Whatever Happened to "The Turkish Model"?

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Articles & Testimony

Can Turkey's experience in the past decade under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government -- more or less successfully blending democracy, close ties with the U.S., "Muslim" foreign policy, capitalism, and Islamism -- be replicated by the "Arab Spring"? In other words, are Arab AKPs in the making in Cairo, Tripoli, Tunis, Sana'a, or even Damascus and beyond? Despite the talk of a "Turkish model" throughout the region, only Tunisia is a likely Arab candidate.

Turkey has now had a full decade of AKP rule. Although rooted in the country's Islamist movement, the AKP moderated in order to come to power in 2002, which was driven by both democratic and undemocratic pressures. The AKP faced the classic dilemma for radical parties in democracies possessing checks and balances (in the Turkish case, the courts and the military): move to the center and get elected, or stay on the fringes and languish. This was a particularly poignant dilemma for the AKP because the powerful and staunchly secularist courts and military had repeatedly banned the party's Islamist predecessors, telling the AKP: "either youmoderate, or we will shut you down too."

In the end, the AKP moderated.

Once in power, the party pursued a policy that delivered phenomenal economic growth for the Turks and spread some of this wealth to the middle and working classes. In the past decade, average Turkish incomes have tripled, and Turkey now possesses a large middle class, not just in Istanbul but even across small towns in the Anatolian hinterland. This strategy has built a solid support base for the AKP, endowing it with immense popularity: in the most recent July 2011 elections, the party received an overwhelming plurality of almost 50 percent of the vote.

Embracing capitalism has been the key to the AKP strategy. The party has subsequently become so popular that it has been able to reshape Turkey, bringing the once-dominant military under its control and the Turkish elites -- including the staunchly secular courts, business community, and media -- into its camp. Its authoritarian impulses

in dealing with women, minorities, or journalists occasionally surface, but are often checked by more moderate voices both among its inner councils and in Turkish society as a whole.

In the meantime, the AKP has done a near full circle in foreign policy. Initially, the party took issue with the United States on key Middle East issues, including the Iraq War and Iran's nuclear program, with the hope of casting Turkey as a "Muslim power." This worked at least on the public relations side: the AKP became popular not just in Turkey, but across the Muslim Middle East. Yet lately, the party has shifted, moving closer to U.S. positions on Iran and also cooperating with Washington in Libya and now in Syria.

The AKP has come to understand that as a purely "Muslim power" in the Middle East, but one isolated from the West, Ankara at best resembles a "wealthy Yemen," i.e., a prosperous, large Muslim nation with no real value to regional security. However, the AKP then realized its strategic value to the Middle East as a Muslim power with strong ties to the U.S. and access to NATO technology and muscle. This self-interested posture, which also provides Turkey with better security in a tumultuous region, has been the catalyst for Ankara's foreign policy turnaround. Accordingly, in September 2011, Turkey made perhaps its most strategic decision of the past decade, throwing its lot with NATO's twenty-first missile defense project. At the same time, Turkey's all-too evident problems and frustrations in dealing with both Damascus and Baghdad lately have driven home the limits of trying to export a "Turkish model" to the wider regional geopolitical arena.

The AKP has blended Islamism, capitalism, democracy, NATO membership and "Muslim" foreign policy. Is it realistic it to expect the AKP model to thrive in post-authoritarian Arab societies, such as in Egypt?

The first point, almost always overlooked, is that even now, over a year after the Arab Spring started, most Arab states are not yet post-authoritarian. In fact, most are either still authoritarian or newly almost anarchic. For instance, in all six Gulf Cooperation Council countries, plus Jordan and Morocco, monarchs remain more or less firmly in power -- some with weak elected parliaments, some without even that.

In Libya and Yemen, autocrats have been deposed, but the new governments are not effectively in control and remain hostage in some measure to tribal, regional, or religious militias. In Iraq, the elected government seems to be moving backward instead of further away from autocratic tendencies, as the political system shows new signs of fragmentation. Syria is locked in a bloody stalemate between a dictatorial regime and an increasingly violent popular uprising. The Palestinians have had neither popular uprising nor peaceful political change; instead, they remain divided between two different governments, both of whose electoral legitimacy has long expired and neither of which is willing or able to negotiate freedom from Israel.

That leaves Tunisia and Egypt.

In Tunisia, as in Turkey, a relatively moderate Islamist party won a plurality in a free election but still has to compete with a medley of relatively secular political parties, institutions, and social groups. Extreme fundamentalists are absent from the parliament and other major national establishments, as in Turkey, though they do have a modest presence in Tunisian society. Again, as in Turkey, the Tunisian population as a whole is fairly well-educated, with a large middle-income segment despite significant pockets of poverty. And the dominant Islamist party is again very friendly to the private sector, especially to small business, and poses no threat to tourism and other important international economic lifelines.

