noted, are prone to deny any campaign to promote Turkey as a model. Erdoğan himself stated that “We do not have a mentality of exporting our system”⁵—but there is nonetheless a recognition and pride that Turkey has, in many ways, done remarkably well in the past decade and that it may have something to offer others. A year prior to the Arab Spring, Turkish President Abdullah Gül suggested that “Turkey has been a role model for all the world with its democratic and secular system and contemporary cultural identity. I believe we should act with awareness of this responsibility.”⁶ Leaders from the *Al-Nahda* (“Awakening”) Party in Tunisia and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt have picked upon this notion, suggesting that Turkey can indeed serve as a model for their countries in the aftermath of the Arab Spring.⁷ Western officials have endorsed this view as well. US Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama have repeatedly spoken well of Turkey, including Turkey as a possible “model” for other Muslim countries.⁸ Even NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, who alienated many Turks for his position on the Danish cartoon controversy, opined that Turkey could “serve as a role model for countries in the region that are currently transforming from dictatorship to democracy.”⁹

This paper will seek to cover the merits of this claim, investigating in particular whether the Turkish experience can or should be replicated in the Arab world. It will be composed of five sections. First, it notes that the claims for a “Turkish model” are not really new, although the point of emphasis today is—importantly so—different than what it was in the past. Second, it will lay out in brief the case behind the contemporary discourse that advances the “Turkish model” argument, focusing in particular on the accomplishments of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), which has governed Turkey since 2002. Third, it will suggest some limits to applying the Turkey model to the Middle East, illustrating how Turkey is different from most of the Arab world and how it would be difficult for Arab authorities, even if they wanted to do so, to borrow wholesale from the Turkish experience. Fourth, it will note that arguments for the “Turkish model” overlook in some respects certain less savory or positive aspects of contemporary Turkey. Finally, it will offer some conclusions about Turkey and the “new” Middle East.

The Turkish Model: Déjà Vu All Over Again

Reflecting on his country's recent political and economic experience, one Turkish scholar suggested that the political system in Turkey is a reflection of "the political maturity of the Turkish people and to their successful efforts toward modernization and democracy" and that countries facing similar conditions as Turkey would naturally be inclined to "follow the Turkish example".¹⁰ Two Western observers, also expressing enthusiasm for developments in Turkey, suggested that the country's "systematic and persistent" efforts toward political and economic development have "borne fruit".¹¹ These might be brushed off as simply echoes of some of the statements noted in the introduction, except that they were penned over fifty years ago. Indeed, in a quick survey of some of the literature on political development in the late 1950s and early 1960s finds high praise for Turkey as a successful modernizing state, one that was moving forward with democracy and had achieved a high standard among so-called "developing states." Turkey was praised as a "relatively efficient, purposeful, and modernizing state," one that had an admirable record of political stability.¹²

Observers tended to agree on the elements of Turkish success: the political, economic, and social reforms launched in the 1920s and 1930s by the founder of the Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Atatürk was responsible for reforms in a number of areas, including law, education, economic development, women's rights, and even adoption of the Latin alphabet and state-mandated manners of dress. The net result was a "fundamental political and social revolution".¹³ One French observer suggested that "Nothing of what has happened in Turkey from 1922 to 1928 has ever had its equal anywhere in the world. The whole nation has had its skin turned inside out".¹⁴ The goal of these reforms was modernization—which Atatürk essentially viewed as Westernization—and shedding Turkey's Islamic past. Laws and schools would henceforth be purely secular. Nationalism based on shared notions of "Turkishness," not Islam, would bind the people together. Brimmed hats, not the fez, would be the norm. This transformation was not easy, but Atatürk relied on a military that was supportive of modernization and his Republican People's Party, which held a virtual monopoly on political power. Opposition—liberal, Islamist, or Kurdish—was suppressed, and multi-party competitive elections did not occur until after World War II, nearly a decade after Atatürk's death.

Writing in the late 1950s, however, it was easy to uphold Turkey as a successful country, one that appeared to be following many of the core tenets of modernization theory. It was treading upon the well-worn path created by successful Western states. Turkey was still poor and largely rural, but it had rudimentary democratic institutions and trends looked positive allowing it to be grouped in a major comparative study with postwar Japan, which ranked as one of the most prosperous and stable non-Western countries.¹⁵ This comparison with Japan is in some respects instructive, as it was underlain with a functional approach to political development, one that downplayed elements of culture, or, à la Atatürk, assumed that culture could be or necessarily would be transcended. True, scholars recognized that most Turks were Muslim and that this might have some political import, but this fact was not highlighted in this literature. Indeed, one writer at that time even remarked, "there can hardly be any doubt that popular religion will gradually decline".¹⁶

Turkey's role as the darling for modernization theorists suffered a blow in 1960 when the democratically-elected civilian government was toppled in a military coup. Power was returned to civilians a year later, but Turkish democracy remained deeply flawed: civil unrest in the 1960s; another coup in 1971; more unrest and political polarization; and another coup in 1980. Moreover, predictions that Islam would gradually decline were not borne out, and by the 1970s political Islam was emerging as a powerful force.

