

DEMOCRATIC JANISSARIES?

Turkey's Role in the Arab Spring

THE POLITICAL UPHEAVALS of the Arab Spring and electoral victories of Islamist parties have brought a resurgence of talk about the 'Turkish model'—a template that 'effectively integrates Islam, democracy and vibrant economics', according to a gushing *New York Times* article last year, which hailed Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as 'perhaps the Middle East's most influential figure'. White House officials stressed the positive example that Turkey could play, as a Muslim country that maintained diplomatic relations with Israel; in 2009 Obama hailed the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government as a 'model partner' and pillar of the NATO order on a much-trumpeted visit to Ankara. The International Crisis Group describes Turkey as 'the envy of the Arab world', delighting in 'a robust democracy, a genuinely elected leader who seems to speak for the popular mood, products that are popular from Afghanistan to Morocco—including dozens of sitcoms dubbed into Arabic that are on TV sets everywhere—and an economy that is worth about half of the whole Arab world put together'. Tourists from elsewhere in the region flocked to witness 'a Muslim society at peace with the world, economically advanced and where Islamic traditions coexist with Western patterns of consumption'.¹

The praise is echoed by Tariq Ramadan, who declared the Turkish Prime Minister's September 2011 visit to Egypt, Tunisia and Libya 'an immense popular success'—'Arabs and Muslims looked on with amazement and admiration' as Erdoğan spoke up for Palestinians' right to exist. 'He is on the right side of History', Ramadan proclaimed. 'Turkey can and must play an important role', helping 'to reconcile Muslims with confidence, autonomy, pluralism and success'.² Meanwhile, Turkey's

Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu has prided himself on bringing a new *pax ottomana* to the region, a ‘zero problems with neighbours’ approach that would expand Ankara’s influence across the Caucasus and the Black Sea, the Middle East and the Mediterranean, while helping to broker better relations between Israel and the Arab states. This vision disavows any neo-Ottoman imperial ambitions; rather, it is described by its proponents as a matter of ‘soft power’, underlining the smiling face they wish to set on it. As an emergent structure of feeling, the *pax ottomana* has been embraced by layers of the intelligentsia and by popular culture, extending far beyond AKP ranks.³ A nostalgia for all things *ottomanesque* has swept even secular Turkey, leading to record ratings for a soap opera about Sultan Süleyman and his harem’s intrigues; banalized and sexualized forms of imperial splendour have become part of the air one breathes.

After a decade of AKP rule, an international consensus has portrayed Erdoğan’s Turkey as the ‘successful’ alternative to both secular Arab authoritarianism and the revolutionary Islamism of Iran. Opinion polls reveal a more cautious assent: some 60 per cent of Arabs are reported to see Turkey as a model. To what extent does a cool-headed examination of the AKP’s foreign-policy and domestic record support these claims?

The new Ostpolitik

The AKP entered office in November 2002 as an outsider party, capitalizing on the crisis of the political establishment after the meltdowns of the Turkish economy in 1999 and 2001. Its origins lay in a conservative social movement, built on the basis of street politics, religious schools and popular mobilizations; its ideology combined business ethics, religious piety and parliamentarianism with a standard pro-Muslim, therefore pro-Palestinian, line, opposing Anglo-American military intervention in the region. But the new AKP leadership—Erdoğan, Abdullah Gül, Bülent Arınç—were also vociferously pro-EU and made frequent

¹ ‘In Turkey’s Example, Some See Map for Egypt’, *New York Times*, 5 February 2011. See also International Crisis Group, ‘Turkey and the Middle East: Ambitions and Constraints’, 7 April 2010, p. 20. I would like to thank Aynur Sadet for comments on the text.

² Tariq Ramadan, ‘Democratic Turkey Is the Template for Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood’, *New Perspectives Quarterly*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2011.

³ Soner Cagaptay, ‘The Empires Strike Back’, *NYT*, 14 January 2012.

visits to the United States.⁴ In the November 2002 elections, the AKP swept 60 per cent of seats in the Meclis, the Turkish parliament, albeit with only 34 per cent of the vote. Its first foreign-policy test came in spring 2003 with the US invasion of Iraq—opposed by an overwhelming majority of the Turkish population. The results of the three Meclis votes on the war hardly need repeating. In February 2003, AKP deputies supported a ruling to allow US bases in Turkey to be upgraded, preparatory to the invasion. The second vote, held in Erdoğan's absence in March 2003, saw a rebellion by AKP backbenchers, who joined with the Republican People's Party opposition to vote down the government motion permitting US troops to launch the invasion from Turkish soil. By the time of the third vote a few weeks later, Erdoğan had whipped his party into line: a massive majority of AKP deputies now voted in favour of the war—and for sending Turkish forces to support the Anglo-American occupation of Iraq (this in addition to the troops that had long patrolled the Iraqi Kurdish region under the Anglo-American no-fly zone).

In the event, the deployment of the Turkish military as part of the occupation force in Iraq was blocked by the Iraqi Kurdish leader Massoud Barzani, and perhaps also by the Bush Administration, as punishment for the Meclis's short-lived rebellion. Most striking, however, and a measure of the hegemony that the AKP enjoyed, was the level of popular support for Erdoğan's pro-Bush position, which was read as a strategic masterstroke: a short-term concession that would ensure American support for Turkey and the reward of major prizes in the longer run. The third vote was also hailed by Turkey's Atlanticist liberals as a welcome step towards fuller participation in the 'international community's' military interventions, not least in former Ottoman lands. This support has stood the Erdoğan government in good stead as it has lent its backing to successive Western military interventions in Muslim countries. Thus in 2006, when the Turkish population almost unanimously condemned Israel's invasion of Lebanon and bombardment of southern Beirut, Erdoğan and Gül, then Foreign Minister, insisted on Turkish participation in the UN force sent to contain Hezbollah, which the IDF had signally failed to do, on the grounds of 'coming to the aid' of suffering Lebanese.