Moreover, Tunisia's new Islamist authorities have quickly gone out of their way to avoid antagonizing the country's well-wishers in the West and to demonstrate in practical ways their strong desire to cultivate close economic, political, and security ties with the U.S. and other foreign friends. For all these reasons, Tunisia seems the best prospect to follow in Turkey's footsteps. Tellingly, and not by coincidence, Tunisia's ruling Ennahdha party is the only one in any Arab country that explicitly acknowledges its wish to emulate the "Turkish model."

As of November 2012, almost two years after the “Arab Spring” started in Tunisia, its post-revolutionary record and prospects remain mixed -- but still tilting in the “Turkish” direction. A draft constitution preserves, so far, the principles of secular law, civic freedoms, and gender equality. The non-Islamist political parties, while still fragmented, appear to retain the support of about half the public, and will probably continue to deprive Ennahdha of a monopoly of power. Some Salafi parties have been legalized, amid intense street pressure to conform to Islamic mores; but secularists and progressives are about equally mobilized and vociferous. And the economy has resumed respectable if not buoyant growth.

Egypt tells a very different story. The Muslim Brotherhood's party won a plurality in free elections, but its main competitors, in politics and in society at large, are the more extreme fundamentalist Salafi parties and movements, not the secularists. Unlike Turkey, neither the military nor the courts or other institutions are proving to be an effective balance or check on this trend.

Moreover, the Brotherhood seems determined to centralize political power in its own hands, sidelining its rivals in the new constitutional committee and nominating its own candidate for president as well, notwithstanding earlier promises of a more inclusive democratic approach. The constitution ratified last month suggests (according to Egyptian liberals) a further drift toward official Islamization, including possible new restrictions on both individual freedoms and civil society.

In the economic sphere, Egypt sadly still suffers from widespread abject poverty and illiteracy. The new regime's economic plans appear to be a muddle of religion and populism rather than a realistic AKP-like agenda for growth and development. When speaking to Egyptians (though not to Western audiences), the Brotherhood emphasizes Islamization, not democracy or development. The country’s huge dependence on foreign grants and loans will no doubt compel some limited economic reforms, but this is unlikely to mean enough growth to end that dependence anywhere on the horizon.

Finally, Egypt's new government has sometimes gone out of its way to alienate its friends in the U.S. and Europe over marginal issues, going so far as to arrest workers from international NGOs promoting democracy in the region. The Brotherhood has publicly and explicitly disavowed comparisons with the “Turkish model." Even most independent Turkish analysts agree that most Egyptians resent any hint of a “neo-Ottoman” approach by Ankara. And the latest Turkish-sponsored opinion polls show that Egyptians (and other key Arab publics) actually see Turkey less as a model than they did last year, with around half at most still holding that view.

Nevertheless, in foreign policy, the bilateral atmospherics are much improved. The two governments, for example, share much common rhetoric on important embattled neighbors like Syria and Israel. But the reality is that, of the two, only Turkey borders Syria, and only Egypt borders Israel, so practical cooperation on these issues is remote. Egypt’s short-lived effort to bring Turkey, along with rivals Iran and Saudi Arabia, into a “Muslim Quartet” to address Syria’s civil war sank without a trace over the summer. President Morsi made a very friendly visit to Ankara in September, and Prime Minister Erdogan is due back in Cairo soon -- reportedly with a substantial aid, investment, and credit package in tow. Egypt and Turkey therefore seem destined to be somewhat closer friends, and perhaps economic partners, than before the revolution, yet it is a far cry from forecasting Egypt’s internal political or economic evolution along Turkish lines.

If the prospects for Islamic democracy and prosperity a la Turkey seem fairly dim in Egypt, the odds are actually much better that Egypt will, nevertheless, continue to follow a basically moderate foreign policy. Its national security and economic needs propel it in that direction, as does its unease with Iran. Right now Egypt is torn between supporting Hamas in Gaza and hanging on to the shreds of its own “cold peace” with Israel. If the recent past is any guide, it will probably grudgingly choose the latter. Ironically, we can probably expect Egypt to be not as democratic at home, but more cooperative abroad, than most superficial impressions of the new regime suggest.

Does this imply a different model of an Islamic Arab government that is not democratic, yet generally cooperative with the U.S., hostile to Iran, and not really threatening to Israel? For a startling real-world example of this, which may be more like Egypt's future, one should perhaps look not to Turkey, but to Saudi Arabia. If only Egypt had Saudi Arabia's oil or Turkey's democratic experience and massive skilled middle class to make either one of those models work.

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