

# Turkey's Future Role in the 'Arab Spring'

by SONER CAGAPTAY

As Egyptians and Tunisians vote to replace ousted despots and the Syrian government teeters on the brink, Turkey's role in the "Arab Spring" is under scrutiny.

Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, modern Turkey became a nation state, turning its face to Europe, and abandoning the Middle East. In the last decade, this has changed. Turkey has witnessed record-breaking economic growth. It is no longer a poor country desperately seeking accession to the European Union. It has a \$1.1 trillion economy, a powerful army, and aspirations to shape the region in its image. What is more, as political turmoil paralyzes the Middle East, and economic meltdown devastates much of Mediterranean Europe, (together with France) Turkey is the only country in the region that has been spared. Accordingly, Turkey is exerting influence over the "Arab Spring." What kind of role can and should Ankara play in countries exiting authoritarian rule?

## ■ *Ankara's New Found Influence in the Middle East*

Prior to the "Arab Spring," Turkey's recent activist foreign policy shifted away from Europe, building Turkey more influence in the Middle East. After coming to power in 2002, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) cultivated ties with former Ottoman lands in the Middle East and beyond that were ignored for much of the 20th century. The hope was that this would jump-start integration between Turkey and its neighbors, creating something like the 1950s "Benelux" bloc of Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg.

For instance, of the 33 new Turkish diplomatic missions opened in the past decade, 18 are in Muslim and African countries.

This has resulted in new commercial and political ties, often at the expense of Turkey's ties with Europe. In 1999, the European Union accounted for over 56 percent of Turkish trade; in 2011, it was just 41 percent. Over the same period, Islamic countries' share of Turkish trade climbed to 20 percent from 12 percent.

New trade patterns have led to the emergence of a more socially conservative business elite based in central Turkey, which derives strength from trading beyond Europe and is using its new wealth to push for a redefinition of Turkey's traditional approach to secularism. Since 2002, Ataturk's French-inspired model promoting freedom *from* religion in government, education, and politics has collapsed. Instead, the AKP and its allies have promoted a softer form of secularism that allows for freedom *of* religion in government, politics, and education. This has made the Turkish model appealing to socially conservative Arab countries, which for the most part regard French-style secularism as anathema.

In the past decade, Turkey has also, perhaps unwittingly, built soft power in Arab countries in the hope of rising up as a regional leader, building business networks and founding state-of-the-art high schools, run by the Sufi Islam-inspired Gulen movement, to educate the future Arab elites.

Until the "Arab Spring," this policy seemed to be inconclusive, largely because of the hard reality on the ground: Turkey's counterparts in rapprochement

were not its neighboring peoples, but rather their undemocratic regimes. Now, the "Arab Spring" is providing Turkey with an unprecedented opportunity to spread its influence further in newly free Arab societies.

Syria is a case in point: Whereas Ankara hoped to reach out to the Syrian people, the Bashar al-Asad regime took advantage of its close ties with Turkey, a member of NATO, to gain legitimacy while oppressing its people. The "Arab Spring" has ended the mirage. Even though Ankara repeatedly asked Asad to stop killing civilians, he chose to ignore these calls—demonstrating that there was never true rapprochement between Turkey and Syria, and that Ankara had been unsuccessful in establishing effective soft power over Damascus.

Subsequently, Ankara has dropped Asad, emerging instead as the chief regional opponent of his policies. This is Ankara's new policy toward the Arab Middle East: leading the world in dropping dictators in favor of the pro-democracy movements, from Egypt to Libya to Syria. Accordingly, Turkey now has a chance to promote democracy in the Middle East and rise to leadership in the region.

## ■ *Building the Democratic Center: The German Model*

The role played by Germany in Portugal after that country exited the Salazar dictatorship in 1974 provides food for thought.

On April 25, 1974, the "Carnation Revolution" shook Portugal's 48-year-old dictatorship. A group of army officers, joined by the masses and underground

communist movement, rebelled against the regime. Surprisingly, the dictatorship collapsed like a house of cards.

Portugal—then ridden by poverty, illiteracy, and authoritarianism—found itself at a crossroads: military rule or communist takeover. But neither happened. Thanks to the often-untold story of efforts by Germany's Social Democratic Party (SPD) government and the Stiftungs (non-governmental organizations, or NGOs, linked to Germany's political parties) to build centrist forces in Lisbon, the unexpected occurred: Portugal became a democracy.

