

Can Turkey be a Role Model for the Muslim Countries?

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Abstract: The Arab world is awakening; especially Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria, countries trying to change their destiny. Turkey has been shown as a model instead of those authoritarian governments and corrupt systems. According to two surveys conducted by Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV) and KA Research Limited in seven Arabic countries, 61% of survey respondents (in 2009) and 66% of survey respondents (in 2010) think that Turkey can be a role model for the other Muslim countries in the Middle East.

Keywords: Arab revolution, Turkey, Middle East, Muslim Countries.

1. Introduction

Islam was born in the Arab Peninsula located between two great rival superpowers (the Persian and Roman Empires) in the 7th century which produced a political unity that had never before been experienced¹ in the Peninsula. It created this unity from many disconnected and even hostile tribes under the control of one leader and spread Islam rapidly to Asia, Africa and Europe. Subsequently the four caliphate era Umayyad and Abbasside continued to conquer new countries and spread Islam. When Turks arrived in Mesopotamia in the early 11th century they created great empires like Seljuk and Ottoman and they took control of the Mediterranean basin. Following the Ottoman Empire's sovereignty, for hundreds of years this area has been colonised by France, United Kingdom and Italy and Muslim lands have lost their unity.

Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Syria and Tunisia gained their independence in the twentieth century but they could not escape from the influence of western countries. In these countries in which settled repressive authoritarian administrations, a small minority owned all the business by exploiting the countries' resources, enriching themselves and living a life of luxury. This resulted in huge inequalities and poverty which grew to intolerable proportions. The lack of a democratic system and the existence of a repressive policing administration, corruption, injustice and human rights violations did not allow citizens to live in dignity in these countries.

Meanwhile, thanks to the development of communication tools, Arabic people have raised up against oppression in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria and some others countries. While some of these countries are trying to reform their systems; Turkey which was built on the Ottoman Empire's remains, has been shown as a model for them. Can Turkey really serve as a model for the Middle Eastern and North African countries? How and why? To answer these questions we will have a look into the political situation in the Middle East and try to analyse the Turkish political system.

2. Control of The Region

Mediterranean basin countries have constantly been a focus of the superpowers because of their extremely important geo-strategic location and natural resources like water, oil and natural gas. Therefore, the superpowers have always tried to be present there to dominate the region, to control the natural resources

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and energy. After being under the Ottoman Empire's sovereignty for hundreds of years, the region was divided and colonised by France, United Kingdom and Italy. Therefore British, French and Italians replaced the Turks as the rulers of the region.

“The Ottoman Empire's collapse at the end of World War I left a deep political vacuum in the Balkans and the Middle East-North Africa. And neither European colonialism nor the imposition of national boundaries after 1918 managed to create democratic, peaceful, and prosperous countries in those regions. On the contrary, the Arab-Israeli conflict, the wars in former Yugoslavia, and dictatorships in the Middle East and North Africa have dominated the scene until now. Fortunately, the European Union has managed to move the Balkans forward (with the exception of Bosnia-Herzegovina, which is another story). So it's a question of whether Turkey can help to move the Middle East and North Africa forward.”²

Although Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Syria gained their independence in the twentieth century they could not escape from the domination of western countries in the economic, administrative and cultural sense. France, United Kingdom, and then the United States of America, have always been present in these countries. They settled the repressive authoritarian monarchical or republican administrations in order to control the region, its natural resources like water, oil and natural gas. They occupied the region and faced, “as one account says, “anti-imperialist agitation...from the start.” A revolt “becomes widespread.” The British felt it wise to put up an “Arab façade”, as Lord Curzon, the foreign secretary, called it, “ruled and administered under British guidance and controlled by a native Mohammedan, and, as far as possible, by an Arab staff.(...) And that's the way Britain ran the whole region- in fact, the whole empire. The idea is to have independent states, but with weak governments that must rely on the imperial power for their survival. They can rip off the population if they like. That's fine. But they have to provide a façade behind which the real power can rule. That's standard imperialism.”³

Thus, European super powers settled in the region after the First World War and tried to provoke the hostility between Arabic countries and Turkey while they exploited their natural resources and historical fortunes. During the cold war while international balances were frozen between two superpowers (The United States of America (USA) and Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR)) the Mediterranean basin was mainly under the influence of U.S and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The USSR was seeking to reach warm seas and used the Algerian, Syrian and Libyan ports effectively to form a counterweight against the U.S. and European power in the region.

