

The Arabs and Modern Turkey: A Century of Changing Perceptions

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ABSTRACT

For centuries, the Arabs and Turks were subjects of the Ottoman Sultanate, and were largely shaped by the dominant Ottoman culture and mode of religiosity. The founding of the Turkish Republic and several Arab states during the 1920s created a new political map in the region and subsequently led to the evolvement of a new Arab consciousness of the modern Turkey. This article explains the role played by four major factors in framing the Turkish image in Arab eyes: interpretations of the Ottoman past, legacy of the Kemalist era, conflicts and alliances of the Cold War period, and the recent rise to power of the Justice and Development Party. The article concludes by underlining the challenges that the Arabs and the Turks are now facing to enhance the relations between them as nations, not subjects of an empire.

There are no two peoples in the Middle East whose histories have been so intertwined as the Arabs and the Turks. For centuries, both were subjects of the Ottoman Sultanate, where a dominant Ottoman culture and an Ottoman mode of religiosity affected almost all of the Muslim peoples of the empire; Ottoman systems of government and justice were applied in Adana as well as in Cairo; and *‘ulama*, administrators, soldiers and merchants moved freely between various cities of the empire, but neither people identified itself in terms of the nation. With the emergence of the modern state in the mid-19th century, self and mutual consciousness would begin to change. Advances in the means of communication, military conscription and modern education, escalating foreign threats and competition for power and influence in the modern state would all contribute to the development of an Ottoman shared space as well as to its

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contradictions, the Turkish and Arab sense of nation-ness. Gradually, however, the Ottoman sense of belonging, on the one side, and the novel sense of national identity, on the other, were to pull the empire in two different directions.

The last decade of the Ottoman Sultanate was the most turbulent in the relations between the Arabs and the Turks.

Pressures of the modern state, centralization policies and nationalism played their part in raising doubts about the future of the Ottoman league. But the final partition of the empire was certainly the result of defeat in World War I. The founding of the Turkish Republic and several Arab states during the 1920s created a new political map in the region and subsequently led to the evolvement of a new Arab consciousness of the modern Turkey. To be sure, Arab perceptions of the Turkish Republic were never simple or constant, but rather a continuously changing affair, influenced by a variety of elements and historical conditions. Some of the most powerful forces that contributed to the framing of the Turkish image in Arab eyes related to interpretations of the Ottoman past, the legacy of Mustafa Kemal, Cold War conflicts and alliances, and the recent rise to power of the Justice and Development Party (AKP).

The Ottoman Past Reconsidered

Arab nationalism was first born in Greater Syria, during the interwar period; however, it was soon to become the main legitimating theme for almost all Arab entities, whether independent countries or those still struggling against imperialist control. Imbedded in the Arab nationalist discourse was a narrative condemnatory of the Ottoman past, in which “Ottoman” and “Turk” would frequently appear as synonymous. The historical projection of the regime of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) and the 1916 Arab revolt of Sharif Husayn of Makka would play a crucial role in the construction of this narrative. Although Arab responses to the revolt were at the time mixed, to say the least, the publishing of George Antonious’ *The Arab Awakening*, Sati’ al-Husari’s works on Arab nationalism and a few other academic and semi-academic tracts with a similar outlook¹ created a new perception of the revolt and its contribution to the making of Arab nationalism. According to this version of history, the origins of Arab nationalism were rooted in the 19th century, and the Arab revolt was a legitimate response to the Turkification and despotic policies of the CUP, and the ultimate, inescapable expression of

the Arabs' aspiration to establish their independence from the heavy burden of the long "Ottoman occupation." By denoting it as *al-thawra al-'arabiyya al-kubra* (the great Arab revolt), the Sharifian movement was depicted as a mass Arab insurrection, and a positive, major force in the revival of the modern Arab nation.

The appearance of Zeine N. Zeine's *Origins of Arab Nationalism*, and its later Arabic version, represented the first challenge to the dominant nationalist version.² While asserting the link between the CUP's policies and the development of Arabist feelings, Zeine questioned the whole assumption of the existence of an Arab liberal-nationalist awakening prior to the Ottoman second constitutional period. In assessing responses to the revolt in Greater Syria, he also noted the divisions within ranks of the Arab elites, and between the elites and the ordinary people. During the next few decades, the academic debate on Arab nationalism, especially in American and British universities, made its way into Arab academic circles, contributing to the raising of new questions and developing new research approaches.³ As a result, a more balanced view of the late Ottoman period has emerged.

Arab nationalism, like its Turkish counterpart, is understood in light of Ottoman modernization and centralization policies, while the Arab revolt is being re-examined, not only in terms of the Sharifian private motives but also in relation to the almost total lack of popular opposition to Ottoman rule in major Arab cities throughout the war years. Although independence would eventually surface as the main demand of scores of Arab notables and members of the Ottoman military and bureaucracy, a large majority of the Arab educated classes, including those with strong Arabist dispositions, such as Shakib Arslan, Kurd 'Ali, Yasin al-Hashimi and Naji al-Swaydi, fulfilled their duties as loyal Ottomans, well until the final defeat of the sultanate. With an estimated 300,000 men under arms, the Arabs constituted one-third of the Ottoman army during the war.⁴ Two-thirds of the troops who made up the 19th Division, led by Col. Mustafa Kemal during the triumphant defense of the Gallipoli Peninsula, were Arab soldiers, comprising the 72nd and 77th regiments. During the first two decades of the 20th century, Arabist sentiments were certainly on the ascendant, but only a relatively small segment of the Syrian, Iraqi and Hijazi Arabs believed that the upholding of Arab identity and rights called for the breaking up of the Ottoman league. What is interesting is that as the nationalist version of history was not confined to learned and academic quarters, the growing debate about the late Ottoman period is leaving a similar impact on the public sphere and popular culture.