Through it all, however, Turkey remained secular, generally pro-Western, and a valuable member of NATO. By the 1980s, its democracy had been restored and it began opening up to the world economy. Once again, one began to read of Turkey in terms of serving as a model. As before, there was emphasis on democracy and social modernization, but now there was more stress on the

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fact that this was occurring in an overwhelming Islamic country. In other words, Turkey, in contrast to, for example, Iran, had reconciled tensions between modernity and Islam, allowing the two to co-exist albeit in an environment where achievement of Western standards remained a top priority and pro-secular forces controlled most of the political power. This last caveat is central, for it was assumed that secularism was the lynchpin or the key ingredient in this system. One observer noted an important component of the so-called “Turkish-Islamic synthesis” touted by the authorities in the 1980s and 1990s was that Islam was “the essence of culture and *social control*” but that it was “*not to be politicized*”.¹⁷ Turkey was a *secular* democracy, albeit one in which Islam could serve some instrumental purposes. Bernard Lewis made perhaps the most eloquent statement with respect to Turkey’s balancing act between West and East, suggesting that “If they [Turks] succeed in their present endeavors to create, without loss of character and identity, a liberal economy, an open society, and a democratic polity, they may once again serve as a model to many other peoples”.¹⁸ Others, in a harbinger of sorts to contemporary comparisons with the Middle East, suggested that Turkey could serve as a model for the newly independent, largely ethnically Turkic, states of Central Asia.¹⁹

By the mid-1990s, talk of Turkey as a model once again faded. A series of weak governments, human rights problems and fighting in the southeast with Kurdish separatists, combined with the growing strength of Islamist political parties, exemplified in 1995 with the election of an Islamic candidate to the position of prime minister, led some to argue that Turkey was a “troubled ally” and that perhaps the old Kemalist model was outmoded and unable to adapt to new conditions. One writer concluded that even though Atatürk was still “worshipped,” the system he built—including its militant defense of secularism—“has been increasingly at odds with the new realities of modern Turkey”.²⁰ Another more sympathetic interpretation, still cast doubt as to whether Turkey could be a model for others, due to its chronic economic problems and its inability to guarantee rights and freedoms for all of its citizens (including Kurds and Islamists).²¹ By the end of the 1990s, with a “post-modern” or “soft” coup against the Islamist government in 1997, bans on Kurdish and Islamist parties, long-sought-after European Union membership looking increasingly remote, and a deepening economic crisis, the position that Turkey could serve as a model became less and less tangible.

Turkey’s fortunes changed in the 2000 with the dramatic recovery of their economy when the door to the European Union was opened. A series of constitutional amendments and other reforms were passed with the aims of political liberalization and democratization. Violence in the southeast began to ebb. Much of this occurred under the aegis of the AKP, a party with Islamic roots that overwhelmingly won national elections in 2002. It has survived periodic disputes with the secular establishment—including a court case that nearly closed it down—and won two more elections (in 2007 and 2011) increasing its vote share each time. Turkey’s improving domestic fortunes has helped the country achieve more international prestige.²²

The upshot is talk, once again, of Turkey as a possible “model,” albeit this time primarily as a result of developments in the 2000s under the AKP. Subsequently, what is now implied is not that Turkey can serve as a model because it will “overcome” Islam (as argued in the 1950s/early 1960s) or that Turkey has found a way to manage, channel and essentially subdue Islam from assuming a political role as a secular democracy (as in the 1980s/early 1990s). Turkey’s pre-AKP experience of “revolution from above”—led by the secular, Kemalist elite—is now viewed as “out of sync with the contemporary *Zeitgeist*”.²³ Rather, the focus is on “democratization from below,” which puts political Islam front and center. Turkey demonstrates, at least potentially, that you can have it all: economic development, democracy, and political Islam, a form, perhaps, of “*Islamic*” democracy. True, the state remains secular—tenuously so, according to those who are still fearful of the AKP—but there is little doubt that Islamic-oriented discourse and the public space for religion have expanded in the past decade. The military and its allies who have in the past intervened against Islamic parties seem far less capable of playing an overt political role. Voters inclined to opt for a more Islamic-oriented party can now cast their vote freely and be confident that if their party wins it will constitute the

government. Reformers in the Middle East—both secular liberals who realize out of necessity they may have to make some accommodation with Islam and Islamists who believe the government can and should uphold basic principles of Islam and democracy—might therefore understandably look to Turkey as a positive example. The next section will briefly review the case for and elements of the contemporary “Turkish model.”

The Case for Turkey as a Model

As noted above, the multifarious elements of the Turkish political system has great potential appeal to other Muslim societies. Many of these states have been ruled by—and most still are ruled by—monarchs, single-party dictatorships, military figures, and/or Islamic clerics. Oppositional Islamic political movements have been frequently suppressed and/or inclined to radicalism. Thus, even prior to the Arab Spring, some noted how Turkey under the AKP might serve as a model for the Middle East.²⁴ The Arab Spring—and events in Iran in 2009—engendered greater hope for political liberalization. Recognizing the reality that their populations are overwhelmingly Muslim and that political Islam will likely play a major role in an open, competitive, political system, many in the Muslim world have expressed interest in fashioning an “Islamic democracy.”²⁵ Arguably, Turkey is the closest to achieving this goal in the world today and thus can potentially serve as a “model.”

What constitutes the attractive features of the “Turkish model”? In brief, one could point to the following factors.²⁶

Democracy

Turkey under the AKP has been, compared to its recent past, both more stable and more democratic. The AKP has implemented a number of reforms—particularly with respect to freedom of expression, minority rights, development of civil society, and curtailing prerogatives of the military—directed toward political liberalization. One review of developments under the AKP concludes that the government’s priorities reflect a “liberal” interpretation of democracy: “limited government, the rule of law, the centrality of the individual, free-market economy, strong civil society, universal human rights, [and] the importance of dialogue and toleration”.²⁷ Whereas Turkey had been excluded from possible EU membership in 1997, by 2005 it was determined to have sufficiently met EU political criteria so accession negotiations could begin. This is not to say Turkish democracy is fully secure—problems range from the AKP narrowly avoiding being closed by a court decision in 2008 to allegations of military coup plots to renewed violence with Kurdish militant groups. However, progress under the AKP is notable. One report concluded, “it can be said that Turkey’s political system has never been closer to the long-standing democracies of Europe than it is now, thanks to the successful policies adopted by the Islamic-oriented ruling party”.²⁸