3. Arab Awakening

Consequently, the status quo of repressive dictatorial monarchical administrations, one-party dictatorships (in Iraq, Syria, Libya, Sudan, Yemen, Tunisia etc...) or republican administrations also stayed frozen in the Middle East. In all these countries a small elite minority enriched themselves in the shadow of these corrupt administrations and their western allies owned all the business remaining from ex-colonialists by exploiting the countries' resources and lived a luxurious life. This resulted in an increase in the income distribution gap, inequality, unemployment and poverty grew to intolerable proportions. The existence of the repressive policing systems, persecution, corruption, injustice and the proliferation of arbitrary government agencies along with the human rights violations, the exclusion of the media and severe restrictions on freedom of expression and access to information did not allow all citizens to live in dignity in these countries. The lack of democracy, all these adjustments, restrictions, repressions, violations and poverty create great dissatisfactions and repercussions on citizens against these administrations.

In the meantime, the global economic and food crisis deteriorated the supply-demand balances and caused a huge increase on food's and commodity's prices. The cost of wheat has been climbing since summer 2010. In February 2011, wheat was trading at \$8.50-9.00 a bushel, compared to around \$ 4 in July

2010. (...) In January, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) warned that its food price index had risen past some of the highs that sparked riots in 2008. By the time of its February announcement, there had been a further 3.4% increase, and protesters were on the streets of the world's top wheat importer, Egypt.⁴

Among other things, thanks to the development of the Internet and communication tools, (such as mobile phones, social medias etc...) and satellite channels like Al Jazeera, the effect of which meant easier access to global information, people awakened and poured into the streets to demand the end of dictatorships in some countries like Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria. The people of each country which rose up against oppressions and injustices were united in their problems and their demands for a more representative government. Thus, the Arab revolts showed the world the importance of communication tools especially those of the Internet and social networks. It has also raised expectations of transformation in the region.

4. Turkish Model

Nowadays, the strategic importance of the region has increased significantly due to transportation projects in the Middle East, North Africa, Central Asia and Russia, the transport of oils and natural gases to Europe via the Mediterranean and to the Far East over Israel. After the dissolution of the USSR, the United States has become the major force in the Mediterranean and also the European Union (EU) has started to work its strategic interests such as defence and security issues in order to increase their effectiveness in the region.

Turkey also has developed more rigorous and friendly relations with Muslim countries in the Middle East to enhance its efficiency in the region especially in recent years. It has signed some mutuality agreements with some countries, such as free travel visa agreements etc. “Under the “zero problems” policy, Turkey’s relations with its Middle Eastern neighbours are better than at any time since the founding of the republic. Regional trade is booming: Turkey’s exports to the Middle East more than doubled between 2002 and 2010 as a share of total exports, now reaching 20 percent. (The share of exports to Europe has dropped over the same period by about 10 percentage points, to about 45 percent.) Turkish diplomats, meanwhile, have taken on a more active role in the region.”⁵

The Republic of Turkey was founded by Mustafa Kemal after the First World War. Inspired by the French Revolution, Mustafa Kemal established a semi-military nationalist and Jacobean state by proclaiming The Republic of Turkey in 1923. He became the leader of Turkey, brought a kind of secularism (laicism) as a principle and modernized Turkey according to Western principles by detaching Turkey from the sphere of Asian and Muslim administration’s culture. He realized a series of political, legal, cultural, social and economic reforms which opened Turkey to the West. He abolished the sultanate, the caliphate, encouraged western clothing for men and women and discouraged veiling of women. He adopted a new civil, commercial, and penal codes inspired by European models (French, Swiss, Italian and German law). A new civil code ended Islamic polygamy and divorce by renunciation and introduced civil marriage. Women were given the right to vote in 1934, (before French women). Thus, he installed a modern system and left Turkey a model and a fitter place and became the father of the Turks, “Atatürk”.

However, many Turkish people have resisted modern and secular republican obligations. This radical change of policy was not the priority of the Muslim population which lived over a thousand years under Muslim systems. Despite this Turkey has changed over time. It has made its own partly democratic system and has been one of the most influential countries in the region.

This secular Republic has been viewed by the West as the only democratic state in the Middle East after Israel. It changed to a multi-party system after World War II, but had three coup d’états (1960, 1971 and 1980). On the one hand, it has been criticized by western countries because of military interventions in political and civilian life but on the other hand, it has been pointed as a model for the other Middle Eastern Muslim countries.

In 1999, the European Union formally adopted Turkey as a candidate and since the Justice and Development Party, (AKP), came up to power in 2002, it has declared that it supports Turkish EU membership. Labelled as a moderate Islamist party by European countries, AKP has been likened to the European Christian Democratic parties. Turkey has achieved significant progresses on social, political, economical and international domains since the AKP came to power. Already the world’s 16th largest economy, Turkey’s leaders have promised top 10 ranking by the Republic’s centenary in 2023. A robust and heavily regulated financial sector escaped the worst of 2008's global crisis while steady flows of foreign

investment and tourism have been complemented by healthy domestic industries. GDP grew 8.9 per cent in 2010, among Europe's best and outpacing worldwide recovery. Per capita earnings have doubled reaching \$10,079 in 2010. The goal for 2023 is around \$25,000.⁶

4.1 Positive Opinion of Turkey

Thanks to these achievements and Turkish constructive foreign policy in recent years it has gained a significant international influence. It has often been touted as a model for the other Muslim countries in the Middle East. But especially after the Turkish Premier Minister Erdogan's consistent critique of Israeli policies during the Gaza crisis in 2008 and in Davos in 2009, Turkey has regained an admiration which it has never reached since its foundation.