In many ways, Portugal in the 1970s parallels today's Arab societies. Arab countries, similarly poor and undemocratic, also stand at a crossroads, faced with the choice between military rule and an illiberal—in this case radical Islamist—takeover.

In the 1970s, Germany's SPD, the first elected social-democratic government in Bonn, had the ability to uphold social democracy as a legitimate alternative to communism in Lisbon. Turkey can play a similar role in the Middle East today if Ankara's first Islamist-rooted and democratically elected party, the AKP, encourages alternatives to radical Islamist parties.

In 1974, Portugal lacked deep democratic traditions and a sizable middle class. The powerful communist movement stood ready to hijack the revolution, while the military—which took charge after the dictatorship—seemed lost. The situation looked bleak. Only a few years later, however, Portugal blossomed as a democracy and later entered the European Union. It is now one of the world's liberal democracies.

To facilitate this, the German government strategically built a political center in Portugal: The SPD literally helped found the Portuguese Socialist Party (PS), a social-democratic movement that called for a democratic Portugal and the defeat of communist efforts to take power, in Bad Munstereifel, Germany. Furthermore, Germany took the lead in organizing the "Friendship Solidarity Com-

mittee for Portuguese Democracy and Socialism" in August 1975. Led by German chancellor Willy Brandt, this committee included leading European social democrats, such as Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme and Austrian Chancellor Bruno Kreisky, and became a platform in which social democrats shared knowledge with the PS and developed strategies for successful democratic transformation. The committee also prepared the groundwork for Portugal's EU membership.

The German Stiftungs, too, performed a valuable function. SPD-affiliated Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) provided financial assistance to the PS. FES alone donated 10 to 15 million German marks for campaign training and the funding of PS leaders' travel, using discrete Swiss bank accounts to facilitate monetary transfers. Stiftungs connected to liberal and conservative German parties built counterparts in Portugal, as well.

Ankara needs help to play Germany's role. Just as Bonn received financial and political assistance from the United States and other democracies in building Portuguese democracy, Turkey would benefit from support from the West as well as other Muslim-majority democracies, such as Indonesia, especially in creating "Turkish Stiftungs," the missing part of the Germany-Turkey parallel.

### ■ **Challenges Remain**

Turkey ruled the Arab Middle East until World War I, and it must now be careful about how its messages are perceived there. Arabs might be drawn to fellow Muslims; the Turks are also former imperial masters. Arabs are pressing for democracy, and if Turkey behaves like a new imperial power, this approach will backfire. Arab liberals and Islamists alike regularly suggest that Turkey is welcome in the Middle East but should not dominate it.

Then, there is the problem of transferring the "Turkish model" to Arab countries. In September 2011, when Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan landed at Cairo's new airport

terminal (built by Turkish companies), he was warmly met by joyous millions, mobilized by the Muslim Brotherhood. However, he soon upset his pious hosts by preaching about the importance of a secular government that provides freedom of religion, using the Turkish word "*laiklik*"—derived from the French word for secularism. In Arabic, this term translates as "irreligious." Mr. Erdogan's message may have been partly lost in translation, yet the incident illustrates the limits of Turkey's influence in countries that are far more socially conservative than it is.

What is more, Ankara also faces domestic challenges that could hamper its influence in the "Arab Spring." At the moment, Turkey is debating chartering its first civilian-made constitution. If Turkey wants to become a true beacon of democracy in the Middle East, its new constitution must provide broader individual rights for the country's citizens, as well as lifting limits on freedoms, such as curbs on the media. Turkey will also need to fulfill Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu's vision of a "no problems" foreign policy. This means moving past the 2010 flotilla episode to rebuild strong ties with Israel and getting along with the Greek Cypriots who live on the southern part of the divided island of Cyprus (Turkish Cypriots control the north).

### ■ **Turkey Rising**

Turkey's relative stability at a time when the region is in upheaval is attracting investment from less stable neighbors like Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. Ultimately, political stability and regional clout are Turkey's hard cash, and its economic growth will depend on both.

Turkey will rise as a regional power as well as play a role in the Arab uprising only if it sets a genuine example as a liberal democracy and does not impose itself on Arab countries.

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