Similarly, Vice Prime Minister Bülent Arınç has explained that the Turkish military is in Afghanistan to help NATO 'protect peace'. When

⁴ See Tuğal, 'NATO's Islamists', *NLR* 44, March–April 2007, on which this draws.

twelve Turkish soldiers were killed there recently in a helicopter crash, the government's liberal supporters—the ex-Maoist Şahin Alpay prominent among them—rushed to point out the inseparability of Turkish and 'global' interests, in response to a pointed inquiry by the new, pro-left leader of the RPP, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, as to whether Turkish troops were in Afghanistan 'to defend our nation's interests'. Islamic conservatives, meanwhile, argue that the Turkish contingent of ISAF is there to protect Afghans from the excesses of Western imperialism—an excuse frequently used when defending Turkey's participation in US-led occupations.⁵ They also emphasize the need to protect the Turkish model of Islam against an alleged al-Qaeda version. Turkey's participation in ISAF, along with that of Jordan and the UAE, is plainly of symbolic rather than military value to the US: the presence of predominantly Muslim countries' troops supposedly proves that this is not a Christian crusade against Islam. In fact, it helps to lock Turkey into its accustomed role as 'bridge' between Western imperialism and the Muslim world—a bridge for NATO forces to tramp over. A minority of more radical Islamic forces, along with the much-depleted left, still resist Turkey's Western-guided involvement in the region and call for independent diplomatic and military action. But a far larger number of Islamic intellectuals and activists support the government in its attempt to claim Islamic leadership while remaining an extension of the West.

Neo-Ottoman?

Once the AKP's central foreign-policy goal of EU entry had been stalled—following Cypriot voters' rejection of Kofi Annan's plan for circumnavigating the stark fact of Turkey's 40-year military occupation of the island—Ankara's Ostpolitik took on new salience. In 2007, when French and German leaders made election-stump speeches about 'Christian Europe', Erdoğan, Gül and Davutoğlu could gesture to Turkey's new role in the East. During the Cold War, Ankara's foreign-policy efforts had been almost exclusively West-oriented (if long-standing relations with Israel can be included under this term). The breakup of the Ottoman Empire had left a legacy of mutual distrust across the region once ruled from Istanbul. Turks accused Arabs of 'stabbing them in the back' by cooperating with Western powers in the aftermath of World War One; Kemalist modernization (and Turkification) aimed at a decisive break with Islamic and Arab culture, including the romanization of the

⁵ Sedat Laçiner, 'Neden Afganistan'dayız?', *Star*, 22 March 2012.

alphabet and the de-Arabizing ‘purification’ of the language. Similarly, historical Turkic domination was a negative leitmotif for Arab states, whether secular republics or conservative monarchies; Arab textbooks referred to Turks, not just Ottomans, as imperialists. Just as Kemalists attributed Turkish ‘backwardness’ to the decadent influence of Arab culture, so Arab nationalists blamed Ottoman colonialism and exploitation for the low levels of their countries’ economic development. It is true that some Arab Islamists detected virtuous aspects in the Ottoman past, while some Turkish Islamists were also nostalgic for the times when Turks, Arabs and others coexisted under the banner of Islam. But if there was widespread sympathy for the sufferings of the Palestinians, there was little practical pro-Arab solidarity among Turkish Islamists, while the country’s most influential religious organization, the Gülen community—run by the cleric Fethullah Gülen from self-imposed exile in Pennsylvania—espouses an explicitly Turkish-nationalist cultural agenda.⁶

By the early 2000s, however, three developments were starting to cast Turkey in a more positive, if still mottled, light for the Arab world. Firstly, Turkey had combined its shift to neoliberalism with a partial democratization, while neoliberalizing Arab regimes insisted on authoritarianism, justifying their repressive security apparatuses to the global elite as constituting a bulwark against radical Islamism, and to the Arab masses as a defence against the Israeli threat⁷ (a preposterous excuse, given that Arab rulers systematically turned a blind eye to Israel’s depredations in the occupied lands, contenting themselves with anti-Zionist demagoguery). Secondly, as its economic recovery from the crash of 2001 picked up, Turkey began to enjoy record inflows of FDI, not least from Gulf states, and started posting higher growth figures—though also faster-widening inequalities. Thirdly, the advent of AKP rule aroused the curiosity of the Arab world: Turkey’s Kemalist tradition was customarily portrayed as atheistic and anti-Arab, but AKP leaders were demonstratively pious and, in Erdoğan’s case, had the popular touch. Thus, as police brutality, poverty, inequality and unemployment intensified under authoritarian neoliberal Arab regimes, Turkey re-emerged in the Arab popular

⁶ Hasan Kösebalaban, ‘Making of Enemy and Friend: Fethullah Gülen’s National-Security Identity’, in M. Hakan Yavuz and John Esposito, eds, *Turkish Islam and the Secular State: The Gülen Movement*, Syracuse, NY 2003.

⁷ See for example Alfred Stepan and Graeme Robertson, ‘An “Arab” more than “Muslim” Democracy Gap’, *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2003.

imagination as an ambivalent entity. The Erdoğan government became a symbol of Muslim strength, but it also evoked uneasiness about Turks' imperial arrogance.

