

# The Arab Uprisings: Debating the “Turkish Model”

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## ABSTRACT

*Mass uprisings on the Arab streets have become the vehicle for reform as the availability of modern means of communication has enabled the Arab opposition to express their frustration caused by the stagnancy and inefficiency of the status quo-oriented authoritarian-bureaucratic regimes of the region. There is currently an ongoing debate about whether Turkey could become a model for the region with its growing economy, strengthening democracy, and spreading soft power due to Turkey's increasing popularity in the region and its warm relations with the Arab world. Thus, it is not Turkey's authoritarian secularism or its debacles in the process of democratization that has brought forth Turkey's prominence as a model. This article discusses what the Turkish model is, whether it is applicable to the rest of the region, and the potential risks of proposing Turkey as a model country for the region.*

The world was shocked by the sudden mass uprisings in the Middle East after a young Tunisian street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, set himself on fire in protest against the local authorities. Bouazizi claimed that the municipal authorities continually mistreated him by confiscating his wares and asking for bribes. No one could have predicted that such an incident would spark mass uprisings resulting in the overthrow of the Tunisian government. One thing that most likely increased the magnitude of the protests was that a *WikiLeaks* document revealed the extent of the Tunisian leader Z. Bin Ali and his wife L. Trabelsi's personal wealth that they had acquired over the years.

## Revolution as a Means for Change?

Besides several structural factors such as the overall inefficiency of the governments in the region, high rates of unemployment and underemployment, mass poverty, authoritarianism,

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and lack of democracy, two additional factors fueled the uprisings and exacerbated the situation in the countries: i) the availability of modern means of communication, and ii) the well-educated young masses' high levels of frustration as a result of stagnancy and inefficiency of the regimes whose only purpose was to maintain the status quo. Without these

two factors, the large-scale uprisings on the Arab streets would not have been possible. Following the uprisings in Tunisia, mass protests started in Cairo and Alexandria on January 25, 2011. After 18 days of uncertainty, Husni Mubarak resigned from office on February 11, 2011. The events caused a wave of surprise worldwide, forcing policymakers and experts to try to grasp the course of events.

One of the common themes in the literature on politics of the Middle East has been the need for gradual reform to make the transition from the inefficient and authoritarian status-quo regimes to more democratic ones. Experts on the region often times discussed the routes to democratization in the region within the context of gradual social, economic and political reforms. Some experts who study the region suggested that gradual change and transition to more democratic regimes in the region were inevitable as secularization and modernization take root in the long run. Accordingly, people of the region would become fed up with the authoritarian rulers and create internal pressures for more democracy. Additionally, a developing civil society and international pressure would aid the whole process of democratization. A related argument was the inevitable democratization of the region in the long run through a gradual liberalization of the status quo oriented regimes. These were briefly the recipes for a possible route to democratization in the Middle East, until the whole world was stunned by the mass uprisings on the Arab streets, which largely raised new questions on the plausibility of these arguments.

### **Can Turkey Genuinely Become a Model for the Region?**

While all these uprisings were at their peak, Turkey closely followed the events and stated that “the Turkish government hopes that The Supreme Council of Egypt’s armed forces makes the transition to a government elected through free and fair elections.”<sup>1</sup> The press release from the Turkish Prime Minister’s Office also emphasized that “since the emergence of mass uprisings, Turkey has supported the legitimate demands of fellow Egyptian people regarding democracy and freedoms.”

While many countries of the Middle East have been experiencing mass uprisings, the following question has to be answered: Can Turkey’s unique democratization experience since the Justice and Development Party (AKP)’s rise to power be a model for the Middle Eastern countries as well as for the *Ikhwan* and other political actors in the region?