For example: two surveys conducted by Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV) and KA Research Limited in seven Arab countries (Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iraq) and Iran, show a statistically significant increase in positive opinion of Turkey. The first one which was conducted between July 24th and 29th 2009 in seven Arab countries found that an average of 75% of respondents had a positive view of Turkey. According to the survey in 2009, 61% of respondents thought that Turkey could be a model for the region. Another survey conducted in 2010 the figure even increased 5 points and it reached 66%. Also according to 66% of these survey respondents Turkey represented a successful blend of Islam and democracy.

“Although they are dealt with more thoroughly in the report, there are a few social and thus political findings that are noteworthy here. The first relates to Turkey; sympathy in the region for the country is now on its way to being firmly established. This trend is obviously set to continue unless Turkey makes a serious error of judgement. Indeed, 80% of participants in the seven Arab states surveyed had a positive view of Turkey. The second important finding is that Turkey's mediatory role is welcomed. Indeed, increased tension in Turkish-Israeli relations that arise from Israeli interventions into Gaza may lead some to question Turkey's role in the region but these concerns are not shared by the region's public according to the survey results. For example, 78% of those surveyed were supportive of Turkey playing a role in solving the Israel-Palestine problem. There is the same level of support for Turkey assuming more responsibility in the region. Turkey's mediatory role in the Iranian nuclear crisis is also supported: 61% of Iranian respondents welcomed Turkish mediation. The survey results also demonstrate that Turkey's economic presence is felt in the region. 14% perceived Turkey as having the region's second strongest economy after Saudi Arabia. Although Turkey is not yet seen as the region's economic leader, expectations are high. 27% of respondents see Turkey as the region's economic leader in just ten years time. Turkey's impact on the region is not limited to just the economic and political spheres; Turkey is beginning to be a player in the cultural domain as well. Turkish television series and celebrities are remarkably popular in the region - 78% of respondents had watched a Turkish television series. The survey results also shed light on the debate as to whether Turkey is perceived as a model for the region. 66% percent of respondents felt that Turkey can be a model for Middle Eastern countries. Support for the Turkish model was linked to the country's Muslim identity, its economy and its democratic system.”⁷

To Burhanettin Duran, Associate Professor at Istanbul Sehir University and Nuh Yilmaz, Director of SETA Washington: “There are three main political groups with competing narratives on what the Turkish model means. The first group, predominantly authoritarian secular elites of the Middle East, portrays Turkey as an exemplar of both controlled modernization under military tutelage and integration of Islamist actors into the political system. This group's “Turkey model” is tainted with Eurocentric and Orientalist prejudices about the relationship between Islam and modernity. For them, since Middle Eastern peoples are not mature enough to embrace democracy immediately, there needs to be a transitional period under the tutelage of the military. (...) The second group, mainly Islamist movements in the region, sees Turkey as a model for a completely different set of reasons. This group considers Turkey's transformation over the last decade under the AKP government as an example of coming to power through the democratic electoral process and the successful reconciliation of Islam with democracy, rule of law, and economic development. Furthermore, Turkey's image as a prominent and independent actor that can criticize Israel appeals to this group. The third group, people in the streets of the Middle East, looks to Turkey as an inspiration because of its democratic

transformation, vibrant economic development, and liberal political life. This group, which has observed the more liberal aspects of Turkish life through the country's cultural influence, especially its famous TV serials, is particularly attracted to Turkey. The third group longs to erase injustices and poverty in their countries....⁸

5. Conclusion

The main issue of Muslim countries in the Middle East is the repressive and authoritarian regimes which caused bribery, corruption, unemployment and injustice etc... It's understandable that while Arab people woke up and rebelled against the repressive regimes and systems to struggle for transformation of their countries, Turkey was pointed out as a role model for them.

Of course Turkey is not the most democratic and the most developed country of the world. This country which has also suffered from militarism, violations of human rights and corruption is still trying to cleanse itself from military influence on its civil life and politics. But Turkey is known as one of the most democratic countries in the Middle East and it has an obvious difference from other Muslim countries. It's an attractive and quite developed country compared with the other countries in the region. It has succeeded in bringing together eastern and western values and given birth to one of the most influential countries in the Middle East. Also, political Islam which faced heavy pressure of the army for years succeeded in combining Islam and democracy. Thus, it constitutes a good example for other Muslim countries in the region.

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