



Turkey and the Arab Spring

Karen Kaya

THE ARAB SPRING is a complex, rapidly unfolding phenomenon of uprisings, revolutions, mass demonstrations, and civil war, a diverse set of movements with diverse instigators and aspirations, including freedom, economic opportunity, regime change, and ending corruption. It started in Tunisia in December 2010 and spread to the rest of the Middle East throughout 2011. Although it is the most significant event to happen in the Middle East in recent history, we do not yet understand its trajectory and cannot predict its outcome. Despite the fact that the process is apparently advancing the values of freedom, justice, and democracy, it can still produce less desirable outcomes, requiring alternate approaches to standard diplomatic and economic approaches with a long-term view.

Does the Arab Spring have a Turkish model? Countries in the Middle East are looking to Turkey whose conservative social and cultural outlook, but liberal political and economic program, stand out as a model of Islamic liberalism. For the U.S. Army, this presents a long-term opportunity. Turkish security forces, trained by the U.S. Army, have begun to train other armies (such as Syria and Jordan in the Middle East and many in Central Asia and Eastern Europe). Thus U.S. lessons on civil-military relations or the laws of war will, in turn, be taught to these countries. Given its current popularity, America could use Turkish help as it maps out the future of the Arab Spring.

All this might mean a change in the nature of the U.S. Army's engagement with Turkey. The U.S. Army's former engagement with Turkey mostly entailed military relations through NATO, but did not address the profound transformation of Turkish society, Turkey's new foreign policy, and the end of the Cold War. In addition, Turkey's democratization process has led to civilian control of the military and reduced the military's previously unique authoritative role.¹ Thus, if we assess them accurately, the changing dynamics in the region may present a long-term opportunity for the U.S. Army. This requires a comprehensive analysis of the so-called Turkish model. What aspects of it can Arab Spring countries aspire to, and what features of it are not applicable?

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PHOTO: Tunisians demonstrate support for current Tunisian interior minister Al Laaridh in front of the Interior Ministry in Tunis, Tunisia, 11 January 2012. (AP Photo/Hassene Dridi)

The Destination

Turkey's current state of affairs is the result of an evolutionary process, not rapid development, but it has the ability, through its example today, to serve as a model for what some of the Arab spring countries might want to emulate. Turkey as a destination point features a democratically elected, moderate Islamic party in charge of an economic boom. Turkey can make a real and visible, if not decisive, difference in the Arab Spring's changing societies.² The Turkish experience shows that Middle Easterners do not have to choose between authoritarian government and an Islamist regime. Turkey shows that there is a third option: Islamic liberalism. With its conservative social and cultural outlook, but liberal political and economic program, Turkey's Justice and Development Party (JDP) is a model of this. It seems to demonstrate that Islamic identity does not contradict democracy, and that there is no inevitable clash between the two.

Some also argue that under JDP leadership, Turkey, in developing political, economic and cultural relations with all the countries in its region, has played a role in the emergence of the Arab Spring. By lifting visa restrictions, developing trade and cultural relations, and exporting its television programs, Turkey exposed Arabs to new ways of thinking about Islam, modernism, and elections.

Not the Journey

Turkey's non-Arab identity and the process it followed to get to its current end state are features that do not quite apply to the Arab Spring countries. The Turkish military's historically unique role, its membership in NATO and relations with the European Union (EU), its capitalist economy, and its evolutionary process are impossible to duplicate exactly. There are various versions of the Turkish model.

Military control model. The first is the pre-2002 Turkey in which the military controlled the secular state, and the country modernized under military control before democratically bringing Islamic actors into politics. This Turkish model's military-controlled transition period instilled secular and Western values in Turkish society before Islamist politics arrived. The military firmly defended a secular constitution to deter any imposition of Islamic rule.

However, this narrative does not tell the whole story. The Turkish military certainly had a role to play in the country's modernization, but many claim it actually inhibited the democratic process.³ Some experts even claim that democratic change occurred in Turkey not because of the military, but despite it.⁴ Therefore, to say that Turkey is a model of modernization because of its military overlooks the fact that the military intervened in politics five times by staging three military coups, one "post-modern coup" that forced the government to resign, and one "e-coup" that issued an online statement threatening action. The military was not a force for democracy or progressive political change.

In addition, Kemalism, the principle the military authoritatively enforced, that Turkey should be secular and Western, cannot be a model for the region because it was authoritarianism and lack of democracy that triggered the Middle East's uprisings in the first place.⁵ The Arab people no longer want authoritarianism.⁶

Islamic power model. The second version of the Turkish model is that Turkey represents the consolidation of Islamic power in a formerly secular system. This model demonstrates the possibility of a party with an Islamic pedigree coming to power through democratic means, via free and fair elections. Furthermore, this model shows that such a country can be a powerful actor in the Middle East while defying, or at least openly criticizing Israel's policies. This is the Turkey of 2002 to the present, an independent country with ties to Western institutions, yet determined to stand up to Israel and pursue its own national interests.