About 30 years ago, there was a considerable amount of fear among Arab leaders and western observers over revolutions like the Iranian revolution spreading all over the region. Back then, in international policy circles, one of the main debates on the region was whether Iran could export an Islamic revolution to the rest of the region. However, currently we are debating the question of whether the Turkish model can be taken as an example. There is, in a way, an element of flattery on the side of Turkey, especially when the Turkish process of modernization and westernization is considered, because it was Turkey that imitated the west for quite some time to “reach the level of contemporary civilization”. However, for some, Turkey has now politically and economically become a model country for the rest of the region.<sup>2</sup>

But “which Turkey” that be regarded as a model? Could the old Kemalist Turkey with its radical secularism and authoritarianism be a model for the region? Indeed, authoritarianism and Kemalist-style secularism are not completely foreign to the region and variants of authoritarianism have dominated the region since the end of World War Two. For instance, the defunct Tunisian regime had earlier adopted harsh secularist policies, similar to the Kemalist-style secularism, which have had little to no benefit for Tunisian citizens regarding their access to economic and political rights, democratization and freedoms. Similarly, Kemalism cannot be an appropriate model for the rest of the region either, because it was authoritarianism and lack of democracy that triggered the mass uprisings on the Arab streets. In other words, the Arab people no longer want authoritarianism. Additionally, considering *Ikhwan*’s role in the overthrow of Mubarak and their increased political role and religio-political demands in the newly emerging political environment in Egypt, it would not be appropriate to push for a Kemalist-style secularism. Doing so would inevitably lead to precarious tensions at the beginning of a new era in Egypt. Thus, if it is not the Kemalist style secularism that would be attractive for the newly emerging regimes in the region, then what actually is? In other words, what makes Turkey attractive for the emerging regimes?

Indeed, assessing the attractiveness of the Turkish model could be done in two parts. The first part includes the debates on what the Turkish model really is and why it has become attractive for the region. In other words, it revolves around the



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*Ikhwan and other groups in the region do not have the experience of serving at the local and/or national levels and of participating in parliamentary politics in a democracy, which could be a serious obstacle on their path to fully emulate the Turkish model.*

contents and characteristics of the model. The second part includes the debates on the applicability and meaning of the Turkish model for the region.

### **What is the Turkish Model and Why has It Become Attractive?**

Turkey had limited economic and foreign policy relations with the Muslim world during the Cold War years, partially because the Kemalist elites naively assumed that increasing foreign relations with other Muslim countries would be detrimental to the secularist nature of the Turkish republic. Although signs of departure from Turkey's unwavering secularist policies emerged during Turgut Özal's leadership, Turkish foreign policy had remained quite western-oriented and isolated from the rest of the Middle East until the AKP's rise to power. By liberalizing the Turkish economy and enabling the emergence of conservative businessmen coming mostly from conservative towns in central Anatolia, Özal actually sowed the seeds for the pluralization of Turkish politics and of foreign policymaking mechanisms. The conservative capitalists—dubbed the *Anatolian tigers*—who found an opportunity to expand economically through Özal's liberalization programs later formed the social and economic foundations of the AKP. Currently, it is this new class of

conservative businessmen that take the AKP’s economic and political openings to the Middle East.

The picture depicted above also provides the most important pillar of the Turkish model: a bottom-up connection with Islam as opposed to a top-down and revolutionary version of Islamism.<sup>3</sup>

Unlike the revolutionary (and to a certain extent violent) Islamist activism that has been very influential in the region, the Turkish model emphasizes a more civil and tolerant connection with Islam where Turkish Islamists’ main goals differ from establishing an Islamic state based on Shari’a and a top-down transformation of society based on Islamic principles. Indeed, Turkish Islamism is more bottom-up where religiously motivated individuals seek to Islamize their environments through grassroots activism and solidarity by forming social networks, emphasizing education (both religious and secular), entrepreneurship, and use of the media. This bottom-up connection also includes operating within the boundaries of democratic rules. The Turkish Islamists, since the establishment of the National Order Party, have operated within the boundaries of a relatively well functioning democracy, took valuable lessons from their mistakes, and internalized the democratic and civic culture to a great extent. Except for a few cases in Egypt and Jordan where *Ikhwan* members have achieved seats in their parliaments, across the region the Islamists’ experience with democracy and national democratic institutions remained pretty limited. Also, Turkish Islamism has not resorted to violence whereas several terrorist groups in the Arab world have chosen to challenge their governments through political violence. Indeed, in the 1960s and 70s, the question over whether *Ikhwan* should resort to violence was an important and divisive discussion among the *Ikhwan* elders. For instance, those who were inspired by S. Qutb’s justification of violence<sup>4</sup> against secularist regimes split from the mainstream *Ikhwan* and established violent groups, whereas the Turkish Islamists have always been nonviolent and worked within the boundaries of democratic principles. Additionally, the Turkish Islamists’ experience in local and national politics also had a moderating effect on them. They had to solve the mundane problems of citizens and soon they had realized that it was indeed their ability to solve the problems of citizens, not necessarily pure ideology (i.e., Islamism), that attracted votes.