Economic growth

The economic record of AKP governments may be, if anything, even more impressive than its record in terms of political liberalization. Upon assuming office in 2002, the AKP inherited a country situated in deep economic crisis that would require intervention from the IMF as it was manifested in high inflation, expanding debt, and low growth. Since 2002, the Turkish economy has seen a remarkable turnaround. According to one source, gross domestic product tripled from 2002 to 2011 and Turkey is projected in 2011-2017 to enjoy the highest growth of any country in the Organization for Economic and Cooperation and Development (OECD).²⁹ World Bank data show impressive accomplishments under the AKP including: a decline in inflation from 45% in 2002 to 8.6% by 2010, a growth in GDP/capita (Atlas method) from \$3460 in 2002 to \$9890 in 2010, an explosion of foreign

direct investment (especially in the mid-2000s, prior to the global economic downturn), and an average growth rate from 2002 to 2011 of 5.2%, including the years of economic crisis in 2008-2009.³⁰ While a variety of factors contributed to Turkey’s performance in the 2000s, prudent policies of the AKP governments, which emphasized engagement with the world economy while maintaining fiscal discipline, no doubt played a role and helped it win re-election in 2007 and 2011.³¹

Islam and Modernity

There has been a lively debate in both academic and more popular venues about whether and how Islam can be reconciled with modernity, whose elements would include, *inter alia*, acceptance of universal human rights, gender equality, tolerance of diverse views and lifestyles, and belief in economic and scientific progress.³² Political Islam in Turkey, at least as represented by the AKP, is not focused on reviving a mythical past or settling grievances against internal or external “Others.” It is associated with movement toward Europe, political liberalization, and economic and social progress. It is pragmatic, not ideological. One observer, in an echo of sentiments expressed with respect to Turkish democracy and modernization in the 1950s, suggests that:

“the Turkish case is the first Islamist experience that invests in the future, in contrast to other movements [in the Middle East] that regard the past as the pinnacle of human development and want to recreate it...they [AKP leaders] are investing in solving concrete socioeconomic and political problems...[their success] will surely offer a new perspective on the complex and controversial issue of the meaning of modernity and the compatibility of Islam and democracy”³³

The AKP has been willing and able to work within a secular order, evolving, according to one source, “into an Islamic version of the European Christian Democratic parties,” insofar as support for it is tied not primarily to Islam but to “better governance and stable economic growth”.³⁴ Its record stands in stark contrast to that of many “Islamist” parties and the Middle East, one that eschews radicalism, favors “natural and evolutionary change” and adopts a “posture against social engineering” (Hale and Özbudun 2011, 24).³⁵

International Prestige

Turkey under the AKP is not only providing more freedoms and a better standard of living for its people, but it is also a rising power that is gaining respect in the international community. Turkey gained entry into the G-20, has one of the most dynamic economies in the world, and is becoming an important political player in its neighborhood, expanding trade and investment as well as diplomatic muscle on issues such as: the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Iranian nuclear program, post-conflict development in the Balkans, and managing political change in countries such as Libya and Syria. It is increasingly asserting a more independent line (on the war in Iraq, on Israel) vis-à-vis the United States. As noted, its prime minister is the most respected world leader among Arabs, arguably both because of what he has done at home and his willingness (from their perspective) to stand up for Muslims facing oppression, be it from their own governments, the West, or Israel.

In short, given the performance of the AKP combined with the history of repression, authoritarianism, political extremism and violence, economic underdevelopment, and international humiliation and subjugation in many parts of the Middle East and the wider Muslim community, it is natural to understand how a more powerful, stable, democratic, richer Turkey governed by a party widely viewed to be “Islamic” in orientation might be viewed as a “model” for future development.

As one observer noted, the demands for greater freedom, justice, equality, better governance, and economic management heard in the wake of the Arab Spring are not so different than the objectives of the AKP. Moreover, the shared affinity for Islam between the AKP and many political parties and movements in the Middle East has helped the AKP's experience resonate in the region.

The Turkish Model and the Middle East: A “Single Fist”³⁶ or Concept-Stretching?

On one hand it is understandable to be impressed or inspired by what has happened in Turkey in the past decade. No doubt, there is some sort of “demonstration effect”³⁷ from Turkey’s recent experience, from which one could draw some useful lessons. It is another thing, however, to ask whether Arab states or other Muslim-majority countries can easily replicate what has occurred in Turkey. In this respect, it is important to keep in mind several factors that distinguish Turkey from the Arab Middle East and most other Muslim countries.

First, Turkey’s modern history varies considerably from that of much of the Arab World. Indeed, it possesses its own “individuality”.³⁸ One feature is that Turkey never lost its independence, meaning that its Westernization (and continued embrace of Western values) can be portrayed as a conscious choice with domestic legitimacy.³⁹ Moreover, the consolidation of Turkish independence coincided with the development of Turkish nationalism, an ideology that, with the important exception of the Kurdish population, is firmly ensconced and does not have to compete, as civic nationalisms would in the Middle East, with pan-Islamic or pan-Arabist discourse.