This narrative is also incomplete. Turkey's democratic transition began in 2002, and the EU was the main catalyst for Turkish democracy, forcing it to improve its human rights record and establish civilian control of the military. The Customs Union agreement with Europe helped its economic development. Since none of the Arab Spring countries have any prospects of EU membership, this narrative does not apply. Turkey's proximity to Europe and its membership in NATO created dynamics that do not exist in the Arab world. Furthermore, Turkish democracy still has a ways to go. Turkey's infamous Kurdish question remains unresolved, and Turkey ranks poorly in freedom of the press, with a high number of journalists in prison.

The youth model. The third version of the Turkish model is the one adopted by the people and youth who are protesting in the streets of the Middle East. They look at Turkey's open society, strong economy, rule of law, and liberal and tolerant interpretation of Islam. This group is attracted to Turkey because of the liberal life its citizens can lead and is too young to consider Turkey's long history under military rule.⁷

This narrative, which sees Turkey as a free, open, capitalist society, is also hard to replicate for the Arab Spring countries. Contrary to many Arab countries, Turkey does not have any oil, so it needs genuine economic growth. As such, it is the most capitalist country in the Islamic world. The EU market and Turkey's Customs Union agreement with the EU allow Turkish capitalism to thrive, and necessitate an open society. These circumstances are not present in the Arab Spring countries.⁸

Turkey's economic and democratic reforms took place over a period of 80 years, with many setbacks along the way. Some problematic aspects still remain. Turkey is unique in that it has a long history of secularism. In addition, it was never colonized, so it lacks the post-colonial syndrome that the Arab Spring countries have. Turkey has come to its current state after a long evolutionary process, whereas the Arab Spring countries are experiencing rapid change. Plus, for many Muslims in the Middle East, including the youth who look at the Turkey of today and want democracy, Turkey's unique past "militant secularism," such as the headscarf ban, would be unacceptable.

What the Arab Spring lacks is an Arab model of liberalization, democracy, and economic development. Egypt, not Turkey, may play this role in the long-term. Egypt is an Arab country that has long been the center of Arab entertainment and culture. Its language is the commonly understood dialect throughout the region, more so than modern standard Arabic. Therefore, Egypt may be a more relevant model for the rest of the Arab world. Currently Turkey offers hope as a co-religionist with a functioning economy. However, in the long-term, its regional location and its religious status may not be enough to bridge the gap. It is possible that Turkey and Egypt (and possibly Iran) will

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eventually emerge as leaders in the region, with Egypt taking the lead due to its Arab culture and language. A case in point is that, despite Turkey's efforts to mediate Middle Eastern issues, it was Egyptian mediation that brought Hamas and Fatah together in April 2011, which, at the time, was a historic achievement for the Palestinians.⁹

The Diversity of the Arab Spring Countries

The Arab Spring is not a homogeneous social movement or set of national events. The people in each country are calling for something different. Some want to overthrow their government, while others are simply calling for an end to corruption or for increased economic opportunities. The countries involved are witnessing different outcomes. The internal dynamics between each country's military and political leadership, as well as between the military and society in general, may explain the diverse outcomes.

For example, in Tunisia, people demanded political change after a single event (Muhammad Bouazizi, a young vendor, set himself on fire outside his local municipal office when the police arbitrarily confiscated his cart). In Egypt, people demanded the fall of the regime, starting out with a peaceful demonstration that turned into social unrest. In Yemen, mass peaceful protests demanding an overthrow of the regime turned into demonstrations, unrest, and violence. In Bahrain, the protests centered on the lack of economic opportunity and political freedom, and eventually became a sectarian dispute between a Shi'ite majority and a Sunni minority. In Syria, people called for political change after a history of repression, with events leading to a brutal crackdown on disaffected citizens. Libya experienced civil war.

Other countries did not experience such dramatic events. Kuwait experienced political turmoil not necessarily related to the Arab Spring. Oman faced demonstrations as part of the Arab Spring, but they have not threatened the regime. Demonstrators confronted the government, but did not call for the resignation of Sultan Qaboos. Instead, they demanded a strong legislature to serve as a counterweight to monarchical power. Their main demands and frustrations had to do with a lack of economic opportunity.

