

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE “TURKISH MODEL” IN THE ARAB WORLD

After the AKP gained power in 2002, Turkey’s newly assertive “zero problems with neighbors” foreign policy strategy sparked debate in the Arab Middle East. This grand strategy revealed Ankara’s ambitions as not only a regional player, but also as a democratic “model” for a liberal political system able to incorporate a strong Islamic party. Arab fascination for Turkey reached its peak between 2009 and 2010 after Prime Minister Erdoğan’s condemnation of Israel’s military operation Cast Lead in the Gaza Strip. This, along with the Mavi Marmara incident, sparked admiration across the Arab world. Over the last few months however, Arab fascination has been severely tested and now support for the “Turkish model” appears to be waning. This is the result of apprehension over Turkey’s strategic choices in different areas such as the Syrian crisis and the events in Egypt.

Jean-Loup Samaan*



* Jean-Loup Samaan is a researcher at the Middle East Department of the NATO Defense College in Italy.

In the years following Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's rise to power in Ankara, Turkey's geopolitical inclinations sparked growing interest, if not outright fascination, among Arab intellectuals and scholars. The focus of this interest was mainly on the new Turkish grand strategy, which was designed by Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu; this was initially outlined in his well-known book *Strategic Depth* written in 2001 before the AKP came to power, and expanded on later in numerous speeches. This strategy revealed Ankara's new ambitions for the Middle East, not only as a regional player but as a "model" for a political system able to combine the rule of a strong Islamic party—the AKP—with democratic process.

Arab fascination for Erdoğan's Turkey reached its peak in 2009 and 2010. Erdoğan's condemnation of Israel's military operation Cast Lead in the Gaza Strip in December 2008 galvanized Arab public opinion; in May 2010, the clash over the Turkish *Mavi Marmara* flotilla, that attempted to reach Gaza but was sieged by Israeli naval commandos in the Mediterranean Sea, led to a major crisis in Turkish-Israeli relations. Many people in the Arab world saw the event as confirmation of Turkey's support for the Palestinian cause and, by the summer of 2010, Arabic newspapers were hailing Erdoğan as "the new Nasser".

Over the last few months, however, Arab fascination has been severely tested and now appears to be waning. This is the result of apprehension over Turkey's strategic choices in different areas. Among these is the Syrian crisis and perceived Turkish interference in recent Egyptian events. The *Gezi* demonstrations this summer have also had repercussions on the vogueish "Turkish model" in the Arab world. Still, from a historical point of view, this new phase in the Arab perception of Turkey's policies toward the Middle East is less of a major turning point, and more of a return to past Turkish-Arab relations, long marked by caution and suspicion.

Arab Fascination for Turkish Grand Strategy Under Erdoğan and Davutoğlu

Although Turkey has always been a subject of interest in the Arab political debate, attention to the country grew dramatically after the AKP gained power in 2002 and its newly assertive foreign policy was felt in the Middle East. For instance, although Ahmet Davutoğlu's seminal book, *Strategic Depth*, had not yet been translated into English, the Al Jazeera Centre for Studies published an Arabic version in 2010. This has been widely read and quoted. Arabic newspapers frequently use Davutoğlu's terminology and concepts, such as "strategic depth" (*al 'amik al iistrategyya*) or "zero problems with neighbors" policy (*sifr moushkiilat maa' dawli al jiwar*). As a result, many books and academic articles published over the

last few years have analyzed Turkey's grand strategy, its lessons, as well as its role as a "model" (*namouzaj*) for the Arab world.¹

By the end of the last decade, Erdoğan's ambition to use Turkey's geographic position to an advantage in its relations with both Europe and Middle Eastern countries was seen by Arab intellectuals in a positive light, particularly following Turkey's rapprochement with both Syria and Iran. Turkish-Iranian cooperation grew in earnest in 2004, when both countries signed an agreement on security cooperation, with particular emphasis on counterterrorism, border security, and intelligence sharing. Meanwhile, reconciliation between Turkey and Syria, which developed throughout the 2000s, was epitomized in 2009, by a three-day military exercise involving ground forces from both countries. It exemplified the new level of cooperation between Ankara and Damascus, confirmed a month later by President Gül's visit to Syria. The improvement in bilateral relations was to symbolize the "zero problems with the neighbors" policy, mentioned above.