That arrogance has been amply displayed in the Erdoğan government's treatment of Turkey's Kurds. Since 1984, the Turkish state has killed an estimated 40,000 of its Kurdish citizens—comparable at least to the deaths attributed to Bashar Assad—and repression of the Kurdish language and culture has been more savage in Turkey than in Syria, Iraq or Iran.⁸ The first two years of AKP rule brought some measures decriminalizing Kurdish culture, including permission for limited Kurdish-language TV broadcasting and private tuition, though these fell short of what Kurds have been calling for. But by 2005, the AKP was starting to take a stridently Turkish-nationalist turn, stepping up military repression in the south-east and swathing the cities with giant Turkish flags. Concomitant with this, and encouraged by the *de facto* Kurdish autonomous region created under the auspices of the US occupation in northern Iraq, the PKK ended its five-year ceasefire. Turkey duly stepped up its air raids on PKK camps in Iraq, angering Massoud Barzani's regional government there. The Bush Administration stepped in to bang its allies' heads together in January 2005 and again in October 2007, brokering deals whereby Barzani's palm would be greased by Turkish construction firms, granted huge government infrastructure contracts in Iraqi Kurdistan, including the \$40m Sulaymaniyah airport, while the Turkish military was given a free hand to shell PKK militants sheltering in northern Iraq.⁹ After successive waves of arrests, activists estimate there are now at least 3,000 Turkish-Kurdish students in prison, along with journalists and university teachers, not all of them Kurdish, accused of 'terrorist propaganda' or 'insulting the Turkish nation'.

'Zero problems'

It was against this background that Erdoğan, Gül and Davutoğlu launched the diplomatic initiative they dubbed 'zero problems with

⁸ Estimates of the Kurdish population vary widely, but conservative figures suggest 14 million in Turkey, 2 million in Syria, 6 million in Iraq and 7 million in Iran.

⁹ By 2010, Turkey's trade with Iraq had risen to \$7.4bn, of which \$6bn was accounted for by Turkish exports, nearly all to Iraqi Kurdistan, where Turkey now controls 95 per cent of the construction market. See Kemal Kirişçi, 'Turkey's "Demonstrative Effect" and the Transformation of the Middle East', *Insight Turkey*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2011, p. 38.

neighbours', aiming to impress Middle East states with Ankara's influence in Washington, and Washington with its new influence in the Middle East. A great deal of money was spent on upgrading Turkish embassies, and much time and energy on shuttle diplomacy around the region. The 'zero problems' policy had a substantial business component. Economically, Turkey still remains overwhelmingly oriented to the north and west: in 2010, Turkish trade with the EU was nearly \$125bn (Turkish exports of \$52.7bn, imports of \$72.2bn), while trade with Russia and other former Soviet republics was \$35.1bn. By contrast, trade with the GCC and Yemen was \$10.3bn (\$6.7bn exports, \$3.6bn imports); trade with North Africa was \$8.2bn; with Egypt, \$3.2bn; with Syria, \$2.5bn, of which three-quarters was composed of Turkish exports. Nevertheless, by 2010 trade with the Middle East and North Africa was substantially greater than it had been in 2002—up threefold with Syria, nearly fourfold with North Africa, fivefold with the GCC and Yemen and sevenfold with Egypt.¹⁰ Much of this was represented by the Turkish construction industry, with projects often facilitated by loans from Turkish banks; Turkish food and textile companies have invested in Egypt, Syria and the Gulf. Davutoğlu's 'zero problem' diplomacy also led to a welcome relaxation of visa restrictions for Arab-state visitors to Turkey, putting them on a par with tourists from the EU and Russia. Visa requirements for Moroccans and Tunisians were eased in 2007, for Syrians, Lebanese, Jordanians and Libyans in 2009. The following year, Turkey steered through an agreement with Syria, Lebanon and Jordan to create a four-country free-trade zone, the Close Neighbours Economic and Trade Association. Turkey's diplomatic offensive naturally involved warmer relations with the Gulf rulers, Mubarak, Ben Ali, Assad, Gaddafi and so on. In 2010 Erdoğan flew to Tripoli to be honoured by the Libyan leader with that year's Al-Gaddafi Human Rights Prize.

'Zero problems' with Israel was a central plank of Davutoğlu's policy. Bilateral trade with Israel almost tripled under the AKP, rising from \$1.3bn in 2002 to \$3.4bn in 2010. Turkey made large purchases of Israeli arms, joint military exercises were extended, and the Israeli Air Force was offered free use of the airspace over Konya for its training missions. Davutoğlu and Erdoğan invested a good deal of effort in attempting to mediate between Israel and its neighbours. Erdoğan was particularly entranced by his imagined role as 'facilitator' in a new Syrian–Israeli

¹⁰ Kirişci, 'Turkey's "Demonstrative Effect"', p. 38.

peace initiative in 2008. According to local diplomats, his busy shuttling between Bashar Assad and Ehud Olmert allowed ‘Turkey to feel important’ and Israel to demonstrate its ‘peaceful intentions’. Erdoğan was reported to have felt ‘shocked and betrayed at what he felt were personal commitments by Olmert’ when the Israeli Prime Minister launched the Operation Cast Lead offensive on Gaza in late December 2008, a day or so after a cosy five-hour discussion-cum-dinner with Erdoğan, during which the Turkish leader had made a long phone call to Assad. Naturally Olmert had made no mentions of the IDF’s Gaza plans. This was the background to Erdoğan’s protest at Davos a few weeks later when, taking part in a panel with Shimon Peres, he began to read out criticisms by Avi Shlaim and others of the assault on Gaza, and left the platform when the moderator tried to get him to wind up. This won Erdoğan copious praise in the Arab press for ‘standing up to Israel’, even though Israeli Air Force exercises in Turkish airspace continued, and in 2010 Tel Aviv duly fulfilled delivery of refurbished M-60 tanks and Heron drones, for the AKP regime to use against the PKK in northern Iraq.¹¹