In fact, the whole history of the Ottoman epoch is being reconsidered. Dur-

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ing most of the 20th century, in contrast to Arab nationalist circles, Arab Islamist forces, such as the Muslim Brothers and the Islamic Liberation Party, expressed strong attachment to the memory of the Ottoman Caliphate, although much of this attachment reflected religious nostalgia rather than a proper understanding of history. The rising interest in Ot-

toman history since the 1970s, at least, manifested in the organization of academic conferences, the establishment of specialized research centers and the increasing number of post-graduate students undertaking research on the Ottoman era, has fundamentally changed the way the Arabs have come to perceive and relate to their Ottoman past. A greater number of Ottoman historical manuscripts have been edited and published, a better understanding of Arab Ottoman society has been evolving, and the Ottoman intellectual history, in which Arab *'ulama* made immense contributions, has been receiving more attention. The Ottoman period, with its powerful Turkish dimension, is no longer seen as external to the making of Arab society and culture, but rather as an organic and pivotal phase in the Arab and Islamic history. Like Peter Gran, Nelly Hanna, an eminent Egyptian Copt historian, seems even to question the whole notion of Ottoman decline.⁵

The Kemalist Legacy

No less controversial in shaping modern Arab-Turkish relations was the founding of the Turkish Republic and its consequences. Contrary to the common view, defeat of the Ottoman army in Syria, its withdrawal to the north of Aleppo and the subsequent signing of the Armistice of Mudros did not put an end to Arab-Ottoman ties. Most of the Arab Ottoman officers who joined Faysal's Damascus government had maintained their allegiance to the sultanate to the last moment of the war, only a few of whom had been recruited from British prisoner-of-war camps by Sharifian emissaries.⁶ With the outbreak of the Turkish resistance in Anatolia, Arab officers in Damascus contacted their former comrades in Ankara, with the view of staging an all-Arab revolt in Syria and Iraq and re-unifying the Ottoman realm. The French troops in Cilicia were constantly harassed, and their supply lines from the Beka' valley were disrupted. The 1920 Iraqi revolt, sparked by Arab officers' incursions from Syria into Mosul and Tala'fer, should be seen in this context.⁷

Support for Mustafa Kemal and the Turkish resistance forces were recorded

in Palestine and Iraq, creating a sense of apprehension among officials of the British occupying authorities.⁸ With the Turkish victory in the war of independence, Ahmad Shawqi, the renowned Arab-Egyptian poet of the time, composed one of his most memorable poems in which he described Kemal as “Khalid of the Turks,” identifying him with the early Muslim legendary military commander and companion of the Prophet, Khalid ibn al-Walid. Not long later, however, when the republican state took the decision to abolish the institution of the caliphate, Shawqi wrote his “Fall of the Caliphate,” another immortal piece of 20th century Arab poetry. Expressing strong disappointment with the Kemalist regime and evincing a profound sense of melancholy, Shawqi’s poem depicted an image of the world of Islam shaken from its roots.

To a large extent, no Arab quarter could escape the repercussions of the caliphate question. Rashid Rida, the most influential figure of the Arab-Islamic reformist movement in the interwar period, republished a series of essays that had appeared earlier in *al-Manar*, defending the caliphate and calling for its preservation in a reformed institution.⁹ Immediately after the removal of the Ottoman caliph from Istanbul, Sharif Husayn declared his bid to the caliphate seat while on a visit to his son ‘Abdallah in Jordan. However, mosque imams in Palestinian cities who mentioned Husayn’s name in the Friday sermon were harshly attacked by members of the congregation or received death threats.¹⁰ Two pan-Islamic conferences, held in Makka (1924) and Cairo (1926), failed to reach an agreement on how to elect a new caliph or the most appropriate candidates for the prestigious position. Most of the Arab countries were by then under imperialist control, and with the downfall of the caliphate, there was very little left to tie the Arabs to the new Turkey. On the other hand, the Turkish Republic was not particularly keen on reviving old connections with the Arab world.

Among the Arabs of the interwar period, it was widely felt that the Turks had not only turned their back on the caliphate but also on their responsibilities to the faith. To be sure, even in those turbulent times of the republican era, Turkey did not completely disappear from the Arab imagination. The republic, too, had its admirers. An important episode in the caliphate debate was the publication

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in Cairo of *al-Islam wa Usul al-Hukm*, by the Azhari judge, Shaykh ‘Ali ‘Abd al-Raziq.¹¹ In one of the most controversial tracts of 20th century Arab-Islamic culture, ‘Abd al-Raziq denied that the caliphate was a religious institution and argued that Muslims were free to decide the form of their government according

to the changing conditions of time. Faced with widespread condemnation, ‘Abd al-Raziq was accused of recycling anti-Islamic ideas developed by Western orientalis. The truth is that the main thesis advanced in *al-Islam wa Usul al-Hukm* was derived from the document issued by the Ankara Grand National Assembly in defense of its resolution to abolish the caliphate.¹²

More significant was the rising admiration of Mustafa Kemal among the emergent modern Arab elites. With the growing belief in the power of the state among young Arab nationalist intellectuals and military officers, republican Turkey was seen as a success story, where a committed nationalist leadership gained independence and used the instrument of the state to establish order and stability and enforce a program of modernization. Turkish influences were distinctively clear in the 1933 founding declaration of the National Action League, one of the most important forerunners of the ideological Arab nationalist organizations. With a strong impact on the development of the Arab nationalist discourse in greater Syria and Iraq, the league emphasized the role of the state in deciding the Arab national future. Especially appealing to Arab nationalist officers during the interwar period was the role played by Mustafa Kemal, a fellow army officer, in the creation of the Turkish Republic from the ruins of the Ottoman Sultanate, and the structuring of its state machinery.¹³ Almost all Arab officers who became involved in politics saw the state as the righteous embodiment of the national will and the military as the savior of the nation.