Secondly, Turkey has a longer history of democratic development. True, democracy in Turkey has witnessed difficulties but its constitutional system, a product of evolutionary development including both formal and informal adaptations, is by now fairly well-established. Arab states will have to build “democracy from scratch,” which will mean developing new norms and forging consensus on a host of difficult political, economic, and social issues. To expect that Arab countries will be able to quickly navigate waters that took Turkey decades to cross may not be realistic. Turkey’s democratic experience also rubbed off on politically-engaged Islamists in Turkey who have served in local governments and cultivated a bottom-up connection to Islam that is grounded in democratic practices and norms as opposed to a revolutionary, at times violent and authoritarian Islam, that relies upon imposition of Islamic law.⁴⁰ While it is true that groups such as Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood have deep roots and connections in society, they do not have the experience of governing or of parliamentary politics that could facilitate their embrace of a democratic political system.

Third, Turkey also has a strong history of secularism. True, many Arab states were also secular, Tunisia ranks as perhaps the closest equivalent to Turkey, but in the Turkish case secularism was unassailable so that religious leaders and movements had to adapt to become, as Berna Turam puts it, “children of the republic.”⁴¹ In other words, to the extent that the “Turkish model” features the reconciliation of Islam and modernity, as suggested in the previous section, it is attributable to learning and moderation of Turkish Islamist parties over time. As moderation became necessary both to win votes and to avoid repression by more powerful secularist forces.⁴² The net result is pragmatism, not an idea that “Islam is the answer.” According to one observer, “The AKP’s electoral success has not been caused by an increase of Islamists. It is largely due to the party’s distancing itself from traditional Islamism”.⁴³

In this respect, the AKP, an offshoot of earlier, more radical parties, does not view itself and has not governed as a force for social engineering to impose a Muslim order. Its party program acknowledges “secularism as a pre-requisite of democracy” and rejects “the interpretation and distortion of secularism as enmity against religion.”⁴⁴ Its “Islamization” of Turkey, for example, has focused on giving women (e.g. in universities, in state institutions) the *option* or right to wear the

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headscarf, not, à la Iran, requiring it. Necmettin Erbakan, leader of the *Refah* (Welfare) Party, an Islamist predecessor of the AKP, even accused the latter in 2007 of “taking away its religious gown”.⁴⁵ It is worth noting on this front as well that the primary constituency of the AKP has been small business owners in Anatolia, culturally conservative but also an aspiring bourgeoisie, one that has profited from engagement with the outside world.⁴⁶ Religion, for the AKP, is “one of the most important institutions of humanity” and deserving of respect, but it also concedes that it is not the basis for broad political claims and is grounded in a larger vision that emphasizes “conservative democracy” within a secular system.⁴⁷ One question that might emerge, however, is whether some might think the AKP is not Islamic enough, a party that “disregards the real meaning of political Islam”.⁴⁸

This last consideration leads to inquiries about possible differences in political culture between Turkey and other Muslim states, particularly in the Arab World, that may work against easy adoption of the “Turkish model.” This is not to say that Arabs or others are inherently democratic or do not desire greater individual freedoms. Indeed, data from a spring 2011 survey by the Pew Research Center, reported in Table 1, reveal that Egyptians, Jordanians, Lebanese, and Palestinians do not show significantly less preference for democracy than Turks. Indeed, by some measures, Arabs could be said to be “more democratic.” However, as seen in Table 2, on questions relating to religious-based law and gender equality—aspects of what others have dubbed “emancipatory values” that are conducive to liberal democracy⁴⁹—there are discernible differences, with Turks far less inclined to favor religion as a basis of law and far more willing to support gender equality than Muslims in Egypt and Jordan (Muslim respondents in Lebanon are similar to Turks).

Table 1: Support for Democracy as a Form of Government

Country	Democracy preferable to any other kind of government	In some circumstances, non-democratic government can be preferable	Doesn't matter to me what kind of government we have	Democratic government more important than a strong leader	Good democracy more important than strong economy
Egypt	71	17	10	64	47
Jordan	72	17	10	59	37
Palestinian Territories	64	23	11	56	36
Lebanon	81	10	6	62	47
Turkey	66	21	3	61	48

Source: Pew Global Attitudes Project, “Arab Spring Fails to Improve US Image,” May 17, 2011, available at <http://www.pewglobal.org/2011/05/17/chapter-3-views-of-democracy-and-the-role-of-islam>. Asked of Muslims only. Data show percent agreeing with each statement.

Table 2: Views of Religious-Based Law and Gender Issues

Country	Laws should strictly follow	Laws should follow Islamic values but	Laws should not be	Women should have	Women should be

	teachings of Quran ^a	not strictly follow teachings of Quran ^a	influenced by teachings of Quran ^a	equal rights with men ^b	able to work outside the home ^b
Egypt	62	27	5	60	61
Jordan	70	25	3	61	58
Palestinian Territories	36	30	12		
Lebanon	20	36	37	95	96
Turkey	8	45	34	89	95

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Source: ^aPew Global Attitudes Project, “Arab Spring Fails to Improve US Image,” May 17, 2011, available at <http://www.pewglobal.org/2011/05/17/chapter-3-views-of-democracy-and-the-role-of-islam>, asked of Muslims only; ^bPew Global Attitudes Project, “Gender Equality Universally Embraced, But Inequalities Acknowledged,” July 1, 2010, available at <http://www.pewglobal.org/2010/07/01/gender-equality>. Data show percent agreeing with each statement.