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The second pillar of the Turkish model lies at the Turkish Islamists’ special connection with the economy. Turkish Islamists have a market-oriented approach

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where economic successes and gains, not pure ideology, are the main driving forces.<sup>5</sup> The liberal spaces created by Turgut Özal's reforms paved the way for the emergence of this type of market-based Turkish Islamism which is lacking in the Arab world. Gradually, Turkish Islamists have become market seekers as their rapid economic successes, which were mainly a result of their export-oriented economic growth strategies, created pres-

ures for them to seek new markets for their goods. European markets had already been taken by large Turkish companies mostly owned by secular businessmen and were already too competitive for them. Thus, the Anatolian tigers inevitably resorted to new markets in the Middle East, Africa and Central Asia whose people were predominantly Muslims.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, this is a long-term economic strategy of the AKP's conservative constituency that the AKP government also encourages. This would inevitably make Turkey a country that has a larger role in the regional trade. Accordingly, the economic successes of the AKP's Islamist constituency would contribute to strengthening Turkey as a regional power with the possibility of making Turkey a soft power in the region as well.<sup>7</sup> Thus, Turkey's economic success and the newly emerging conservative business elite have increased its soft power in the region, which constitutes the third pillar of the Turkish model.

Turkey's process of democratization, rising economic performance, Erdoğan's popularity in the Arab world regarding the Palestinian issue, Turkey's gradual distancing from Israel, and the AKP's cultural-religious affinity with the people of the region in contrast to the Kemalists and secularists in Turkey have also contributed to its attraction to people in the Middle East. Additionally, the AKP's ability to successfully move from relatively heavy Islamist tones into a centrist political movement with a conservative outlook has significantly contributed to Turkey's gradual rise as a soft power in the region. Indeed, on several different occasions, AKP officials have described themselves as a political party that is similar to the European Christian Democrats, which indicates the AKP's willingness not be perceived as a hardliner Islamist party.<sup>8</sup> In sum, the AKP's bottom-up connection with Islam, the economic dynamics that compelled Turkey to seek an active political and economic role in the region and Turkey's gradual transformation into a soft power have constituted the main pillars of the Turkish model. Considering the current dynamics and characteristics of the region, the second aspect of the Turkish model debate is the applicability of the model in the region.