The Cold War Era: Conflicts and Alliances

One of the main features of the early period of the Cold War was the West’s adoption of an anti-communist approach, based on the construction of multiple zones of alliances, with the purpose of blocking the possible expansion of communism and Soviet influence. At the same time, the rise of the Arab army officers in Egypt, their embrace of Arab nationalism and their anti-imperialist outlook posed a formidable challenge to the traditional monarchic regimes of Iraq, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Nasser, who was certainly not pro-Soviet in the beginning, strongly

believed that the Arabs' first priority was to remove the vestiges of imperialism, not to be involved in the Western game of power. Re-asserting Egypt's position in the Arab world, Nasser rejected the notion that withdrawal of the colonial powers from the Middle East would create a strategic vacuum and saw the Western-oriented alliances as a new form of imperialist administration.

A powerful tide of mass protests in 1955-56 forced King Husayn of Jordan to revoke an earlier decision to join the Baghdad Pact and consent to the appointment of a government with nationalist and leftist leanings. In 1956, Nasser emerged triumphant from the Suez War, the outcome of which dealt a fatal blow to the British position in the Middle East. Prior to and after the Suez crisis, Egypt extended support to the Algerian national liberation movement against French colonial rule. In 1958 Egyptian-Syrian unity was declared, and the pro-British regime in Iraq was overthrown by a group of nationalist army officers.¹⁴ Turkey, of course, had opted for a pro-Western policy from the end of World War II, becoming a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the pro-Western system of alliances in the Middle East, as well as the first Muslim country to recognize and establish diplomatic relations with the state of Israel.¹⁵ Not surprisingly, Menderes's Turkey was viewed with great suspicion by the majority of peoples in the Arab world. Since the Arab masses rallied behind Nasser's call for unity, independence and development, Turkey was seen as a mere imperialist instrument in the Middle East and a force for the perpetuation of the status quo in the region.¹⁶

Very few Arabs, not even the Arab Islamists, paid special attention to the reformist program of Menderes and his government, or to his attempt to reconcile society with the republican system. Not until after the tragic removal of Menderes in 1960 did his legacy become a subject of discussion in Arab circles, especially among those concerned with the authoritarian tendencies of the Arab nationalist state, its more secular attitudes and the heavy-handedness of its socialist policies.

With the Arab defeat in the June 1967 war and the expressions of solidarity shown by the Turkish people,¹⁷ a softer image of Turkey would emerge, and an Arab consciousness of the shared history of what is common with the Turks would quietly and slowly begin to grow. The 1967 defeat led to a new configuration

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of Arab politics and culture, characterized by the emergence of the Palestinian resistance movement, on the one hand, and the Islamic political movement, on the other. For the Turkish left, like leftists throughout the world, the Palestinian resistance represented a great progressive force in the world and Middle Eastern politics, and Turkish leftist elements were thus to make an appearance

in Palestinian offices in Beirut and guerrilla bases in south Lebanon. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, young Turkish Islamists would follow suit. As the question of Palestine dominated Arab politics and defined Arab political attitudes for decades, Palestine became the arena in which Arabs and Turks, however few they were, would find a common cause.

Yet the Arab perspective of Turkey at the time was also shaped by political developments within Turkey itself, as two Turkish politicians were to capture Arab attention more than any other since Mustafa Kemal: Bülent Ecevit and Necmettin Erbakan. Ecevit's democratic-socialism,¹⁸ critical views of the world system and his palpable attempt to establish strong relations with Turkey's Arab neighbors, appealed to large sections of Arab public opinion, especially those on the left. But since the Arab masses during the 1970s and 1980s were becoming more Islamic in outlook, it was Erbakan who would be held with a high degree of affection and appreciation.¹⁹ Erbakan's reference to the glorious Ottoman achievements was not only to recall the most powerful historical bonds between the Arabs and the Turks, but was also to contribute to the rehabilitation of the Ottoman past in the Arab collective imagination. Equally important was the commitment to the Palestine question that was expressed by all the parties he formed since the beginning of the 1970s.

News of the Turkish army's landing on northern Cypriot shores in 1974²⁰ to protect the lives of the Turkish people of the island was received with enthusiasm and wide approval in Arab-Islamic circles. Very few in the streets of Cairo were prepared to listen to reports speaking of American complicity in the Turkish step, and though Erbakan was the junior partner in the Turkish government at the time, all credit for the Cyprus decision was given to him. The National Salvation Party's mass protest against the Israeli annexation policy, held in Konya prior to the 1980 military coup, electrified the Arab street and elevated the Arab perception

of the Turkish Islamists to new heights. The army's subsequent intervention was condemned by large sections of the Arab public, especially the Arab Islamists, who saw the military coup as an anti-Islamic measure, not only in Turkey but in the region as a whole; others, however, felt that the army's step was inevitable, since the degree of political violence in Turkish cities had already reached a stage that threatened the very survival of the country.²¹ These diverse reactions to the Turkish situation pointed not only to the Arab internal divisions but also to a major development in the Arab awareness of modern Turkey.

From 1980 onward, the Arab public was becoming more informed of Turkish affairs, while Arab states showed greater interest in the direction which Turkey was to take. One reason behind this development was the Islamic revolution in Iran. While supported by the Arab masses and growing Arab interests in the non-Arab neighborhood, the change in Iran was met with profound hostility by the majority of Arab regimes. The outbreak of the Iraq-Iran war in 1980 drew Turkey into its proliferations, as the Kurdish armed rebellion erupted simultaneously in northern Iraq and eastern Turkey, encouraged, as it seemed, by Iran. Second, it became clear during the 1980s that Turkey's opening to its Arab neighbors was turning into a national policy, pursued with varying degrees of commitment by all Turkish governments. Third, while Turkish universities started to attract thousands of Arab students, a growing number of their Turkish counterparts headed for Egyptian, Syrian and Jordanian universities. At the same time, travel for purpose of tourism, business and trade between Turkey and the Arab countries increased noticeably. The 1980s were also the decade of growing and manifest Turkish popular solidarity with the Palestinian people, encouraged by Islamist as well as leftist groups. Finally, rapid advances in the means of communication helped to overcome barriers of language and geography, bringing Turkish political issues into Arab families' sitting rooms.

