

Arab Revolt Makes Turkey a Regional Power

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One of the unexpected consequences of recent Arab unrest in the Middle East is Turkey's elevation into a potential regional power.

One of the unexpected consequences of the unrest in the Middle East is the elevation of Turkey's role in the Middle East, making Ankara a potential regional power.

On Feb. 8, a leader of the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt, Ashraf Abdel Ghaffar, said in Istanbul that he was taking refuge in Turkey, where he will remain until the demonstrations to remove Mubarak from power succeed. Mr. Abdel Ghaffar then praised Turkey, referring to the governing Justice and Development Party, or AKP's, political role, and said that his movement considers the AKP to be a model for Egypt after Mubarak. And on Feb. 10, Turkish media quoted Abdel Ghaffar as saying that "there might be dialogue" between the Muslim Brotherhood and the AKP.

These developments and the AKP's recent comments against Mubarak make Ankara a de facto protector of the Muslim Brotherhood, a potential powerbroker in post-Mubarak Cairo. More importantly, it provides Turkey with access to hitherto unimaginable power in the Egyptian capital.

Since the AKP came to power in Turkey in 2002, a debate has formed over whether the party's Middle East-focused foreign policy has made Turkey a regional power with influence in Middle East capitals. Until the upheavals in Tunisia and Egypt, this did not seem to be the case. The AKP's foreign policy line, for instance, which defends Hamas and Iran's nuclear program, fell on deaf ears in most Arab capitals where regimes were worried about Hamas-related instability and Iran's growing influence in the Middle East.

Now, while the Muslim Brotherhood is emerging as a key player in Egyptian politics, the AKP, as an advocate for this movement, has found an ally and voice in Cairo. The same also applies to Tunis, where the local Muslim Brotherhood has emerged from the shadows since the fall of Tunisia's dictator. Moreover, if unrest in other Arab countries were to topple more dictatorships à la Tunis, or force them to recognize the opposition à la Egypt, the AKP would gain additional allies in more Arab capitals.

The Arab Winter of 2011 has created a new Middle East landscape in which the AKP's Turkey, which has positioned itself as the defender of the Muslim Brotherhood and popular uprisings -- Ankara has voiced the strongest support for the Egyptian demonstrators, calling for Mubarak's departure before any country did so -- is a regional power to be reckoned with.

The proximity between the AKP and the Muslim Brotherhood goes beyond contemporary political support. In past years, leading AKP politicians, including Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, broke their political teeth in the Muslim Brotherhood's Turkish versions. This included the Islamist Welfare Party, or RP, in the 1990s, its predecessor and even more radically, the Islamist, National Salvation Party, or MSP, in the 1970s. The Muslim Brotherhood, RP and MSP shared political goals, such as a desire to make a narrowly defined conservative brand of religion the moral compass of their respective societies, as well as a strong dislike of secular democracy and the United States.

Such political hobnobbing, akin to the socialists' networking for a common cause in the Socialist International during the 20th century, lasted for decades, bringing together AKP and Muslim Brotherhood members and allowing for the development of mutually supportive political and personal friendships. This history affords the AKP power in the Arab capitals in the new Middle East.

For example, whether or not the Egyptian regime falls, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood is, for all practical purposes, a force in politics in that country. It is likely to take part in the transition process after Mubarak and perhaps join the government. Throughout this process, the AKP will defend the Muslim Brotherhood as an ally and strive to maximize its role in Egyptian politics. The Muslim Brotherhood will, in return, seek to provide its foreign policy vision, shared by the AKP, with leverage in Cairo.

This is the effective end of Turkey's decades-long policy of strategic isolation from the Middle East. The secular parties that ran Turkey until 2002 chose to coordinate Middle East policy with the West. After 2002, AKP supporters argued that the party's new Middle East-focused foreign policy would make Turkey a regional power, especially since the party did not seek concert with the West. Until the Arab Winter of 2011, this approach did not produce results. Not only did

the AKP fail to wield influence in Arab capitals, but it also alienated the country's traditional Western partners, for it often broke ranks with the West on Middle East issues. In other words, the AKP could neither have its cake, nor eat it.

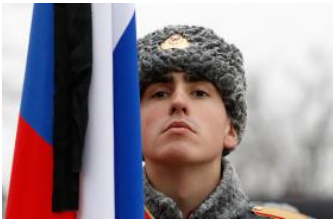
Now, the AKP can at least eat its cake. The party will not only continue to break rank with the West on issues such as Sudan and Hamas, but it will also have the benefit of a receptive audience and powers to support such policies in Cairo and elsewhere. After nearly a decade of disappointments, the AKP's Turkey is now emerging as a regional power, thanks to the Arab Winter of 2011.

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