It would be too hard for countries with such diverse histories, cultures, motivations, and trajectories to adapt the Turkish model exactly. Different groups would embrace different versions of it, rejecting the other aspects, creating disagreement. As such, the best model will be different for each country and each country's political development will happen according to its own political history, sociology, and motivations.

Ironically, some in the "Arab street" see Turkey as a model because of its Muslim identity, its democratic government, its successful economy, and its relations with the West, while others say that it cannot be a model because it is *not Muslim enough, not democratic enough, and not distant enough from Israel and the West*. This is illustrated clearly in research done by the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation.¹⁰ The research obtained data from 2,267 respondents from Egypt, Iran, Syria, Palestine, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and Iraq. The study found that 66 percent saw Turkey as a model. The most cited reasons were its Muslim identity (15 percent), its economy (12 percent), its democracy (11 percent), and its advocacy of the rights of Palestinians and Muslims (10 percent).

However, a paradox emerged when it came to the cited reasons to reject Turkey as a role model. This time Turkey's secular political structure was seen as a negative aspect (12 percent). The view that Turkey is not Muslim enough came second (11 percent). A perception of Turkey's Muslim identity having been "watered down" because of its democratic process and its abolition of the Caliphate in the early 20th century probably help to fuel these perceptions. The third factor weighing against Turkey was its relations with the West and Israel (10 percent), and the fourth, the assumption that a model was not needed for the region at all (8 percent).¹¹

The Arab Spring's Effects on Turkey

The Arab Spring revealed a lot about Turkey. Until then, many in the Arab world admired Turkey's ability to stand up to the West by establishing good relations with countries such as Syria, Iran, and Libya while criticizing Israel. Before the Arab Spring erupted, the JDP, which came to power in 2002, had been following a new foreign policy called the "zero problems with neighbors" policy, in which Turkey pursued "proactive peace diplomacy" in the Balkans, the Middle East, the Caucasus, and the Gulf.

This new policy claimed that Turkey needed to be at peace with its diverse Muslim, Ottoman, European, and Central Asian background and take advantage of its multifaceted identity. The idea was that Turkey could talk to Damascus and Jerusalem, Tehran and Washington, and be an effective arbiter and peacemaker. In fact, when Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan made his victory speech after winning the elections for the third time in a row, he said, "Believe me, Sarajevo won today as much as Istanbul; Beirut won as much as Izmir; Damascus won as well as Ankara; Ramallah, Neblus, Jenin, the West Bank; Jerusalem won as much as Diyarbakır."¹²

The policy also called for improving trade relations between Turkey and its neighbors, thereby creating more economic interdependence to promote peace. Turkey improved relations with Iran, Iraq, and Syria, along with all its other neighbors, causing some concern in the West that Turkey was "turning east." In fact, this was more a case of Turkey diversifying its foreign policy based on calculations of hard national interests, just like any major power.¹³ Turkey claimed this multifaceted identity made it the best candidate for regional leader in the Middle East and among Arab nations, due to its common history, religion, and familiarity with them. Turkey also claimed this unique position enabled it to be a mediator between East and West. For example, it offered to mediate between the United States and Iran, and tried to bring Syria and Israel together to hold direct talks in 2008. Turkey also ventured into Israeli-Palestinian and intra-Palestinian negotiations and tried to mediate the Georgian-Russian conflict. The JDP's aim in all this was to increase its stature and visibility in the world.



Members of the Union of Turkish Youths stage a rally in support of Syrian President Bashar Assad in front of the Syrian embassy in Ankara, Turkey, 1 June 2012. (AP Photo)

All this changed with the Arab Spring. The Arab Spring caught Turkey off-guard, just as it did other countries. In the case of Tunisia and Egypt, where the protestors were calling for an end to authoritarian secularist policies, the JDP was able to stand with the pro-democracy movements protesting conditions similar to those the JDP had fought.

This was not the case for Libya and Syria, where events tested Turkey's "zero problems" policy. It was harder for the JDP to criticize Muammar Gaddafi because Libya was one of Turkey's major trading partners, with billions of dollars invested and 25,000 citizens living there when the crisis began. Thus, Turkey initially hesitated joining the NATO operation against Gaddafi, but eventually carried out its obligations as a NATO member, called on Gaddafi to step down, and supported the Libyan opposition.

When events in Syria erupted, after failed diplomatic attempts calling on the regime to implement reforms, the Turkish prime minister harshly criticized the Syrian president, supported the opposition, and demonstrated that he stood by the Syrian people (and the West), as opposed to pursuing normal relations with the Syrian government for its own interests.