During the 1980s, Arab officials and educated classes paid close attention to Turgut Ozal's policy of strengthening and broadening relations with the Arab countries and to the economic program of his government,²² as well as to the loosening grip of the Turkish state on the media and other forms of civil organization. Since the question of the state was to emerge as a major issue in the Arab

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political debate,²³ Ozal's Turkey was believed to be an important experiment to watch. From an economic perspective, the collapse of the Turkish economy in the late 1990s, along with the Argentinian and South Asian economies, raised strong doubts about the neo-liberal approach.²⁴ But what left an even greater impact on the Arab assessments of the Turkish situation was the powerful return of the state, manifested in the removal of Erbakan's short-lived coalition

government. Erbakan's rise to power in 1996 came a few years after the abortion of the Algerian nascent democracy by the military and the consequential eruption of the Algerian civil war. The reaching of a well-known Islamist to the highest pinnacle of the Turkish state demonstrated that the Algerian fate of democratic Islamic forces was not universal or inevitable. However, the optimism fed by developments in Turkey would not last for long.

The Arab public took note of Erbakan's success in improving the economic situation, as well as of his declared policy of bolstering ties with the Arab and Islamic world. With Erbakan seen as a late 20th century Ottoman sultan, his project for the Muslim G-8 was enthusiastically welcomed by many Arabs but was equally regarded by others as highly unrealistic.²⁵ It was also obvious that major Arab states, particularly Egypt and Saudi Arabia, were not particularly comfortable about Erbakan's effort to turn Turkey into a leading regional power, setting the future agenda for the Muslim Middle East. Soon, of course, Erbakan would be subjected to mounting pressures from the military, leading eventually to his resignation in 1997. The forced downfall of the Turkish Islamic leader undermined the position of Arab proponents of peaceful and democratic change and supplied new ammunition to the argument of those who called for an all-out war against the entrenched ruling classes and their Western supporters.

The Coming of the AKP

The dawn of the new century was heralded by the September 11 attacks on Washington and New York, intensifying the already existing tension between the Muslim world and the United States. While Islam and Muslims came under suspicion throughout the world, the United States launched a war on Afghanistan, started to prepare for another against Iraq and gave the Israelis the green light to

crush the second Palestinian intifada. In this apocalyptic world of war, terror and religion, the vision presented by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) represented a fresh start for the debate about Islam and the modern state and what it means to be a Muslim in the modern world. The Arabs, like many others throughout the world, were stunned by the success of the AKP in the parliamentary elections of 2002.²⁶ Theories about the rise of the AKP were diverse and contradictory, ranging from being an American version of Islam to a political-Islamist party enveloped in a secular, democratic discourse. Gradually, however, all sides of the Arab political debate began to realize that not only Turkey, but the region as a whole, was entering a new phase with an entirely different form of politics.

With strong roots in the Islamic Refah Party, founders of the AKP were not, of course, unknown figures. For the Arab Islamists, therefore, the challenge posed by the AKP was how it was possible to reconcile individual devotion to Islam with the AKP's commitment to the secular system of government, and whether the AKP's program represented a genuine transformation of its leader's assessment of the Turkish situation, or a mere opportunistic shift in order to gain power. If it was the former, then what could have been that peculiar about modern Turkey to precipitate such a transformation? For the non-Islamists, the challenge was even greater, for the AKP appeared to reflect a combination of a major evolution in the making of political Islam and a fundamental transformation of the Turkish society itself. What both sides could not see at that early stage, and which was later to become an important aspect of the lively Arab discussion about the Turkey of the AKP, was the question of inner divisions and whether the AKP would be able to reconstruct the Turkish consensus in the beginning of the 21st century.

Yet what would continue to nurture Arab interests in Turkey after the 2002 elections was not only the unexpected political achievement of the AKP, for never since the emergence of the republic had Turkey become so involved with her neighboring Arab sphere.²⁷ Business, investment and trade relations between Turkey and the Arab countries have grown to unprecedented levels, both as a result of official agreements or by private initiatives. Turkey is an active member of the Iraq neighboring-states regular meetings, and Turkish troops are part of the multinational security force in south Lebanon, formed after the 2006 war. This certainly is the first time since the end of World War I that Turkish soldiers have been stationed on Arab land, albeit under the UN umbrella.²⁸ Movement of Arab and Turkish officials between Ankara and the Arab capitals has never been so extensive. Even the long-troubled Turkish-Syrian relations have taken a startling turn,²⁹ as a free-trade zone between the two countries has been inaugurated and

Turkey has been entrusted to arrange and play a direct role in the Syrian-Israeli negotiations. This rapidly advancing interaction between the AKP's Turkey and the Arab region, however, has not been without complications.