Turkish-Israeli relations were strained rather more by the Freedom Flotilla affair in May 2010, when Israeli commandos shot nine Turkish activists aboard the Mavi Marmara as it sailed towards Gaza to break the Israeli–Egyptian embargo. Many of the activists onboard were affiliated with an Islamic aid organization, İHH, which provides relief for Muslims afflicted by war. The ship’s send-off had featured a large-scale demonstration organized by the Felicity Party, the rump of the more intransigent Islamist grouping from which Erdoğan and the other AKP leaders had split in 2001, and which has since been only a minor political player. Several AKP parliamentarians had apparently also attempted to go aboard, but the government had called them off shortly before the Mavi Marmara embarked on its fateful journey. While commentators in Turkey speculated that the ship’s route was approved by the government, the AKP has denied any links to it. Meanwhile, in a rare press statement to the *Wall Street Journal*, Fethullah Gülen, Turkey’s most influential Islamic leader, accused the Flotilla activists of ‘defying authority’, a grave sin for conservative interpreters of Islam.¹² In fact the AKP has been able

¹¹ ICG, ‘Turkey and the Middle East’, pp. 14–15, 24.

¹² ‘Reclusive Turkish Imam Criticizes Gaza Flotilla’, *Wall Street Journal*, 4 June 2010. This was the first time the staunchly pro-Israel Gülen had openly come out against the government.

to have it both ways: in response to the Israeli and American critics who said it should have stopped the ship from sailing, it could argue that it had no control of the situation; among its Islamist constituency and Muslims worldwide, however, it could take credit for an attempt to break the Gaza embargo. In line with this approach, Gül called for an official UN inquiry into the fate of the Freedom Flotilla. Unsurprisingly, the UN's report, chaired by former New Zealand Prime Minister Geoffrey Palmer, concluded that the blockade of Gaza—a population of nearly two million locked in ghetto-like conditions, with supplies dependent on Israeli whim—was perfectly acceptable under international law.¹³

Arab Spring

The AKP's 'zero problems' diplomacy was thrown into further disarray by the Arab revolts of 2011. Along with the US and most of the EU, the Turkish government remained silent in January 2011 as protests against the Ben Ali regime mounted in Tunisia, in contrast to the immediate support for the movement offered, for different reasons, by Qatar, Iran and Hezbollah. Erdoğan made a more notable intervention on Egypt. Speaking on Turkish TV on 1 February 2011, a week after the first 'day of rage', he advised Mubarak to 'meet the people's desire for change with no hesitation'—'you must be first to take a step for Egypt's peace, security and stability, without allowing exploiters, dirty circles and circles that have dark scenarios for Egypt to take the initiative.'¹⁴ This was broadly in line with the Obama Administration's call on 30 January for an 'orderly transition', and indeed followed Mubarak's announcement that he would not stand in the scheduled September 2011 presidential election. But it served to position Erdoğan as a friend of Tahrir Square.

Like Washington, again, Ankara was silent as protests erupted in Bahrain in mid-February and turned a blind eye as demonstrators were shot and gassed at Pearl Roundabout. On 20 March, just a week after Saudi tanks rolled down the causeway to crush the democracy protesters,

¹³ Coordination between Turkish and Israeli air forces was suspended, but restarted by late 2011: 'Turkey, Israel reinstate air force coordination mechanism', *Today's Zaman*, 22 December 2011. For international comments on Mavi Marmara, see Lemi Baruh and Mihaela Popescu, 'Communicating Turkish-Islamic identity in the aftermath of the Gaza flotilla raid', *New Perspectives on Turkey* 45, 2011, pp. 76–7.

¹⁴ 'Erdoğan's Cairo Speech', *Foreign Policy* blog, posted 2 February 2011, citing Nicholas Noe's MideastWire blog.

Erdoğan announced that Turkey and Saudi Arabia ‘provide an important contribution to regional peace and stability, and exhibit a model cooperation’.¹⁵ Indeed, Erdoğan and Davutoğlu moved to consolidate Turkish relations with Saudi Arabia as the Arab Spring wore on, serving to strengthen the sectarianization—Sunni versus Shia and Alawi—of the region. Ankara was prudently silent about the uprising in Yemen, too, where Saudi and American interests might have been endangered had demands for jobs, living standards and democratization been satisfied. As repression took its toll, the divisions within the ruling tribal elite took on greater salience, eventually pitching tribe against tribe, rather than activists against the dictatorship.¹⁶ Tribal brokerage ultimately led to the removal of President Saleh without any major change in the state apparatus, which was still fit for purpose as far as the Saudis and the Obama Administration were concerned.¹⁷

The geo-politics of the Arab Spring underwent a decisive change with the militarization of the Libyan uprising, under the auspices of the NATO powers. On 17 March 2011, the ‘international community’ authorized itself to impose a no-fly zone—in effect, aerial warfare against the Gaddafi regime—and take ‘all necessary measures’, under UNSC Resolution 1973. Here, the Erdoğan government was torn.¹⁸ At first Erdoğan himself had been opposed to NATO intervention, to the dismay of his liberal-Atlanticist supporters. On 15 March he announced in a TV interview that he had personally telephoned Gaddafi and advised him to listen to the people and appoint a new president. A lot of swerving followed, once the NATO operation was underway. On 25 March, a Turkish naval force was sent to enforce the blockade of Gaddafi-held ports. The Meclis approved the dispatch of further forces, including troops if necessary. Turkish officials protested at France’s Operation Harmattan stealing a march on the combined action of NATO powers,

¹⁵ Erdoğan: “Suudi Arabistan’la tam bir iş birliği içindeyiz”, *Milliyet*, 20 March 2011.