Turkey's criticism of Syria also soured relations with Iran, bringing the whole "zero-problems" policy into question. Iran warned that if Turkish officials insisted on their "contradictory behavior" and continued on their present path, Iran would choose Syria over Turkey. In short, the Arab Spring exposed the contradiction between pursuing good relations with all neighbors, including such undemocratic rogue states as Syria and Iran, while advocating democracy and values that the people demanded.¹⁴ When faced with this dilemma, Turkey realized that its values were incompatible with a policy of befriending Syria and Iran. The two countries were in opposing camps. Syria was close to Iran, while Turkey has historically been in the Western camp as a member of NATO.¹⁵

U.S. Military Considerations

What made Turkey a hero in the Arab street was its harsh rhetoric against Israel, its increased self-confidence and independence from the West, its open society, successful economy, and Prime Minister Erdoğan's success in reining in the military. When Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu visited Libya in July 2011, crowds in Tahrir Square chanted, "Thank you, Turkey," and "Erdoğan, Turkey, Muslim!" When Prime Minister Erdoğan took his Arab Spring tour, which included visits to Egypt and Tunisia, thousands of adoring supporters at Cairo's airport received him like a rock star.¹⁶

Turkey's military approach in the region reflects its popularity and self-confidence. It has sent officers abroad to Arab military schools and hosted exchange students at home. Turkish military expertise (gained from the United States and NATO) has also been sought in other states, as demonstrated by joint exercises and programs with Pakistan. Turkish security forces are training other armies in the region as well. Lessons they have learned and will learn through U.S. training programs will, in turn, be taught to these countries through their own exchanges.

In fact, Turkey has taken the lead in training the security forces of many countries. It has been a key contributor in training local police and military forces in Afghanistan, having recently taken the lead within the NATO training mission to train 15,000 Afghan police officers over the



(DOD, Cherie Cullen)

Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates walks with Turkish Lt. Col. Zafer Ali Ozsoy in Istanbul, Turkey, 4 February 2010.

next decade. Turkey has also trained the forces of Albania, Bangladesh, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Tunisia, Turkmenistan, Jordan, and Syria under its “Guest Military Personnel Program.”¹⁷ Turkey leverages its close relationships and cultural and religious ties to advance military-to-military relations with those countries.

Despite all the talk about Turkey “turning east,” the fact remains that the Turkish military has had decades of U.S. assistance and training, and is full of Westernized officers. Thus, Turkey’s current position provides an opportunity. The U.S. Army can leverage its decades-old relations with its NATO ally to influence the Middle East through increased military training programs. Increased U.S. Army training of Turkish forces via exchange programs, coupled with Turkey’s initiative to take the lead in training the security forces of other Muslim countries, could enable the United States to guide the military training and education of security forces in those countries.

This is important because Arab countries in the Middle East also look at Iran. Iran represents the Muslim world’s defiance of the West, but more precisely, the ability to develop without Western assistance and in spite of Western resistance. Turkey represents a model of Muslim democracy, a legitimate political system, and a popular actor in the Middle East. Turkey is leading Iran by a wide margin, but it must be ensured that it remains the more attractive end state.¹⁸

The desire to assume a leadership role has created competition between Iran and Turkey for influence in the region. Egypt is also a rival, due to its Arab culture and language. There are also the Saudis, who have tried to contain Iran while viewing Turkey’s ambitions with suspicion.¹⁹ Saudi Arabia is a huge power in the Gulf, with the largest population (27 million), the greatest wealth, and a wide influence.

The Middle East may be heading toward a future in which countries will adopt variations or syntheses of a Turkish model (secular democracy), an Iranian

one (Islamic dictatorship), an Egyptian one yet to be determined, or a Saudi Arabian one. The long-term future of the Middle East may therefore depend on what happens in Turkey, Iran, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, and the relationship among these countries and their policies toward the rest of the region.²⁰

The U.S. Army's support to Turkey in its efforts to further its democratization process and become the influential Middle Eastern player that it wants to be should ensure Turkey becomes a more attractive model than the alternatives. As the effort to train and equip the Turkish Armed Forces matures, the U.S. Army might consider bolstering its support to the Turkish forces to counter Turkey's long-time terror

problem with the Kurdistan Workers' Party, a problem that undermines Turkey's attractiveness to the Arab Spring countries. However, these efforts could remain in the background and be jointly coordinated such that they do not play into narratives that see U.S. involvement as a negative factor or the United States as controlling Turkey. A Turkey that benefits from U.S. Army engagement resources would be even more attractive in terms of local and grassroots acceptance in the Middle East. A shift from strictly military relations within NATO to a relationship that entails increased training and exchanges may be more beneficial than weapons programs for the United States, Turkey, and the Middle East. **MR**

NOTES

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