One of the first important issues the AKP government had to grapple with was the approaching American war on Iraq. On the eve of the invasion, the Turkish parliament won plaudits for rejecting American requests for transit passage through Turkey into northern Iraq. The war on Iraq was extremely unpopular in Turkey, and though the vote of the AKP deputies in the national assembly did not necessarily reflect their government's will, the decision left a strong impression on Arab public opinion. On more than one occasion afterwards, Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government expressed its displeasure at American policies and tactics in Iraq, reinforcing an image of Turkish independence from the American policy in the region. Yet while Turkey became more involved in Iraqi affairs (as it was, at any rate, expected to be), the AKP's approach to the occupied Iraq was not always consistent, properly positioned or particularly influential.³⁰

Soon after the American occupation of Iraq, Turkey did become a major supply line for the American forces in northern Iraq, even without further reference to the Turkish Parliament. The Turkey of the AKP, like almost all Arab states, could not see the drastic consequences emanating from the sectarian and ethnic bases upon which the new Iraq was structured. And as the security situation in Iraq deteriorated and Turkey was invited by Washington to send troops to the Sunni-dominated areas, Ankara accepted the invitation, thereby engendering strong opposition from almost all Iraqi communities, each for their own reasons.³¹ Turkey, of course, was greatly apprehensive of the American backing of the Kurdish nationalist parties and the *de facto* Kurdish independence from Baghdad, but Ankara seemed to be unsure about what to do to stop the evolving of a highly undesirable situation in northern Iraq, not even after the border area was effectively turned into a safe haven for the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Turkish pressure contributed to the postponing of the inflammatory referendum on the future of Kirkuk, but not until the late months of 2007 did the American authorities in Baghdad and the Iraqi government consent to a Turkish military intervention against the PKK. The AKP government had already prepared the groundwork for this development by a visit that Erdogan made to the White House and by extending full political recognition to Maliki's government, receiving the Iraqi prime minister in a high-profile visit to Ankara.

The mixed signals sent by its attitudes to the Iraqi situation were mirrored in

the AKP's Palestine policy. On several occasions, Turkish spokesmen, including the prime minister, voiced their protest over the harsh Israeli treatment of the Palestinians. In 2005, however, Erdogan made a rare visit by a Turkish prime minister to Israel, where he met with Israeli leader Ariel Sharon, followed by a kind of balancing visit to the Palestinian authority in Ramallah, in which he described Turkish-Palestinian relations as historical. A few months later, the AKP government helped in arranging an un-

precedented meeting between Pakistani and Israeli officials, a role that proved no less controversial than Erdogan's visit to Israel.³² To avoid American and Israeli reactions, the AKP government kept its distance from the Palestinian Hamas-led governments, even before the 2007 rift between Gaza and Ramallah. When Khalid Mash'al, the Hamas leader, arrived in Ankara in February 2006, he was not received by Erdogan, but met with Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul, and the meeting was tellingly held at AKP headquarters, not at the Turkish Foreign Ministry.³³

In addition to the long-established channels of military and economic cooperation, what seemed to inform Erdogan's Israel policy was partly the role that the American pro-Israel lobby has been playing in confronting the Armenian "genocide" allegation, and partly the wish to secure a Turkish mediating role in the Palestinian problem. During his visit to Israel, Erdogan publicly offered to play such a role, but the offer was conspicuously ignored by Sharon. In November 2007, the now-Turkish President Gul hosted a meeting in Ankara between the Palestinian President Mahmud 'Abbas and Israeli President Shimon Perez. Since meetings between the two were not particularly unusual, and as Perez lacked the constitutional authority to influence a future Israeli-Palestinian settlement, the Ankara gathering was rather cosmetic. In another first in the history of Turkish-Israeli relations, however, Perez was given the opportunity to address the Turkish Parliament. On November 27, 2007, Turkey, along with other 40 countries, took part in the Annapolis conference, organized by the Bush administration to re-launch the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. Turkey's attendance highlighted its determination to be an active party to developments in the Middle East peace process; yet, according to the Turkish press, it was Israel that pressed for the Turkish presence in Annapolis.³⁴ Turkey finally did win a mediating role in the long-stalled Israeli-

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Syrian negotiations, but not in the Palestinian track.

In November 2007, a Turkish committee investigating Israeli excavations under the Aqsa mosque, agreed upon during the visit of the Israeli prime minister, Ehud Olmert, to Ankara in February, published its report. The report concluded that the Israeli excavations were not justified at all, neither legally, nor scientifically.³⁵ However, publication of

the committee's report was a noticeably low-key event, reflecting Ankara's desire not to disrupt the significant improvement in Turkish-Israeli relations. Earlier, during Olmert's visit to the Turkish capital, the Israeli prime minister announced that the volume of trade between the two countries had reached \$2.83 billion and that 152 Israeli companies were operating in Turkey. In September the AKP government kept suspiciously quiet over reports that an Israeli air raid on a Syrian installation near Dayr al-Zur had passed through Turkish airspace, and in October the Turkish energy minister signed a crucial agreement with the Israeli minister of infrastructure, with the aim of constructing an oil pipeline between the Turkish port of Ceyhan and the Israeli port of Ashkelon.³⁶

Viewed from the coffeeshops and the university halls in the main Arab urban centers, the meaning behind the AKP's policies has not always been fathomable. Regular and educated Arabs alike look with great admiration at Turkish economic growth under Erdogan's government and the integrity and seriousness of the Turkish prime minister as well as at the expanding Turkish influence in the region. With the quiet and steady revival of the shared past in the Arab collective consciousness and the unceasing meddling of the world powers in the region's affairs, the great majority of Arabs are more receptive to Turkey's increasing involvement in the Middle East, hoping that regional matters will one day be decided by its own peoples. Still, these same Arabs expect Turkey to be a more principled and less pragmatic force, especially on the Palestinian question.

Largely, the Arabs recognize that the AKP is a secular, conservative party, led by elements with an Islamic background. Six years after its coming to power, very few Arabs, not even the staunchest of Arab secularists, still think of the AKP in political-Islamist terms. Watching the crisis engendered by Gul's candidacy to the presidency in 2007, and the Constitutional Court case for the closure of the

AKP in 2008, many Arabs believed that the political conflict in Turkey was essentially about power rather than Islam. Yet, at least for the recurrent Turkish divisions over the AKP and the reality of its agenda, the Arabs cannot entirely view the AKP in isolation of the debate about Islam.³⁷ One might even feel that the Arabs' heightened interest in the AKP is a reflection of their own inner struggle as much as, if not even more than, of their concern for a neighboring Muslim country. As the protractible encounter between the Arab Islamists and ruling classes in several Arab countries seems to have reached a deadlock, many Arabs have become keen to see the manner in which the AKP might reshape and/or be reshaped by the republic.³⁸ Despite the considerable differences that distinguish the modern Turkish political experience from that of the majority of Arab countries, there is an underlying sense, even one of a mystical nature, that the fate of the AKP's project is somehow related to the fate of the Arabs' own discord over the position of Islam in the public sphere.