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In virtue of this, expressions such as "bridge" (*jisr*) or "pivotal State" (*dawlat mah-wariya*) have been often used by Arabic commentators to describe Turkey's foreign policy since 2002. Michel Naoufal, Editor in Chief of the Lebanese newspaper *Al Mustaqbal* and an expert on Turkish-Arab relations, explained how "Turkey represents a safety valve (*samam aman*) in the Middle East."² At the time, Naoufal and other Arab intellectuals toned down Arab fears of a new Turkish imperialism and characterized Turkey's agenda in the region as a manifestation of soft power (*quwat na'ima*).³ Back in 2010, for instance, Amr Kouch, a Syrian researcher, described Erdoğan's grand strategy as a way to build an "Ottoman commonwealth"

1 Among others, see Al Mesbar, *Udat al-Uthmaniin: Al-Islamiyya al-Turkiya*, [The Return of the Ottomans: Turkish Islamism] (Dubai: Al Mesbar Studies and Research Center, 2010); Al Jazeera Center for Studies, *Turkiya Beina Tahdiyat al-Dakhl wa Rihanat al-Kharaj*, [Turkey between domestic challenges and foreign gambles] (Beirut: Arab Scientific Publishers, 2010); Michel Naoufal, "Turkiya fi al-'Alam al 'Arabi: Al-Itaar Al-mafhumi li'Faadat Tawjii Assiyaat al-Turkiya," [Turkey in the Arab World: The Conceptual Framework for the Restoration of Turkish Political Orientation], *Majalat al-Darassat al-Falestiniat*, No.92, (Autumn 2012).

2 Michel Naoufal, "Al 'Outhmania al-Jadida wa ach Charq al-Awsat: Rou'iyat Arabiya," [The New Ottomanism and the Middle East: An Arabic View], *Udat al-Uthmaniin: Al-Islamiyya al-Turkiya* (2010), p. 256.

3 Itidal Salame, "Turkiya...al-Quwat an Na'imat fi ach Charq al-Awsat," [Turkey...The Soft Power in the Middle East] *Al Majalla*, 26 May 2013.

and argued that “it is possible to say that this new ‘Ottomanism’ is not geographically oriented, it is not pursuing hegemony and direct control but what Turkey seems rather to express is soft power.”⁴

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But more than Turkey’s strategic and economic rapprochement with Syria and Iran in the late 2000s, it was Ankara’s position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that prompted Arab perceptions of its role in the region.⁵ The strategic partnership between Ankara and Jerusalem had been eyed with suspicion by those commentators in the Arab world who view all bilateral relations in the Middle East as a zero-sum game. From that standpoint, cooperating in any domain

(economic, military, or political) with Israel was understood as taking a stance against the Arabs. As a result, large sections of the media in the Arab world depicted relations between Turkey and Israel through the conventional narrative lens of a Zionist-Ottoman plot against the Arabs.

This suspicion had largely crumbled by the end of the 2000s, when the AKP government started criticizing Israeli treatment of the Palestinians. In particular, Erdoğan’s condemnation of Israel’s Cast Lead operation during one of the plenary sessions of the Davos Summit, right in front of Israeli President Shimon Peres, turned the Turkish Prime Minister into a hero for the Arab world. In the following months, the more Israeli-Turkish tensions rose, the more Turkey’s image in the Arab world benefited. In addition, the relations between Erdoğan’s Turkey and the Palestinian Hamas in Gaza, along with continued close relations with Fatah, allowed Ankara to play a role as potential mediator between Palestinian factions.⁶ Consequently, by the end of 2010, the debate in the opinion pages of the leading Arabic newspapers was not whether Turkey had new imperialistic designs, but what similarities could be seen between Erdoğan and Gamal Abdel Nasser, the Egyptian ruler and perennial champion of Arab nationalism.⁷

4 Amr Kouch, “Al Komonwelth Al ‘Outhmani: Turkiya Tafsahou ‘an Tawjihatiha Assiyasiyat al Mustaqbaliya,” [The Ottoman Commonwealth: Turkey Reveals its Future Political Posture], *Al Iqtisadia*, 24 December 2010.