In this respect, as suggested above, the “Turkish model” might be viewed as too secular and tolerant and insufficiently Islamic. On this point, it is worth noting that survey data from 2011 that show pluralities in Palestinian Territories (37%), Jordan (36%), and Egypt (31%) are more likely to identify with “Islamic fundamentalists” than “those who disagree with Islamic fundamentalists,” whereas in Turkey almost twice as many (45%) identify with non-fundamentalists compared to those (24%) who identify with fundamentalists.⁵⁰ Erdoğan’s statement on Egyptian television that Egyptians should not “fear secularism” thus shook many. Mahmoud Ghoslan, a spokesman for Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood argued in reaction, “No, we don’t want to Turkish model...In Turkey women may go to university without a headscarf. They have adultery and homosexuality. We will not allow that in Egypt. Egypt is a Muslim country. The Sharia, the Muslim legal framework, must be the foundation for everything.”⁵¹ True, there is a great diversity of views within the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups, but the strong showing by Salafist parties in Egypt’s elections, together with violence between Coptic Christians and Muslims, clearly shows that Egyptian Islamists, at least, will have real difficulty in adopting the more moderate interpretation of Islam as implemented by the AKP in Turkey.

Turkish success in the 2000s is also attributable, at least in part, to international factors. The European Union, in particular, has played an important—arguably indispensable—role in pushing for democratic reforms.⁵² The numerous political reforms in Turkey in the early 2000s coincided with the opening of possible EU membership through application of political conditionality. True, EU membership for Turkey looks less and less likely through a short-term perspective, meaning that the external incentive to reform is less powerful than it was a decade ago. However, one might argue that Turks have internalized many democratic norms so that Turkey can adopt “Europeanization without the EU”.⁵³ Moreover, one could also mention that the EU also has had a customs union in place with Turkey since 1996. Turkey is also tied to the West through membership in various European (e.g. Council of Europe) and trans-Atlantic (e.g. NATO) organizations. Turkey’s long-standing relationship with Western countries paired with the Westernizing orientation of reforms under Ataturk and his successors is an important part of Turkish identity that functions as a “bridge” between West and East.⁵⁴

Democratization and reform in the Middle East, in comparison, seems likely to be disadvantaged. At this time, there is no prospect for EU membership. The EU will likely continue to offer political and economic assistance but without a membership perspective. This is mostly due to Europe's own economic problems, but their inability to offer generous financial assistance will inevitably detract from their ability to influence developments. The US has lent much rhetorical support to democratization in the Middle East but its credibility on this issue is questionable due to its strong ties with Arab autocrats and its wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (although US and European assistance in the overthrow of Qaddafi may bolster Western standing). Moreover, given strong fears of “fundamentalist Islam,” Western actors may hedge their bets, working with groups such as the military (as it did in the past with Turkey) to provide a “backstop” of sorts, lest anti-Western or radical groups become too powerful. Non-democratic Arab states such as Saudi Arabia may also pursue their own agendas in the Middle East that work against adoption of the “Turkish model.”

This is not to say that democracy in the Middle East is doomed or that the Turkish model has no relevance. Certainly it is a source of inspiration for many. However, secularism, democracy, and a moderate form of political Islam have arisen in Turkey over time and out of circumstances that are not present in much of the Middle East. Successful implementation of the “Turkish model” will not, in short, be easy.

Second Thoughts about the Turkish Model?

Throughout this paper we have assumed that the “Turkish model” is largely positive and worthy of emulation. It is worth noting, however, some shortcomings and criticisms of what has transpired in Turkey in the past decade. Turkey remains in many respects a democratic work-in-progress. Freedom House in 2012 ranks it as “Partly Free” earning an average score of 3.5 (on a scale of 1-7 where one is “most free”) in respect to both civil liberties and political rights, a decline in its score from 2011.⁵⁵ Turkey’s scores on the World Bank’s Governance Indicators, shown in Table 3, also show that Turkey has made rather modest progress in the 2000s. These indicators, on a scale of -2.5 to +2.5, are used to measure aspects of political openness (especially the Voice and Accountability Index) and good governance. On most indicators, and in particular on the Voice and Accountability and Political Stability indices, Turkey rates well behind countries in the European Union, including the newest members Romania and Bulgaria, although it does measure well compared to many Middle Eastern and Muslim countries. Its low scores for Political Stability reflect in part violence associated with Kurdish demands for greater rights, an issue the AKP hoped to solve with its “Kurdish opening” in 2009 but on which it has had limited success.

Table 3: Turkey’s Performance on World Bank Governance Indicators

Indicator	2002		2010		+/- 2002-2010
	Score	% rank	Score	% rank	
Voice and Accountability	-.30	41.3	-.16	43.1	+.14
Political Stability	-.88	19.7	-1.00	16.0	-.12
Government	.05	59	.35	66	+.30

Effectiveness					
Regulatory Quality	.07	56.9	.38	61.2	+.31
Rule of Law	-.09	51.2	.10	58.3	+.19
Control of Corruption	-.71	32.7	.01	57.9	+.72

Source: World Bank, on-line at http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/sc_country.asp. Percent rank is of all countries in the world, with 100 as the top scoring country.

Other indicators point to more troubling signs. For example, Reports without Borders ranked Turkey 148th out of 179 countries (lower than Uganda, Russia, and Democratic Republic of Congo, among others) in its 2011-2012 Press Freedom Index. In comparison, Turkey ranked 100th in 2002. Its report noted a pattern of intimidation against journalists, including the imprisonment of dozens for alleged involvement in the “Ergenekon” coup plot.⁵⁶ The World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Index ranked Turkey 122nd out of 135 countries, lower than Jordan, Tunisia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates and only one place above Egypt.⁵⁷ True, this index measures issues that are not entirely in the government’s control (e.g. wage inequality, female life expectancy), but it still captures the fact—one noted as well in EU Progress Reports throughout the 2000s—that Turkey still has a ways to go on gender issues to deepen aspects of what might be called substantive democracy.