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For obvious reasons, the Arab public's interest in following the Turkish political arena and its probable shifts is also shared by the Arab governments, although their real attitudes toward the contending forces in Turkey are more difficult to discern. In reality, however, the official Arab views of the AKP's Turkey are the outcome of more than one set of factors. One important dimension of the main Arab capitals' relations with Erdogan's government is the search for a solution to the Iraqi question and the desire of all sides involved to prevent any further deterioration in Iraq from spilling over into bordering countries. Another is related to the rapidly changing configuration of power in the region, manifested in the assertive Iranian role and the threat of war arising from the Iranian pursuit of a nuclear option.³⁹ A third dimension is certainly linked to Turkey's, perhaps unintended, involvement in the Arab struggle, by extending a hand to Syria's attempts to break the circle of isolation imposed by Washington, Paris, Riyadh and Cairo. All in all, however, the official Arab position on the AKP's active engagement in Arab-Islamic affairs seems to be torn between warming up to Turkey the old partner and worrying about Turkey the emergent regional power, in a period when the Middle Eastern theater has become crowded with competing powers.

Conclusion

During the past 85 years of its existence, the Turkish Republic continued to change, perhaps even more than the guardians of the republic are prepared to admit. The Arabs, peoples and states, have also changed. But while it is extremely simplistic to assume that the post-Ottoman entities represented a total rupture with the Ottoman legacy, it is equally mistaken to assume that the process of change that Turkey and the Arab countries have been experiencing will bring a total, rapid transformation of the relations between the Arabs and the Turks. What is certain, nonetheless, is that neither the idea of nationalism nor the emergence of the nation-states could break these relations completely, not even during the difficult period of the interwar years. Sons and daughters of the Turkish Republic can no longer read the Ottoman texts of their ancestors, written in Arabic script, let alone the Arabic texts of their faith, and Turkish is no longer spoken in the modern cities of Cairo, Damascus and Bagdad, as it used to be well into the early decades of the 20th century. Yet, for the past 20 years at least, Arabs and Turks have been rediscovering each other, motivated by economic prospects, political underpinnings and cultural curiosities as well as historical yearnings.

For the foreseeable future, Turkey, regardless of the ruling party in Ankara, will continue to behave as a nation-state, and Syria, Saudi Arabia and Egypt will continue to look after their national interests the way they have been doing since they came into existence as independent entities. The project of Arab unity is not making any significant leaps, while Turkish national cohesion is being tested as never before since the creation of the republic. Both the Arabs and the Turks have been grappling with the encumbering loss of socio-political consensus, exacerbated by all forms of foreign intervention in their own, as well as in regional, affairs. Closer relations, based on creative sensibility to each side's requirements and interests, could be of great benefit for all peoples of the Arab-Islamic Middle East, exchanging experiences and maximizing national gains. In a very short period of time, the opening of the Syrian-Turkish border and the strengthening relations between the two countries have engendered economic vitality on both sides of the border and transformed the way Turks and Syrian Arabs view each other.

In some respects, the challenges the Arabs and the Turks are now facing revolve around how they can create an Ottoman space of nations, not empire; how they can be inspired by their shared heritage, not be burdened by it; how they can treat the past as a subject of scholarly examination, not be prisoners of negative perceptions; and how to envision national prosperity as not isolated from the

prosperity of the whole region, not as a small-nationalism-defined enterprise. Yet, even if real and imagined obstacles in the way of the relations between Turkey and the Arab states can be overcome, the Turkish-Israeli connections will continue to overshadow the Arab peoples' view of Turkey. While the Middle East peace process and the signing of peace treaties between Israel, on the one hand, and Egypt and Jordan, on the other, have mitigated the impact of the long-established Israeli-Turkish relations, one should never underestimate the influence that the Palestine question exercises in determining the Arab peoples' political perspective.

The challenges the Arabs and the Turks are now facing revolve around how they can create an Ottoman space of nations, not empire; how they can be inspired by their shared heritage, not be burdened by it

Endnotes:

1. George Antonius, *The Arab Awakening* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1938); Sati' al-Husri, *al-Bilad al-'Arabiyya wa'l-Dawla al-'Uthmaniyya*, 2nd edn (Beirut: Dar al-'Ilm li'l-Malayin, 1960,.); idem, *Nushu' al-Fikra al-Qawmiyya* (Beirut: Dar al-Itihad, 1956); Amin Sa'id, *al-Thawra al-'Arabiyya al-Kubra*, 2 vols, (Cairo: 'Isal al-Babi al-Halabi, 1935-6); Sulayman Musa, *al-Haraka al-'Arabiyya: al-Marhala al-Aula* (Beirut: Dar al-Nahar, 1970).

2. Zeine N. Zeine, *The Struggle for Arab Independence* (Beirut: Khayat, 1960); which appeared in its Arabic version as *Nushu' al-Qawmiyya al-'Arabiyya ma' Dirasa Tarikhiyya fi al-'Ulaqat al-'Arabiyya al-Turkiyya* (Beirut: Dar al-Nahar, 1971).

3. See, for example, Ernest C. Dawn, *From Ottomanism to Arabism: Essays on the Origins of Arab Nationalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973); Rashid Khalidi, *British Policy Towards Syria and Palestine, 1906-1914* (Oxford: Ithaca Press, 1980); R. Khalidi, L. Anderson, M. Muslih, and R. Simin (eds.), *The Origins of Arab Nationalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); Hasan Kayali, *Arabs and Young Turks* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Basheer M. Nafi, *Arabism, Islamism and the Palestine Question, 1908-1941* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 1998). Kayali's work, highly critical of the established version of the early period of the Arab nationalist movement, has also been published in Arabic as *al-Haraka al-'Arabiyya bi-'Uyun 'Uthmaniyya, 1908-1918* (Beirut: Qudmus, 2003).

