

Turkey's Role in the Arab Spring

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Can Turkey play a role in the Arab Spring? Yes and no.

Yes, because Turkey has developed newfound soft power in the Middle East. Over the past decade, Ankara has painstakingly built influence in the region by fostering business networks and establishing state-of-the-art high schools to educate the future Arab elite. A recent survey by TESEV, an Istanbul-based think tank, measured perceptions of Turkey in the Middle East. According to the poll, Turkey is the most popular country in the region.

"Most people in the Middle East view Turkey's accomplishments as being replicable," an Arab friend of mine told me. "Turkey was once like us, and that is why we like it, for it suggests a way forward." Turkish products dominate shops across the region, and Turkish soap operas depict educated and emancipated women against the background of a modern and functioning society. Turkey seems to offer an appealing social model that is within reach, and the Arab Spring is providing Turkey with an opportunity to spread its influence even further.

Coupled with spreading soft power across the region, the Turkish government has shown its solidarity with Muslim causes in the region, building rapport between Turks and some Arabs in ways not seen during the era of Westward-looking Kemalism in Turkey.

At first, this meant a distancing of Turkish foreign policy from the United States. Yet amid the throes of the Arab Spring, Ankara has come to realize the value of its strong ties with the West. If it wants to keep its influence in Arab countries, Turkey needs to prove it is more than a "wealthy Yemen," i.e., a prosperous, large Muslim nation with no real value added to regional security.

Ultimately, Turkey has come to understand that its strategic value to the Middle East is not rooted in the fact that it is a Muslim power -- the region has many such states -- but that it is a Muslim power with strong ties to the United States and access to NATO resources. This realization was the catalyst for Ankara's foreign policy turnaround. One example of this was Turkey's strategic decision to join NATO's missile defense project in September 2011.

Similarly, what Arabs care about is not that Turkey is a Muslim country, but that it is a democracy.

According to the recent Arab Public Opinion Poll conducted by the Brookings Institute, Turkey is the biggest winner of the Arab Spring and was chosen by Arabs as the country that has played the "most constructive" role in the region as a democracy.

Still, challenges remain for Turkey's potential role in the Arab Spring. First, Turkey faces the temptations of Ottomania. Buoyed by record-breaking economic growth over the past decade, the Turks are, once again, feeling imperial. Subsequently, neo-Ottomanism is becoming the political lens through which many Turks view world politics. A recent Turkish blockbuster, "Conquest 1453," glorifies the Ottomans as benevolent rulers, exemplifying Turkey's tendency to idealize its Ottoman past.

Indeed, the Turks benign view of Ottoman rule in the Middle East hardly resembles what the Arabs remember of the Ottoman Empire. For the Arabs, the Ottomans were masters, and no one wants them to return as today's big brothers. If the Arabs start to see Turkey as a neo-Ottomanist entity, Ankara could encounter pushback as it tries to lead political developments in the region.

Turkey's latest challenge will be proving its credentials as a liberal democracy. As debate continues on drafting its first civilian-made constitution, this is an especially important point. In this regard, Ankara's recent decision to start Kurdish-language education in public schools is a step in the right direction. This move could help alleviate the Kurdish problem in the country and provide more diversity within Turkey. In order for Turkey to rise as a regional power and lead the movement for democratic change, it must first win the battle for liberal democracy at home.

Soner Cagaptay is director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute. ❖

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