5 On a recent Arab view of Israel-Turkey relations, see: Raed Masbah Abou Dayer, *Isstrategya Turkiya Charq Awsattiyān wa Dawliyan fi Douwa ‘Alaqqatiha bi Israel: 2011-2000*, [Turkey’s Middle Eastern and International Strategy in Light of its Relations with Israel 2000-2011] (Beirut: Al Manhal, Al Baheth Center, 2013).

6 Adnan Abu Amer, “Erdogan Wins Palestinian Hearts and Minds,” *Al Monitor*, 6 March 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/fa/contents/articles/opinion/2013/03/palestine-turkish-support.html>

7 See for instance Ahmed Oumrabi, “Nasser, Erdogan wa Wahidat al-Agenda,” [Nasser, Erdogan and the Unity of the Agenda], *Al Arabiya*, 24 June 2011.

Still, the pinnacle of Turkish popularity in the Arab world did not preclude certain concerns. The attention which Arab observers paid to Erdoğan's and Davutoğlu's grand strategy focused in part on the so-called "new Ottomanism" that was supposed to characterize it. This reveals both the ambiguity and the confusion surrounding the Arabs' fascination for Turkish foreign policy. Arabic newspapers widely portrayed Davutoğlu as the official "architect of new Ottomanism" and, in some cases, used false quotes in which Davutoğlu allegedly claimed to be a "neo-Ottoman". Despite the Turkish Foreign Minister's public denial, this vision persisted.⁸

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The use of such expressions as "new Ottomans" or "neo-Ottomanism" blurred, rather than clarified Turkish policies. It engendered many controversies and misunderstandings for the observers of Turkish politics who tended to exaggerate Erdoğan's project for the Middle East, as well as his means of implementing it.⁹ But in retrospect, this may have foreshadowed Turkey's current difficulties with its policies for the Middle East.

The Demise of the “Turkish Model”?

At first, the Arab revolutions that started in Tunisia and Egypt seemed to reinforce the "Turkish model" in the Arab world. The Western media, too, saw this as the perfect—and somewhat convenient—way for the revolutions to establish new, stable political systems in the Arab world. True, the new Islamic political forces in these countries looked deliberately at Erdoğan and the AKP as a potential template to access power, but the use of Turkish references in the Arab polity was not welcomed by public opinion. Furthermore, the regional environment in the post-Arab Spring period took the Turkish government by surprise and weakened its decade-long diplomatic positioning.

By the summer of 2011, it had become clear that Arab fascination with Turkey was backfiring. This was no more salient than in the case of Syria. The Syrian

8 "‘I am not a neo-Ottoman’, Davutoglu says," *Today's Zaman*, 25 November 2009.

9 For a careful analysis of the "neo-Ottomanism" debate, see Ömer Taşpınar, *Turkey's Middle East Policies: Between Neo-Ottomanism and Kemalism* (Beirut: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2008).

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revolution that started in March 2011, which led to a brutal retaliation by the regime of Bashar al-Assad, presented the AKP’s government with a dilemma. Until the summer of 2011, Erdoğan and Davutoğlu tried and failed to initiate diplomatic dialogue with Assad. After reaching a deadlock, the Turkish government decided to suspend all relations with Syria. Ankara also decided to support the rebellion that started to organize itself and its operations from southern Turkey. Then, a series of clashes at its borders led Turkey to officially request assistance from NATO. As a result, in November 2012, NATO’s North

Atlantic Council approved the deployment, by Germany, the Netherlands, and the U.S., of Patriot missile batteries in the south of the country.