4. Eliezer Tauber, *The Arab Movements in World War I* (London: Frank Cass, 1993), p. 59.

5. See, for example, Nelly Hanna, *Making Money in 1600: The Life and Times of Isma'il Abu Taqiyya, Egyptian Merchant* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997). Cf. Peter Gran, *Islamic Roots of Capitalism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1973).

6. Tauber, *The Arab Movements*, pp. 102-121.

7. Elie Kedourie, *England and the Middle East: The Destruction of the Ottoman Empire, 1914-1921* (London: Mansell Publishing, 1987), pp. 170-172; Wamid J. Nazmi, *al-Judhur al-Syasiyya wa'l-Fikriyya wa'l-Ijtima'iyya li'l-Haraka al-Qawmiyya al-'Arabiyya fi'l-Iraq* (Beirut: Markaz Dirasat al-Wahda al-'Arabiyya, 1984), p. 160 and pp. 188-191; Musa, *al-Haraka al-'Arabiyya*, pp. 531-532 and pp. 553-554.

8. Nafi, *Arabism, Islamism and the Palestine Question, 1908-1941*, pp. 95-96; Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 198, 221, 1140 and 1142; Jacob M. Landau, *The Politics of Pan-Islamism* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1990) pp. 197-198.

9. Muhammad Rashid Rida, *al-Khilafa aw al-Imama al-'Uzma* (Cairo: Matba'at al-Manar, 1341 A.H.). Written on the eve of the abolition of the caliphate, Rida was apparently responding to the Ankara debate about the future of Turkey and its relation with the rest of the Muslim world. Although he believed that the caliphate was a necessity, his vision was largely modernist, proposing a separation between the temporal power and the caliphate.

10. Nafi, *Arabism, Islamism and the Palestine Question, 1908-1941*, p. 97. For a contemporary view of the Muslim responses to Sharif Husayn's caliphate, see *al-Manar*, 25 (1924), pp. 390-400.

11. 'Ali 'Abd al-Raziq, *al-Islam wa-'Usul al-Hukm* (Cairo: Matba'at Misr, 1925).

12. Hamid Enayat, *Modern Islamic Political Thought* (London: Macmillan, 1982), pp. 55-56.

13. Nafi, *Arabism, Islamism and the Palestine Question, 1908-1941*, pp. 213-214, 222.

14. Brian Holden Reid, "The Northern Tier and the Baghdad Pact," John W. Young (ed.), *The Foreign Policy of Churchill's Peacetime Administration, 1951-1955* (Leicester: Continuum International Publishing, 1988), pp. 159-179; Ritchie Owendale, *The Origins of the Arab-Israeli Wars* (London: Longman, 1992), pp. 157-159; Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Balknap Press, 1991), pp. 356-372. For a full discussion of the Cold War impact on the Middle East, see Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Superpowers and the Middle East: Regional and International Politics, 1955-1967* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994).

15. Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 307; Stanford J. Shaw and Ezel Kural Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey: Volume II, Reform, Revolution and Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), pp. 429-430.

16. Despite friendly relations with Jordan, Turkey turned down an invitation in 1954 to join a Muslim countries conference on the Palestine question to be held in Amman, suggested by Pakistan. Aryeh Shmuelevitz, "Hashemite-Turkish Relations Revisited: Jordan and Turkey, 1946-1958," Asher Susser and Aryeh Shmuelevitz (eds.), *The Hashemites in the Modern Arab World* (London: Frank Cass, 1995), pp. 198-206. Turkish threats in 1957, on behalf of the American administration, to the Syrian Arab nationalist government, prompted the Syrian move towards unity with Nasserite Egypt. Michael C. Hudson, *Arab Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), p. 259; Gerges, *The Superpowers*, pp. 85-86. Menderes's anti-Arab nationalist policy was pursued by the Turkish governments of the early 1960s. When Syrian-Egyptian unity was broken up by a military coup, Jordan and Turkey recognized the secessionist Syrian regime with haste, raising suspicion of their involvement with the Syrian officers. Yazid Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 30-31.

17. Even diplomatic relations with Israel were suspended by Ankara, although briefly.

18. Kedourie, *Politics in the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 128-9.

19. Serif Mardin, "Religion and Politics in Modern Turkey," in James P. Piscatori (ed.), *Islam in the Political Process* (New York: Cambridge University Press (for the Royal Institute of International Affairs), 1983), pp. 138-159; Feroz Ahmad, "Islamic Reassertion in Turkey," *Third World Quarterly*, 10 (April 1988), pp. 750-769.

20. Shaw, *History*, pp. 430-431; Kedourie, *Politics*, p. 135.

21. The complex nature of the military's role in Turkish politics is discussed in Tanel Demirel, "Soldiers and Civilians: The Dilemma of Turkish Democracy," *Middle Eastern Studies*, 40, 1 (2004):

pp. 127-150.

22. On the Islamic dimension of Ozal's political outlook, and his effort to strengthen relations with the Arab countries, see Alan R. Taylor, *The Islamic Question in Middle East Politics* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1988), pp. 91-92. On his neo-liberal economic policy, see Dani Rodrik, *Premature Liberalization, Incomplete Stabilization: The Ozal Decade in Turkey* (London: Centre for Economic Policy Research, 1990).