¹⁶ Khaled Fattah, ‘Yemen: A Social Intifada In a Republic of Sheikhs’, *Middle East Policy*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2011, p. 81.

¹⁷ ‘US Teaming With New Yemen Government on Strategy to Combat Al Qaeda’, *NYT*, 26 February 2012.

¹⁸ As was the UN Security Council, with temporary members Germany, India and Brazil abstaining on UNSC 1973; however, permanent members Russia and China allowed the resolution to be passed by consenting not to use their veto powers. The Americans were also divided: Defence Secretary Robert Gates opposing intervention, Obama’s close advisors (Susan Rice, Samantha Power) urging it; Congress unconsulted, in breach of the law.

and the airbase at Izmir was offered for the bombardment. The French countered that Erdoğan and Davutoğlu were piqued at not having been invited to the summit Sarkozy had called after UNSC Resolution 1973 was passed. Sarkozy moved to block a leading Turkish role in the assault. This was not difficult, given the mixed feelings and internal divisions among pro-government forces in Turkey. Erdoğan and Davutoğlu grudgingly settled for giving logistical support to NATO. In early July 2011 Davutoğlu flew to Benghazi to meet the Transitional National Council leaders and announce Turkey's recognition of the TNC as the legitimate representative of the Libyan people.

These inconsistencies were in good part caused by the difficulties of reconciling Davutoğlu's 'zero problem' approach with the realities of Turkey's Western alliances, in the context of what was, for Washington, Paris and London, an optional peripheral war. Along with the US and other major Western states, Turkey had developed good business as well as diplomatic relations with Gaddafi, profiting in particular from the post-2009 Libyan construction boom. It was not clear that the violent overthrow of the regime would benefit Turkey, whereas the Western powers, more in control of the transition, could count on their ability to divide and manipulate the new Libyan power holders. But the Turkish government's lurches had another source: the ideologues and activists from Islamist backgrounds, who still formed the ideological vertebrae of the AKP, had fought dictatorships; but they had also opposed Western military action in the region, which since 1990 had adopted, however selectively, the agenda of toppling dictators. As we have seen, many of these AKP supporters were now making their peace with Turkey's sub-imperial role in the region, as a bulwark of the NATO order. This has been the diplomatic and geo-political dimension of a larger process of absorption that I have elsewhere described as a 'passive revolution'.¹⁹ In May 2011—a month in which over seven hundred Libyan civilians were killed by NATO airstrikes, according to Tripoli—Davutoğlu summarized the position of these former Islamist anti-imperialists with respect to the radical upheavals of the Arab Spring:

A revolutionary spirit, a culture of rebellion has developed in this region . . .
If I were not in this post, or if I were young, I would chant, 'Long live the revolution'. But as the big power [*büyük devlet*] that guards stability in

¹⁹ Tuğal, *Passive Revolution: Absorbing the Islamic Challenge to Capitalism*, Stanford 2009.

the region, we have to make sure that the people are harmed as little as possible.²⁰

A mature, 'disenchanted' empathy with youth and rebellion combined with a eulogy of order and stability; an 'ethics of responsibility' that upholds the state as the protector of powerless populations, even as its missiles rain down upon them; such are the achievements of the AKP's Turkish model. Of course, one can point to similar conversions in Paris, London and Berlin.

War on Damascus

To some extent the Erdoğan government's response to the upheaval in Syria has followed a comparable path. Here, the very free-market policies that Erdoğan and Davutoğlu had been promoting through the regional Economic and Trade Association had helped to worsen the plight of youth in the run-down agricultural towns, from Daraa in the south to Homs, Hama and Idlib, that would be the centre of the revolt, while a tiny elite had grown spectacularly rich. Initially, in late March and April 2011, as the Damascus regime met demonstrations with tear gas and water cannons, Erdoğan again tried to position himself as a mediator, attempting to persuade Assad to negotiate with the political wing of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and schedule elections. Even as Turkish naval ships were readied for the NATO operation against Gaddafi, Erdoğan was informing the international press that he had urged Assad to take 'a positive, reformist' approach—'it is our heartfelt wish that there should be no painful events here as in Libya'.²¹ Ankara's aim was a managed democratic transition that would broaden the base of the Assad regime—a strategy of passive revolution which recognized that, if things were to stay the same, things would have to change.²²

This was in stark contrast to Riyadh's line, as conveyed to a former State Department operative by a 'senior Saudi official', who noted that 'from the beginning of the Syrian upheaval, the King has believed that regime change would be highly beneficial to Saudi interests, particularly *vis-à-vis* the Iranian threat. "The King knows that other than the collapse

²⁰ Aslı Aydıntaşbaş, 'Davutoğlu'yla zor sohbet', *Milliyet*, 5 May 2011.

²¹ Delphine Strauss, 'Erdogan urges Assad to hasten reform', *FT*, 28 March 2011.