This latest decision may have signaled the start of the downward turn for Turkish soft power in the Middle East. Syrian officials soon portrayed the deployment of Patriots as tangible evidence of NATO’s hegemonic agenda in the Middle East. Bashar al-Assad repeated this narrative in several interviews and speeches. It is worth taking note of Assad’s terminology when he talks about Erdoğan; in November 2012, he declared: “[Erdoğan] considers himself the new Ottoman sultan and thinks he can control the region the same way the Ottomans did before,” adding that Turkey’s strategy in the Middle East went “from zero problem to zero friends.”¹⁰ Such rhetoric is now the mainstream discourse on Turkey from Syrian official outlets, as well as in the pro-Assad media, like the Hezbollah’s TV Channel *Al Manar* or the Lebanese newspaper *As Safir*.

But, even for Arab thinkers who support the revolution against the Syrian ruler, Turkey’s assertiveness has been progressively seen as ill-advised and perilous, leading to an escalation of the conflict. In particular, Turkey’s support for the rebels, including the fringes identified as extremist (e.g. *Jabhat al-Nusra*), has led many to wonder what exactly Ankara’s political objective is in the Syrian civil war.¹¹

10 “Al-Assad: Erdogan y’Atabirou Nafsahou ‘Khalifa’ wa ‘as Sultan al-Outhman al-Jadid,” [Al-Assad: Erdogan Considers Himself “Caliphate” and “the new Ottoman Sultan”], *As Sharq al-Awsat*, 10 November 2012.

11 Jihad al-Zein, “Inhiyar Siyasat al-Kharjiya at Turkiya,” [The Failure of the Turkish Foreign Policy], *An Nahar*, 7 August 2013.

Besides, the simultaneous warming up of Turkish-Israeli relations in March 2013, with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu apologizing to Turkey over the *Mavi Marmara* crisis, has tempered the positive narrative about Erdoğan as the “new Nasser”. Because of the “zero-sum game” mentality that drives geopolitical thinking, the ending of the Turkish-Israeli dispute was interpreted as meaning that Ankara was lowering its ambitions for cooperation with Arab Middle Eastern countries. Arab intellec-

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tuals started to feel that previous statements were merely short-lived and devoid of any serious effects on Turkey’s fundamental orientation.¹² The resentment over Ankara’s reconciliation with Jerusalem understandably resurrected old conspiracy theories about a “Zionist-Ottoman” plot against the Arabs. The Syrian website *Al Jaml*, for example, posted an article initially published in an Iranian newspaper, entitled “The influences of masonry and Zionism in new Turkey”.

The concerns over Turkey’s policy in the Middle East were further exacerbated in the summer of 2013, following the destitution of Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi by the military in Cairo. The Turkish government has been one of the most vocal critics of these latest developments, calling the toppling an “unacceptable *coup*” and urging the UN Security Council to act accordingly.

Whether or not the Egyptian protests that led to the removal of Morsi turned into a military *coup*, Turkey’s positioning on the international stage was perceived in the Arabic press as a direct interference in Egyptian domestic affairs. Tariq Al Hamid, a columnist for *Asharq Al Awsat*, writes that “Turkey reacted to the developments in Egypt as if the country was like Lebanon (...) the Turkish position *vis-à-vis* Egypt is by all means passionate and unacceptable.” Emphasizing the ideological ties between Erdoğan and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, Al Hamid concludes by asking, “When are the Turks going to understand that they can no longer behave like patrons screaming and agitating in Egypt the way they did during the Ottoman era?”¹³ Similarly, Said El Lawindi, Director of the Centre for Euro-Mediterranean Studies

12 See the editorial in the academic journal: “Turkiya wa Israel: Chirakat Abdya,” [Turkey and Israel: Eternal Partnership], *Shu’un al-Awsat*, No.144 (Winter 2013), pp. 2-6.