Some concerns about contemporary Turkey go even further, suggesting that democracy is not only weak but also imperiled. In 2008, the AKP narrowly avoided being closed by the Constitutional Court for violating constitutional provisions upholding secularism. From the perspective of the AKP and its supporters, this was an obvious threat to Turkish democracy and closure of the AKP would have risked instability. For its part, the AKP has attacked many of its critics, many of whom have been linked to the aforementioned Ergenekon coup plot, an alleged plan by some military officers and state bureaucrats to seize power from the AKP in the early 2000s. Dozens of generals including the former chief of staff of the armed forces, have been arrested and jailed in connection with this episode. In an act of protest in July 2011, the entire Turkish General Staff of the Armed Forces resigned. Journalists, almost all of whom are critics of the AKP, have been linked to this plot and also arrested. Over seventy journalists will have been jailed by the end of 2012 meaning Turkey will have jailed more journalists than any other country in the world. Over three thousand Kurdish activists have also been arrested, including over a dozen democratically elected mayors of Kurdish-majority cities and villages. Dozens of prominent lawyers who have defended Kurdish suspects and hundreds of university students, many of whom were protesting for free education and health care, have also been arrested in anti-terror sweeps.

The true concern for Turkish democracy lies less in the potential Islamization of the state, and more in the increasing authoritarianism presence within the Turkish government, particularly from Prime Minister Erdogan. Critics of Erdogan often recall a statement he made in the 1990s when he was mayor of Istanbul, “democracy is like a train. We shall get out when we arrive at the station we want.”⁵⁸ While Erdogan embraces a different discourse today—in 2011 AKP ran on a platform to bring “advanced democracy” to Turkey—some express concern about his and his party’s actions. In contrast to the 1990s, when Islamist parties were the target of state censure and in 2002 when the AKP came to power campaigning against the state, it is now, because it has placed its personnel in many key positions, *de facto* “the state.” Consequently, abuse of state power, which remains a problem in Turkey, is more a product of AKP rule and less a vestige of the old system. In particular,

many have suggested that Erdoğan is using the Ergenekon case to go after his critics and clamp down on the media, civil society, the universities, and other institutions that might offer resistance to the AKP.⁵⁹ In September 2010, the government won a referendum that will give it more power over the court system, and, given its increasingly strong electoral performance and the weakness of rival political parties, it looks like Turkey could become a one-party dominant state. Whether this will make Turkey more akin to Sweden under the tutelage of the Social Democrats or Mexico under the PRI remains to be seen.

With respect to discussions of adopting the “Turkish model” in other countries, it may be worth noting that Erdoğan himself is a relatively recent convert to valuing democracy among his neighbors. Prior to the recent upheaval in Syria, he had extremely cordial relations with Bashir al-Assad. In 2009 he congratulated Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on his disputed electoral victory that generated mass protests in Iran and later declared in Teheran that “Iran is our friend.”⁶⁰ In the same year on the eve of a proposed visit by Sudanese leader Omar al-Bashir to Turkey he denied any possible genocide in Darfur by suggesting that, “it is not possible for those who belong to the Muslim faith to carry out genocide,”⁶¹ and in December 2010, just prior to the outbreak of protests in Tunisia and Egypt, he accepted the Gaddafi Human Rights Award while on a visit to Libya. He has also declared his support for Hezbollah and Hamas. Indeed, his standing in the Arab world, and discussion in the region of the “Turkish model” itself, may rest in large measure on Turkish foreign policy, particularly its more critical stance toward Israel.⁶² The irony, of course, is that these same policies have led many in Israel and the United States (and a few in Turkey itself) to worry about both the direction of Turkey’s foreign policy and domestic politics.

Conclusion

There is little doubt that Turkey, with all its faults, can serve as a source of inspiration in the wake of the Arab Spring. Turkey—in terms of its democratic development, stability, and economic standing—compares favorably to many Arab states. Despite problems within Turkey, one can assert that one positive development to emerge from discussions of the “Turkish model” is that it shows that political Islam and democracy need not be mutually exclusive. Moreover, the “Turkish model” may have appeal beyond Islamic groups seeking to validate their democratic credentials; indeed, it may be even more attractive to their opponents, who, recognizing that Islam will inevitably be a political force in the Arab world, nonetheless place priority on building or maintaining a more secular system.

However, to think that the Turkish model can easily be applied to other countries is “surely disputable”.⁶³ Turkey’s system has evolved as a consequence of circumstances that do not have parallels in most Arab states. Islamist parties in Arab world lack the experience of working within a democratic system and have not, as of yet, been exposed to circumstances that would necessarily facilitate “learning” in the direction of moderation. True, in some countries, more clearly in Tunisia than in Egypt, for example, Islamic parties have pledged to uphold both democratic norms and secularism.⁶⁴ However, given public opinion data presented in this paper, there may be little incentive for Islamist political parties in countries such as Egypt to moderate their position toward issues such as imposition of Sharia law or even gender equality. In this respect, forging and maintaining a coalition of Islamist and secular groups to promote democratization will be difficult. The lack of confidence in Islamists’ commitment to democracy has allowed authoritarian leaders to use fear of anti-democratic political Islam as a means of justifying their own control.⁶⁵ This is, one might re-emphasize, still an issue in Turkey itself, exemplified by serious conflicts—including allegations of coup attempts and mutual incriminations about the each side’s lack of fidelity to democratic principles—between the AKP and its opponents from the Kemalist establishment. To think that various groups contending for power in non-democratic Middle Eastern countries can reach the tenuous level of political accommodation present in Turkey may be a stretch.

Other factors also work against adoption of the “Turkish model” in the Middle East. There will also be no prospect of EU membership to encourage or safeguard democratic reforms. Socio-economic conditions in the much of the Middle East are also dire, particularly youth unemployment. Replicating Turkish economic success will not be easy and Arab states lack many of the advantages Turkey had in the early 2000s (e.g. an environment hospitable for foreign investment and globally competitive companies). The window of opportunity for post-Arab Spring “moderates” might therefore quickly close if they cannot deliver on the hopes created by democratic openings.