²² Erol Cebeci and Kadir Üstün, 'The Syrian Quagmire: What's Holding Turkey Back?', *Insight Turkey*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2012, p. 16.

of the Islamic Republic itself, nothing would weaken Iran more than losing Syria.”²³ As the Saudi position gained traction in Washington, however, the Turkish line also began to change.²⁴ While maintaining contact with the Assad regime, the Erdoğan government allowed the leader of the military wing of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood to give a May 2011 press conference in Istanbul; in June 2011 Turkey organized a conference of the Syrian opposition. In July 2011 the Free Syrian Army, aiming at the military overthrow of the Assad regime, was established in the southern Turkish province of Hatay, with US logistical support and Saudi money and arms; FSA leaders were given the protection of the Turkish police. This could only serve to confirm Assad’s fatally destructive decision, based on the Baath view of Syrian Sunni Islamists as owing allegiance to Gulf powers, to attempt to shore up the existing order by force. The principal demand of the FSA was for a no-fly zone; that is, Western bombardment of Syrian defences. Its campaigns, focused mainly in the vicinity of Homs, were waged with one eye on the Western media embedded in its ranks; the greater the atrocity, the more likely it was to create international pressure for US airstrikes. The death toll duly rose, as Syrian forces shelled FSA positions in residential areas, and a multitude of sectarian militias, both Alawite and Sunni, looted and killed amid the destruction.

In Turkey, the jingoism of the liberal and conservative Islamist press rose to a crescendo by early 2012. Calls for Turkish intervention also came from conservative forces in the Arab world, not least the London-based daily, *Sharq al-Awsat*, whose main precondition was that there should be Western approval beforehand. The Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist forces were happy to play the anti-imperialist card themselves

²³ John Hannah, ‘Syria: The King’s statement, the President’s hesitation’, *Foreign Policy* blog, 9 August 2011.

²⁴ In April 2011 Hannah wrote, with reference to Riyadh’s man in Washington, Prince Bandar bin Sultan: ‘Working in tandem with the United States, Bandar . . . could prove a huge asset in efforts to shape the Middle East revolts of 2011 in a direction that serves US interests . . . Bandar working without reference to US interests is clearly cause for concern. But Bandar working as a partner with Washington against a common Iranian enemy is a major strategic asset. Drawing on Saudi resources and prestige, Bandar’s ingenuity and bent for bold action could be put to excellent use across the region in ways that reinforce US policy and interests: through economic and political measures that weaken the Iranian mullahs [and] undermine the Assad regime.’ John Hannah, ‘Bandar’s return’, *Foreign Policy* blog, 22 April 2011.

when Erdoğan spoke of separating religion from the state, but played the humanitarian-intervention card when they wanted to get rid of a regime. At the time of writing, neither Turkey nor the US have been ready for a land incursion—euphemistically described as a ‘buffer zone’—or an aerial bombardment, a.k.a. no-fly zone. This seems to suit Israel, too. It has been argued that:

A weakened but stable Assad regime as opposed to a regime under ‘Islamist rule’ seems preferable for Israeli policymakers . . . Although Israel sees advantages in a reduced Iranian influence in Syria, it also sees a bleak future in a post-Assad Syria where Islamist groups might take centre stage. As a consequence, Israel’s less-than-wholehearted endorsement of Assad’s fall has helped to reduce the sense of urgency among American policymakers.²⁵

Amidst this uncertainty, the more pro-Western wing of the Turkish government went along with US initiatives. In early March 2012, Gül was favouring the ‘Yemeni road’ for Syria: Assad should appoint one of his aides, as Saleh had done, and step to one side, leaving the governing structures intact; the notoriously divided Syrian opposition was not yet ready to rule the country. The following week he warned against military intervention, calling for a ‘political solution’ and an expanded ‘Friends of Syria’ meeting in Ankara that would include Russia, thereby ruling out a military option.²⁶ During the same period, Erdoğan gave his backing to the demands of the Arab League, which significantly included a ‘humanitarian corridor’—meaning a land invasion by Turkey, which would inevitably lead to armed conflict with the Assad regime. Thus, despite its pretensions to regional leadership, Turkey failed to articulate a coherent position of its own. The best Erdoğan could come up with was to counterbalance Gül’s position with that of the Arab League, i.e. a cleaned-up version of Riyadh’s. Turkey did not lead, but followed. The government’s lack of clarity allows conflicting interpretations of its actions. Even among the columnists of the pro-government daily *Yeni Şafak*, some see ample ‘proof’ that the AKP is trying to push Assad out of power as quickly as possible, while others believe the government’s priority is stability on its borders and a quick ceasefire.²⁷

²⁵ Cebeci and Üstün, ‘The Syrian Quagmire’, p. 20.

²⁶ ‘Suriye’ye Yemen modeli’, *Sabah*, 3 March 2012; ‘Mu’arada Tunisiyya-Turkiyya li ay Tadakhkhul min Kharij al-Mintiqa fi Suriyya’, *Sharq al-Awsat*, 9 March 2012.

²⁷ See İbrahim Karagül, ‘Suriye için “Misak-ı milli”’, *Yeni Şafak*, 27 March 2012 and Akif Emre, ‘Suriye açmazında yeni dönemeç’, *Yeni Şafak*, 27 March 2012.