13 Tariq Al Hamid, “Misr wa at Tahour at Turki Mara Oukhra!,” [Egypt and Turkish Recklessness One More Time!], *Asharq al-Awsat*, 28 July 2013.

in Cairo, writes in the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Ahram* that “Turkey forgot that it is no longer the Topkapı Palace and Egypt is no longer one of its cities!”¹⁴ Lawindi goes as far as to call for a boycott of Turkish products as a result of Ankara’s position on Egyptian developments.

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Finally, the late-May demonstrations in Turkey itself, in protest at a planned demolition of Istanbul’s *Gezi* Park, severely undermined the appeal of the “Turkish model” in the Arab world. For some observers, it epitomized the internal struggle between secular forces and Islamists, while others used simple, and sometimes simplistic, analogies such as a “Turkish Spring”. If the events did not directly impact Turkish foreign policy in the Arab world, they surely exacerbated the worries and emboldened those

who are most resentful of Ankara’s ambitions in the Middle East. Clearly, the footage of police forces using tear gas to disperse protesters tarnished the sheen of Turkish soft power in the region.

Turkey and the Arab World: Back to the Future

After a first look at Turkey’s recent fortunes and setbacks in the Middle East, one may be tempted to argue that Erdoğan’s ambitions for his country, particularly the rapprochement with Arab neighbors, has ended in dramatic failure. This is the impression one gets from reading Arabic newspapers and academic articles. Historically, however, this assessment is skewed, since it overlooks the state of Turkish-Arab relations prior to Erdoğan’s premiership. For decades, Turkey’s image in the Arab world was shaped by vivid memories of the Arab nationalistic struggle against the Ottomans. In Lebanon, for instance, the latest edition of the high school history textbook, published in 2010, details at length the severe treatment dealt to the Lebanese people under Ottoman rule, in particular the torture of dissidents and food deprivation during the First World War.¹⁵ Just as the legacy of European colonialism in the Middle East has influenced the understanding of Western policies in the region, the experience of Ottoman rule has left its mark. This is associated with the image of “the terrible Turk” used by the anthropologist Ernest Gellner, an expression that

14 Said El Lawindi, “Moukhalitaat Turkiya!” [Turkish fallacies!], *Al-Ahram*, 27 July 2013.

15 *At Tarikh al-‘Alami al-Hadith*, [The Modern Scientific History] (Beirut: Habib Publishers, 2010), pp. 10-22.

encapsulates the traditional Arab view of Turkey as the inheritor of Ottoman ruthlessness.¹⁶ Until Erdoğan's enterprise in the Middle East, the "terrible Turk" narrative was common among intellectuals and politicians in the Arab world, and despite its fading during the brief period of Arab fascination for Erdoğan's Turkey, it has remained a staple of the Arab world's vision of Turkish policies.¹⁷

This calls for a sobering reappraisal of the "Turkish model", or of soft power in the Middle East. Arabs still view Turkey's contemporary grand strategy as being shaped by their Ottoman legacy. This distorts the understanding of Erdoğan and Davutoğlu's options, when it comes to issues like Turkey's Muslim identity, or its Middle Eastern ambitions. Arab intellectuals frequently summarize Erdoğan's strategy as an effort to "Islamize" the country and to sever it from Europe, following EU's apparent rebuff of Turkey's desire to join the Union. According to this narrative, Ankara's Middle Eastern policy is primarily a consequence of the failed European dream of Turkey. Commentators also tend to assume that Erdoğan and Davutoğlu crafted a long-term stratagem that they are now meticulously implementing. This uncompromising Arab view of Turkey, however, allows no margin for appreciating the developments, hesitations and changes in Turkish foreign policy, in particular since the beginning of the Arab Spring.¹⁸ Turkey's venture into soft power was a double-edged sword from the outset: the fascination it created within the Arab world was not associated with enthusiasm within the Middle Eastern audience, nor is it likely to be so in the future.

16 Ernest Gellner, *Muslim Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

17 Dietrich Jung, "Turkey and the Arab World: Historical Narratives and New Political Realities," *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol.10, No.1 (March 2005), p. 3.

18 Ömer Taşpınar, "Turkey's Strategic Vision and Syria," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol.35, No.3 (Summer 2012).