In short, as much as some observers might wish that political actors in the Middle East learn lessons from the Turkish case, there is no guarantee that they will.⁶⁶ Turkey can, and no doubt will, provide assistance to reformers in the region, and its continued success may, over time, give both greater inspiration and credibility to those using the AKP as a positive example to show how political Islam and democracy can be merged together. The fact that some in the Middle East are presently invoking Turkey as a “model” is, ultimately, encouraging to the extent that one would be hard-pressed to find similar praise towards, for example, Iran. However, moving from rhetorical support for the “Turkish model” to implementation of many of its core features will remain a great challenge.

Notes

¹ Reported in *Hürriyet Daily News*, June 13, 2011.

² Bobby Ghosh, “Erdogan’s Moment,” *Time*, November 28, 2011, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2099674,00.html>.

³ For more on this survey, see “2010 Arab Public Opinion Poll,” available at <http://tinyurl.com/7lghprt>.

⁴ 2011 Arab Public Opinion Poll,” available at <http://tinyurl.com/8278x8d>. x.

⁵ Ghosh, “Erdogan’s Moment.”

⁶ Speech at the International Strategic Research Organization (USAk), in Ankara, 4 November 2009, available at <http://www.usak.org.tr/EN/makale.asp?id=1272>.

⁷ Rashid al-Ghannoushi, leader of al-Nahda, stated that Turkey is “a model very close to what Tunisia wants to be, a model that merges Islam and modernity.” Mohammed Badie, Chairman of the Muslim Brotherhood, declared that “Turkey is a model for the other countries [in the region].” See, respectively, *Today's Zaman*, 7 October 2011, and *Hürriyet Daily News*, 14 September 2011.

⁸ For explicit reference to Turkey as a model, see Bush’s statements in *Hürriyet*, 28 June 2004, and Obama’s interview in *Corriere Della Sera*, 8 July 2010.

⁹ *The New York Times*, 1 October 2011.

¹⁰ K. H. Karpat, *Turkey's Politics: The Transition to a Multi-party System* (Princeton University Press, 1959), x, xi.

¹¹ Robert E. Ward and Dankwart A. Rustow, eds., *Political Modernization in Japan and Turkey* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 9-10.

¹² C. H. Dodd, *Politics and Government in Turkey* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961), xi.

¹³ Ibid., 21.

¹⁴ Paul Dumont, “The Origins of Kemalist Ideology,” in *Atatürk and the Modernization of Turkey*, ed. Jacob M. Landau, A Westview Replica Edition (Boulder, Colo. : Leiden, the Netherlands: Westview Press ; E.J. Brill, 1984), 25-26.

¹⁵ Ward and Rustow, *Political Modernization in Japan and Turkey*.

¹⁶ Dodd, *Politics and Government in Turkey*, xvi.

¹⁷ Hugh Poultney, *Top Hat, Grey Wolf, and Crescent: Turkish Nationalism and the Turkish Republic* (Washington Square, N.Y: New York University Press, 1997), 184. (emphasis added).

¹⁸ Bernard Lewis, “Forward,” in Dankwart A. Rustow *Turkey, America's Forgotten Ally* (New York, NY: Council on Foreign Relations, 1987), xi.

¹⁹ Paul Kubicek, “Nation, State, and Economy in Central Asia: Does Ataturk Provide a Model?,” 1997, University of Washington Donald Treadgold Papers no. 14.