Sunni communalism

Overall, the Islamic Turkish press has been much warmer to the idea of intervention in Syria than in Libya, and for the worst of reasons. In addition to the sympathy for the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist forces in Syria, heavily targeted historically by the Baath regime, there is an identification with Syrian Sunnis against the Shia (neither of which had prevented the AKP from developing close ties with Assad). Pro-Turkey voices have argued that the sectarian or tribal divisions present in Libyan, Bahraini, Yemeni or Syrian society make Turkey's mildly Islamized, parliamentary-constitutionalist model all the more desirable, showing a way out of the quagmire. But rather than staying above these rifts, Turkey got further bogged down in its own complex ethnic and sectarian set-up, as the political turmoil moved closer to its borders. The peaceful hegemony of the AKP is based not least on the fact that Turkey had forcibly eradicated its 20 per cent Christian population, through the extermination of Armenians and expulsion of Greeks, between 1915 and the mid-1950s; not such a good model for Syrians and Lebanese to follow. And although Turkey's marginalized and impoverished Alevis have different religious practices from Syrian Alawis, and very few ties with them, the Syrian Sunni hatred of the ruling Alawite minority in Damascus can easily be reproduced against them. The Turkish Islamist movement has been led, staffed and overwhelmingly supported by Sunnis, despite the existence in the country of this sizeable Muslim sectarian minority. In 2012, Turkish Alevis once again found chalk marks on their doors, reminiscent of those of the 1970s when Sunni mobs—led by the right-wing nationalist Grey Wolves, but drawing in conservatives and Islamists—carried out major sectarian massacres.

The Syrian conflict has complex implications for Turkey. The two countries have a very long border; Syria is a major Turkish trade route into the Arab heartland, and Sunni Turks have many business links along the way. Above all, the possible birth of another Kurdish statelet haunts Turkey's ruling order. In northern Syria, the Party of the Democratic Union (PYD), the Syrian wing of the PKK, is the best implanted and most tightly organized of the Kurdish forces. In the summer of 2011, as the Erdoğan government gave its support to the FSA, Assad offered a citizenship deal to Syrian Kurds and stopped sharing intelligence on the PKK with Turkey. Ankara tried to get Barzani, the Iraqi Kurdistan ruler, to impose his hegemony on the Syrian Kurds but the results were

short-lived. When Assad pulled back his forces from the northern and southern borders to drive the FSA out of Aleppo in July 2012, the PYD was left in control of a string of Kurdish border towns: Ayn al Arab, parts of Qamishli, Efrin, Amude. Damagingly for the exemplarity of Turkey, Syrian Kurds' protests against Ankara's role have been one of the reasons for the ructions in the Syrian National Council, the West-backed opposition grouping, along with differences over external intervention and internal democracy.²⁸ Indeed, as political prisoners were set free in Egypt and Tunisia, Kurdish civilian prisoners—as well as non-Kurdish journalists, students and teachers—continued to populate Turkish prisons. In December 2011, acting on intelligence from US drones, Turkish jets launched an airstrike on a group of impoverished Kurds humping contraband cigarettes across the mountains near the Iraq border, killing three dozen. How could a country that treated its own Kurdish citizens in this way act as a model for those of its neighbour?

Targeting Iran

Finally, any revision of Turkey's relations with Syria also means a redefinition of relations with another neighbour, Iran. In the years leading up to the Arab Spring there had been a significant rapprochement between Ankara and Tehran, despite American (and Israeli) scepticism. The emergence of Iraqi Kurdistan helped the rulers of both countries converge in fighting Kurdish insurgency. Bilateral trade has increased significantly in the past ten years; Iran is now Turkey's second-largest natural-gas supplier, after Russia.²⁹ In May 2010, Turkey and Brazil brokered a low-level uranium-processing deal with Iran, both apparently thinking they had Washington's green light for it. By September 2011, however, Turkey had agreed to site a NATO missile-defence radar system near its border with Iran, albeit pleading that there should be no mention of Iran's nuclear programme as a rationale. Joost Lagendijk, former co-chair of the Turkey–EU Parliamentarians delegation, has suggested that the US 'needs Turkey' not just to topple Assad but also to challenge Iranian control over Iraq.³⁰

²⁸ 'Akrad Suriyya yatawaqqa'un fashal mu'tamar Istanbul al-muqbil', *Sharq al-Awsat*, 29 March 2012.

²⁹ Daphne McCurdy, 'Turkish-Iranian Relations: When Opposites Attract', *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, vol. 7, no. 2, Summer, 2008.

³⁰ Joost Lagendijk, 'Using Turkey's expertise to deal with Iran', *Today's Zaman*, 29 February 2012.

In the aftermath of the US occupation of Iraq, Israel's long-standing campaign to maintain its nuclear monopoly in the region has coalesced with Saudi hostility to Iran and to the 'Shia crescent' that Riyadh sees extending from Iran, through Maliki's Iraq, to Syria and Hezbollah-run southern Lebanon. With the growing sectarianization, Turkey appears to be playing an increasingly open part in a Western-backed Sunni coalition whose ultimate target is Iran. If there were rumblings of discontent in the US, and among secular as well as conservative circles in Turkey, that Ankara was getting too cozy with Iran and even Ahmadinejad himself in 2009–10, the pendulum has now swung back, gaining added momentum from the Sunni background of the AKP and the broader Islamist movement. There is growing talk of a possible war with Iran, especially if Turkey decides to send troops into Syria. Simultaneously, the Sunni Arab press has been celebrating, with some caution, the arrival of 'Sunni Turkey'. Arab commentators, and some of their Turkish counterparts, like to invoke the historical rivalries between the Ottoman and Persian empires, as if the AKP regime needed any inflation of its imperial pretensions.³¹ Some Islamist intellectuals assert that there is *already* a sectarian war going on, and that Iran, Iraq and Syria have started it. They are jumping on the bandwagon of sectarianization, claiming that we cannot ignore this 'fact' and that Turkey should be preparing to fight this out as a Sunni–Shia war.³²

In Iraq, it is suggested, this could mean a coalition of Iraqi Sunni and Kurdish forces, with broader Arab and Turkish Sunni backing, aligned against Maliki's Shia-dominated government in Baghdad. There was a hint of this in April 2012, when the (Sunni) Vice President of Iraq, Tariq Hashemi, took shelter in Turkey after first 'visiting', or escaping to, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, after the Maliki regime had issued an arrest warrant for him.³³ The Iraqi government responded with a verbal attack, and Turkey retaliated in kind. In the middle of this cross-border shouting match, Massoud Barzani chose to visit Turkey and tensions rose still further. Despite the AKP's official position against the partition of Iraq into three states, feverish speculations proliferated: was Erdoğan's real project the creation of a Kurdish confederation, under Turkish

³¹ 'Adil al-Tarifi, "Turkiyya "al-Sunniyya" . . . wa Fashal Siyasa al-Ihtiwa', *Sharq al-Awsat*, 25 April 2012.