23. See, for example, Nazih N. Ayubi, *Over-Stating the Arab State* (London: I.B.Tauris, 1995).

24. David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

25. On Erbakan's short term as prime minister, see Aryeh Shmuelevitz, *Turkey's Experiment in Islamist Government, 1996-1997* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, Moshe Dayan Centre, 1999); Ziya Onis, "The Political Economy of Islamic Resurgence in Turkey: The Rise of the Welfare Party in Perspective," *Third World Quarterly*, 18, 4 (1997): pp. 743-766; Hakan Yavuz, "Political Islam and the Welfare (Refah) Party in Turkey," *Comparative Politics*, 30, 1 (1997): pp. 63-82.

26. For the context of the AKP's rise to power, see Yildiz Atasoy, *Turkey, Islamists and Democracy: Transition and Globalization in a Muslim State* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2005).

27. What two Turkish academics have described as Turkey's soft power. Bülent Aras, "Turkey between Syria and Israel: Turkey's Rising Soft Power," SETA, *Policy Brief*, No. 15 (May 2008); Meliha Benli Altunisik, "The Possibilities and Limits of Turkey's Soft Power in the Middle East," *Insight Turkey*, 10, 2 (2008): pp. 41-54. During the whole year of 2002, at the end of which the AKP formed its first government, *al-Hayat*, the pan-Arab daily, contained 124 entries on Turkey, covering all news departments, as well as commentaries and analyses. In comparison, during the first seven months of 2008, *al-Hayat* contained 559 entries.

28. For the Turkish government's vision of its participation in the UN forces in south Lebanon, see Ghassan Charbel's interview with Recep Tayyip Erdogan in *al-Hayat*, Oct. 18, 2006. For an Arab view of the Turkish debate about Turkey's involvement in Lebanon, see Basheer M. Nafi, "al-'Adala wa'l-Tanmiyya Yujhrij Turkiya min al-'Uzla al-Attaturkiyya ila al-'Uthmaniyya al-Jadida," *al-Quds al-'Arabi*, Sept. 28, 2006.

29. Turkish-Syrian relations were poisoned for decades by Turkey's annexation of the disputed Syrian province of Alexandretta (the Turkish Hatay province) in the late 1930s. In 1998, tension between the two countries reached a critical point over Syria's sheltering of the PKK's leader, Abdullah Öcalan.

30. Cf. William Hale, *Turkey, the U.S. and Iraq* (London: Saqi, 2007), for the dynamics of Turkish policy on Iraq, especially prior the American invasion and in the early period of occupation.

31. Mevlut Katik, "Turkish Government Approves Plan to Deploy Peacekeeping Force in Iraq," *Eurasia Insight*, 10 June 2003; idem., "Turkish Deployment in Iraq Now 'Out of the Question,'" *Eurasia Insight*, April 21, 2004; Susan Sachs, "The Struggle for Iraq: The Allies; Turkey Begins to Think Twice about Sending Troops to Iraq," *The New York Times*, Oct. 24, 2003.

32. For a survey of the Turkish-Palestinian and Turkish-Israeli relations from 2001 to the end of 2005, see M. Salih and B. Nafi (eds.), *al-Taqrir al-Istiratiji al-Filastini, 2005* (Beirut: al-Zaytuna Centre for Studies, 2006), pp. 116-120.

33. For the cautious Turkish position, see Abdullah Gül's statement on relations with the Palestinian government, *Milliyet*, July 7, 2006. For more details, see M. Salih (ed.), *al-Taqrir al-Istiratiji al-Filastini, 2006* (Beirut: al-Zaytuna Centre for Studies, 2007), pp. 178-184.

34. *Today's Zaman*, Nov. 15, 2007.

35. *Today's Zaman*, Nov. 16, 2007.

36. M. Salih (ed.), *al-Taqrir al-Istiratiji al-Filastini, 2007* (Beirut: al-Zaytuna Centre for Studies, 2008), pp. 204-216.

37. Cf. Michael M. Gunter and M. Hakan Yavuz, "Turkish Paradox: Progressive Islamists versus Reactionary Secularists," *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, 16, 3 (Fall 2007): pp. 289-301.

38. For examples of the various Arab views of the AKP, see Hani Mahjub, "Erdogan, Hizb al-'Adala wa Tanmiya," *al-Mawazeen*, March 3, 2006; Basheer M. Nafi, "Turkiya: Sira' Ideologi am Azmat Tabaqa Muhaymina," *al-Mawazeen*, July 6, 2007; Hani Mahjub, "Ishkaliyat Rajab Tayyib Erdogan Islamiyan," *al-Mawazeen*, November 13 2007; Azad Ahmad 'Ali, "Makhatir Namdhajat Turkiya 'Ilmaniyan thumm Islamiyan," *al-Hayat*, Sept. 14, 2007; Salah Salim, "al-Hijab al-Turki: Ma'zaq Siyasi Mufta'al li-Hawiyya Hadariyya Mulhima," *al-Hayat*, April 27, 2008; Salih Bashir, "al-Masar al-Turki kama lam Ta'rifuhu al-Mantaqa al-'Arabiyya," *al-Hayat*, June 22, 2008; Radwan al-Sayyid, "Itijahat al-Islam al-Turki wa Mushkilat al-Fahm," *al-Hayat*, Aug. 5, 2008; 'Abdallah Turkumani, "an Ta'thir al-Inmudhaj al-Islami al-Turki fi al-'Alam al-'Arabi," *al-Quds al-Arabi*, Feb. 23, 2006; Subhi al-Hadidi, "Ma'zaq Turkiya al-Mu'asira: Hijab al-Sayyida Erdogan am al-'Askaritariya," *al-Quds al-Arabi*, June 3, 2007; Abd al-Wahhab al-Afandi, "Turkiya wa Khatar al-'Awda ila al-Mustaqbal," *al-Quds al-Arabi*, Oct. 25, 2007.

39 For an Arab view of the Arab-Turkish-Iranian triangle, written in light of the Saudi monarch's visit to Ankara, see Radwan al-Sayyid, "Turkiya wa'l-'Arab wa Tawazunat al-Sharq al-Awsat al-Jadid," *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, Aug. 9, 2006.