## The Applicability and Meaning of the Turkish Model for the Region

Besides the characteristics of the model, its applicability and meaning should also be discussed to fully assess whether the Turkish model has the potential to take root in the region. Over the years, the political manifestations of Islam have revealed themselves in completely different patterns throughout the region and, in this regard, Turkey's path to democratization is quite unique. Thus, the first aspect of the applicability of the Turkish model is Turkey's unique path to democratization. Unlike most of the Arab countries of the region, Turkey had experienced a gradual process of democratization that has allowed Turkey and Turkish politicians (including the Islamists) to take very valuable lessons, which together became part of Turkey's collective political memory. Despite several interruptions, in the form of military interventions in 1960, 1971, 1980, and 1997, Turkey has exhibited significant strides towards democratization. On the contrary, the majority of the Arab countries lack that kind of collective political memory that has developed through political actors' operating within local and national political institutions; thus, such actors have not had the opportunity to operate a political party and learn valuable political lessons from the experience. We cannot deny the fact that several groups in the region, like *Ikhwan*, have tremendous amount of experience in organizing and mobilizing the masses, establishing strong social networks, and fundraising; however, they lack serious experience in party politics, except a few *Ikhwan* members who were able to enter the Egyptian parliament as independents or under different parties. The AKP descends from the political legacy of Erbakan's National Order Party which has allowed the AKP members to build a significant amount of parliamentary and governmental experience over the years. This served as a moderating influence on them. Indeed, *Ikhwan* and other groups in the region do not have the experience of serving at the local and/or national levels and of participating in parliamentary politics in a democracy, which could be a serious obstacle on their path to fully emulate the Turkish model and prevent them from getting exposed to the moderating force that was available to the Turkish Islamists over the years. Thus, the second aspect of the applicability of the Turkish model is the Turkish Islamists' exposure to various moderating factors.

Two significant moderating factors on the AKP were its ability to form a bottom-up connection with Islam and the dynamics of the AKP's relations with its emerging conservative constituency regarding that constituency's motive to succeed economically. In a bottom-up version of Islam, the focus of the main actors is the constituency where bottom-up activism transforms individuals through solidarity and a gradual Islamization of social and political spaces whereas in the top-down version, the focus is on seizing state power, implementing *Shari'a*

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and transforming the masses into better Muslims.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, in the Turkish case, the motive to succeed economically has often times superseded harsh ideological positions and moderated ideological excesses in the long run, besides getting people exposed to different ideas and lifestyles as a result of increasing economic transactions with the global economy. Considering the difficulties of transforming the heavily stagnant statist

economies of the Arab world, it appears that it is not going to be easy for the Arab world to create their own path to economic success like that of Turkey. Additionally, considering the popularity of militant tendencies of some Islamist groups in their quest for implementing *Shari'a* after seizing power through a violent revolution, it would also be difficult (but not impossible) for the Arab world to initiate their own bottom-up connection with Islam and getting exposed to its moderating factors. These moderating factors or dynamics that are peculiar to the Turkish model do not exist in the Arab world, which clearly shows the distinctiveness of the Turkish model. In other words, if most of the Arab world manages to form a bottom-up connection with Islam by giving up their radical tendencies and if they are able to imitate Turkey's path to economic growth, the Turkish model will become more applicable for them.

A different aspect of the model's applicability is that Turkey's economic model can be an example for the highly statist economic models of the Arab world as those countries will eventually need to move from state-controlled economic models to more market-oriented ones parallel to their transition from authoritarian-bureaucratic systems to more democratic-liberal ones. This move includes a shift from the heavily statist economic model marked by the government's heavy control on the economy towards an export-oriented economic growth model that would result in the emergence of new entrepreneurial classes including conservative businessmen and merchants independent of the state's interferences. The Turkish economic model is especially marked by the Turkish economy's success with rapidly increasing GNP per capita and steady economic growth over the years, independent of state-led economic growth. The Turkish economy is also well connected to the global economy and is able to integrate the conservative entrepreneurs who mostly come from central Anatolian cities like Kayseri, Konya and Gaziantep. Turkish economic successes also include increasing exports, and



the growing share of industrial goods in Turkish exports. This type of economic transformation seems to be necessary if the Arab world truly intends to implement the Turkish model.

It was Turgut Özal’s liberal openings in the late 1980s that sowed the seeds for Turkey’s economic successes and for its move from a statist economy to a competitive and export-oriented economy. After largely benefiting from Özal’s liberal openings, the conservative entrepreneurs later became the AKP’s backbone, mostly located in central Anatolia’s conservative towns. However, those conservative businessmen later formed a unique relationship with the AKP which eventually moderated the ideological excesses of the Turkish Islamists and pushed the AKP to expand Turkey’s economic ties with the rest of the Middle East. In short, if the Arab world wants to implement the Turkish model with ease, they will need to establish a similar relationship with their own conservative export-oriented entrepreneurs which currently do not fully exist in the Arab world.