- ²⁰ Katherine A. Wilkens, *Turkey Today: Troubled Ally’s Search for Identity*, Headline Series no. 317 (New York: Foreign Policy Association, 1998), 10.
- ²¹ Andrew Mango, “The Turkish Model,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 29, no. 4 (1993): 726–757.
- ²² In contrast to Katherine A. Wilkens, *Turkey Today: Troubled Ally’s Search for Identity*, Headline Series no. 317 (New York: Foreign Policy Association, 1998); see Stephen Kinzer, “Triumphant Turkey?,” *New York Review of Books* 58, no. 13 (July 18, 2011): 37–40.
- ²³ Seymen Atasoy, “The Turkish Example: A Model for Change in the Middle East?,” *Middle East Policy* 18, no. 3 (September 2011): 86, doi:10.1111/j.1475-4967.2011.00500.x.
- ²⁴ Meliha Altunisik, “The Turkish Model and Democratization in the Middle East,” *Arab Studies Quarterly* 27, no. 1–2 (2005): 45–63.
- ²⁵ For a review of differing views of what this might entail, Feldman, 2003.
- ²⁶ The following descriptive sections borrow liberally from Kaddorah, 2010 Tocci et al, 2011.
- ²⁷ William M Hale and Ergun Özbudun, *Islamism, Democracy and Liberalism in Turkey the Case of the AKP* (London; New York: Routledge, 2011), 24.
- ²⁸ Hassan Nafaa, “The Appeal of the ‘Turkish Model,’” in Nathalie Tocci, et al. *Turkey and the Arab Spring: Implications for Turkish Foreign Policy from a Transatlantic Perspective*, (German Marshall Fund of the United States, Mediterranean Paper Series, 2011), 39.
- ²⁹ Atasoy, “The Turkish Example.”, 91.
- ³⁰ Calculations made with data from www.worldbank.org.
- ³¹ Ziya Öniş, “The Triumph of Conservative Globalism: The Political Economy of the AKP Era,” *Turkish Studies* 13, no. 2 (June 2012): 135–152, doi:10.1080/14683849.2012.685252.
- ³² M. Steven Fish, *Are Muslims Distinctive?: a Look at the Evidence* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011).
- ³³ Ghanim, 2009: 79, 83. Compare this with Karpat (1959: xi) who argued that the fate of Turkey is a “vital test of whether democracy and modernization are reconcilable or mutually exclusive.”
- ³⁴ Atasoy, “The Turkish Example.”, 94.
- ³⁵ Hale and Özbudun, *Islamism, Democracy and Liberalism in Turkey the Case of the AKP*. 24.
- ³⁶ “Turkey and Egypt are a single fist” was a chant heard among the crowd during Erdogan’s visit. See Ghosh, 2011.
- ³⁷ Atasoy, “The Turkish Example.”, 86.
- ³⁸ Hassan Nafaa, “The Appeal of the ‘Turkish Model,’” 43.
- ³⁹ Atasoy, “The Turkish Example.”, 86.
- ⁴⁰ Alper Dede, “The Arab Uprisings: Debating the ‘Turkish Mode,’” *Insight Turkey* 13, no. 2 (2011): 27.
- ⁴¹ Quoted in *The Economist*, “A hard act to follow,” 6 August 2011, 21.
- ⁴² Gamze ÇAVDAR, “Islamist New Thinking in Turkey: A Model for Political Learning?,” *Political Science Quarterly* 121, no. 3 (September 2006): 477–497, doi:10.1002/j.1538-165X.2006.tb00579.x.
- ⁴³ Atasoy, “The Turkish Example.”, 94.
- ⁴⁴ AKP Program, on-line at <http://eng.akparti.org.tr/english/partyprogramme.html>, retrieved on 18 February 2012.
- ⁴⁵ Emad Kaddorah, “The Turkish Model: Acceptability and Apprehension,” *Insight Turkey* 12, no. 4 (2010): 117.
- ⁴⁶ David Ghanim, “Turkish Democracy and Political Islam,” *Middle East Policy* 16, no. 1 (March 2009): 75–84, doi:10.1111/j.1475-4967.2009.00381.x; Öniş, “The Triumph of Conservative Globalism.”
- ⁴⁷ Sultan Tepe, “Turkey’s AKP: A Model ‘Muslim-Democratic’ Party,” *Journal of Democracy* 16, no. 3 (2005): 69–82, doi:10.1353/jod.2005.0053; Kaddorah, “The Turkish Model: Acceptability and Apprehension.”
- ⁴⁸ Kaddorah, “The Turkish Model: Acceptability and Apprehension.”, 113.
- ⁴⁹ Christian Welzel and Ronald Inglehart. “Political Culture, Mass Beliefs, and Value Change,” in Christian Haerpfer et al, *Democratization*. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2009.
- ⁵⁰ Pew Global Attitudes Project, “Arab Spring Fails to Improve US Image,” 17 May 2011, available at <http://tinyurl.com/c9rcfa6>.
- ⁵¹ Quoted in *Spiegel Online International*, “The Muslim Brotherhood Prepares for Power,” 28 November 2011.
- ⁵² Ziya Öniş, “Turkey-EU Relations: Beyond the Current Stalemate,” *Insight Turkey* 10, no. 4 (2008): 35–50; Paul Kubicek, “Political Conditionality and European Union’s Cultivation of Democracy in Turkey,” *Democratization* 18, no. 4 (August 2011): 910–931, doi:10.1080/13510347.2011.584732.

- ⁵³ H. Tarik Oğuzlu, “Turkey and the European Union: Europeanization Without Membership,” *Turkish Studies* 13, no. 2 (June 2012): 229–243, doi:10.1080/14683849.2012.685256.
- ⁵⁴ Paul Kubicek, “Turkey’s Inclusion in the Atlantic Community: Looking Back, Looking Forward,” *Turkish Studies* 9, no. 1 (March 2008): 21–35, doi:10.1080/14683840701813986.
- ⁵⁵ Turkey’s average score on the two indices in 2001, the year before the AKP assumed power, was 4.5, showing that Turkey under the AKP has made progress, at least as judged by Freedom House. Freedom House reports are available at www.freedomhouse.org.
- ⁵⁶ Reporters Without Borders, 2011–2012 Press Freedom Index, available at <http://en.rsf.org/press-freedom-index-2011-2012,1043.html>.
- ⁵⁷ World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap Index 2011, at <http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-2011>.
- ⁵⁸ For a critical view of Erdogan based on cables released by WikiLeaks, see Popp, 2010. This quote in Turkish is “Demokrasi amaç değil araçtır.”
- ⁵⁹ Kinzer, “Triumphant Turkey?”; Ihsan Dağı, “A Difficult Period for the AK Party , 1 January.,” *Today’s Zaman*, January 1, 2012.
- ⁶⁰ *The Guardian*, 25 October 2009.
- ⁶¹ *Haaretz*, 8 November 2009.
- ⁶² Hassan Nafaa, “The Appeal of the ‘Turkish Model.’”, 43–44.
- ⁶³ Dede, “The Arab Uprisings: Debating the ‘Turkish Mode.’”, 31.
- ⁶⁴ Laura K. Landolt and Paul Kubicek, “Opportunities and Constraints: Comparing Tunisia and Egypt to the Coloured Revolutions,” *Democratization* (April 20, 2013): 1–23, doi:10.1080/13510347.2013.777703.
- ⁶⁵ Ellen Lust, “Missing the Third Wave: Islam, Institutions, and Democracy in the Middle East,” *Studies in Comparative International Development* 46, no. 2 (April 12, 2011): 163–190, doi:10.1007/s12116-011-9086-z.