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Despite the fact that the Arab world lacks those dynamics that were particular to Turkey, there are some factors that make the Turkish model still an applicable one. The Turkish model suggests that democracy can function in a Muslim country, and that conservative Muslims can be democrats actively advocating democracy, economic growth, and rights and freedoms. In other words, regardless of whether the Turkish model completely fits the Arab world or not, it still can inspire the rest of the region. Moreover, considering the “democratic deficit” argument regarding the Middle East in western academic and media circles, the Turkish model becomes more meaningful because it alone proves that the widespread argument of “Islam’s incompatibility with democracy” is indeed wrong.

## Conclusion

The idea of Turkey being a model for the Middle East is surely disputable. For the time being, based on the difficulties listed above, it is not going to be in Turkey’s best interests to explicitly and vigorously push for exporting the Turkish model to the rest of the Middle East. Indeed, Turkey has gradually been transforming into a soft power in the region, and whether Turkey likes it or not, this process will continue considering the current political and economic dynamics of the region. There are already strong incentives for Turkey to pursue a soft power

strategy, such as Turkey's increasing political and economic role in the region, and its establishment of warmer relations with the Arab world. However, willingly or unwillingly, proposing a model that is not going to neatly fit the Arab world has its own risks which might range from Arab frustration with the model to Arab alienation leading to a deterioration of Turkish relations with the rest of the region and even with the west. These risks have to be carefully calculated if Turkey wants to maintain its current role in the region as an emerging soft power. One possible foreign policy risk for Turkey to consider here is that the rapid increase of Turkish popularity in the region could raise serious concerns in the west as Turkey gradually shifts its foreign policy towards the Middle East. The western fear of "losing Turkey" is a real one. Thus, Turkey should cautiously try to balance out all of these risks to manage the changing foreign policy environment as the politics of the region transforms. Considering all this, it would not be a surprise to see the "Turkish model debate" occupying academic and policy quarters in the upcoming years. Surely, it appears that there is more to come for those who are interested in the politics of the Middle East.

## Endnotes

1. Prime Ministry Press Office, *Latest Developments in Egypt (Mısır'daki Son Gelişmeler)*, (February 11, 2011), retrieved February 14, 2011 from <http://www.bbm.gov.tr/Forms/pgNewsDetail.aspx?Type=1&Id=1395>.

2. For instance, one of the prominent *Ikhwan* figures, Abdel Moneim Abou Al Fotouh, indicated that the Ikhwan would form a new party like Turkey's ruling AKP. See Ignatius, David "Can the Muslim Brotherhood really take over in Cairo?" (February 19, 2011), retrieved February 23, 2011 from [http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition\\_id=1&categ\\_id=5&article\\_id=125061#axzz1FBiYa47o](http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=1&categ_id=5&article_id=125061#axzz1FBiYa47o).

3. Note the differences between the concepts of Islamization and revolutionary/violent version of Islamism whose goal is to implement *Shari'a*. In Islamization, the transformation of the society is from within (bottom-up) through social networks, preaching, solidarity and activism whereas in revolutionary Islamism the top-down transformation of the society is realized through coercion.

4. See Qutb's justification of violence in *Milestones* where he discusses the concepts of *hakimiyyah* of Allah and *jahiliyyah*.

5. Erdoğan's AKP has quickly given up some of the excesses of its predecessor, the Felicity Party (Fazilet Partisi), such as a common Islamic currency/market or the Just Order (Adil Düzen).

6. For example, trade with African states has tripled in the last three years, reaching to US\$18 billion, *Milliyet*, August 8, 2010.

7. Turkish goods are very popular in the Middle East. This popularity is not just limited to the goods; indeed Turkish soap operas have become very popular in the region. Also, as a result of lifting of visa restrictions with many of the countries of the region, the volume of Middle Eastern tourists visiting Turkey has sharply increased recently.

8. Erdoğan's interview in *Le Figaro*, April 17, 2009.

9. See note 2.