³² For example, see İbrahim Karagül, 'Korkulan oldu, bölündük . . .', *Yeni Şafak*; Ali Ünal, 'Terör ve dış gelişmeler', *Zaman*, March 26, 2012.

³³ 'Baghdad turji' muhakama al-Hashemi mujaddadan', *Sharq al-Awsat*, 11 May 2011.

tutelage.³⁴ There was no doubt that the AKP government descended from its self-appointed throne of supra-sectarianism when it decided to harbour a high-profile figure internationally accused of sectarian massacres, even if some of the charges are fabricated (and others might be laid at Maliki's door). The regime confirmed, once again, the Sunni self-identification of the Turkish state.

Retrogressions

Turkey needs to confront its own problems of sectarian and ethnic repression, state coercion and economic inequality before it can offer itself as a model to anyone. The real-estate and credit bubbles that have lifted its growth rates over the past years cannot be expected to last; its social provision is threadbare, and its income distribution is the most unequal in the OECD, worse than that of Egypt or Tunisia.³⁵ On the civil-liberties front, it is true that the AKP has led a determined struggle against the far-reaching powers that the military High Command enjoyed under the old regime; but this has increasingly taken the form of replacing Kemalist militarism with a new police state. Turkey's most powerful religious organization, the secretive Gülen community, exercises extensive influence within the police and the judiciary; some suggest this is now being extended to MIT, the intelligence service. Gülen is believed to be behind the imprisonment of a number of critical journalists over the past two years.³⁶ In 2010 the Erdoğan government pushed through a notably ambiguous set of amendments to the authoritarian 1980 Constitution, retaining some of its most repressive, nationalist components: 'insulting the Turkish nation', readily extended to any criticism of the state, remains a criminal offence.

In 2002, many Turkish liberals had imagined that the AKP offered the country's best bet for 'modernization' and 'integration with the world', and especially for joining the EU. 'Libertarian left', or *özgürlükçü sol*, intellectual circles played a crucial role in strengthening consent for the

³⁴ Ruşen Çakır, 'Özal'ın hayali gerçekleşiyor mu?', *Vatan*, 24 April 2012.

³⁵ 'Social Justice in the OECD—How Do the Member States Compare?', Gütersloh 2011.

³⁶ The Gülen community has received remarkably sympathetic coverage in the mainstream Western media. See, for example, 'Turkish Schools Offer Pakistan a Gentler Vision of Islam', *NYT*, 4 May 2008; 'Global Muslim networks: how far they have travelled', *Economist*, 6 March 2008; 'Meet Fethullah Gülen, the World's Top Public Intellectual', *Foreign Policy*, 4 August 2008.

AKP's conservative liberalization project. They threw themselves behind the AKP during its struggle with the military, and for a long time extended this unquestioning support to the government's other policies as well, including its constitutional amendments. Influential liberal intellectuals celebrated the role of the police in Turkey's 'democratization'—read, chipping away at the power of the military—and discovered the human face of the new police cadres. This naivety betrayed a reductionist reading of the Turkish state, whose authoritarianism was attributed to 'military tutelage', and an inability to analyse it as a differentiated set of institutions and social actors with now overlapping, now conflicting, concerns and interests. The liberals' strategy of ignoring the Erdoğan government's authoritarian tendencies backfired when the constitutional amendments were followed by the heaviest wave of repression in many years. Some have now become critics of the AKP–Gülen regime.

Internationally, proponents of a Turkish model for the Islamic world often counterpose it to the examples of Iran or Saudi Arabia, set at the opposite end of the spectrum. The developments of the past year suggest a different picture. The main demarcating lines in the region are getting less ideological and are no longer drawn between the 'moderate Islamists' and the conservatives. The exacerbation of the Syrian conflict has begun to crystallize supposedly 'primordial' sectarian differences. Unlike as they may be in some respects, Saudi Arabia and Turkey now find themselves in the same camp, with Iran as the common enemy. But though the situation may change, it is Saudi Arabia, with barely a third of Turkey's population, that seems to be having the greatest success in shaping the current political flux in its own interests. Not a murmur is raised by the 'international community' when it subjects its own Shia population to the same treatment Assad metes out to Syrian protesters. Erdoğan made a big show of his September 2011 tour of the Egyptian, Tunisian and Libyan capitals, accompanied by 280 Turkish businessmen ready to tap into cheap supplies of labour and declaring his intention to triple Turkish investment.³⁷ But the visit also demonstrated the limits of Turkish influence. The Muslim Brotherhood had no objection to citing AKP Turkey as an economic model, but Erdoğan's call for a secular state incited a bitter 'anti-imperialist' response from the Brothers: the organization told him not to meddle in Egypt's internal affairs. Meanwhile President Morsi's first foreign visit was to Riyadh.

³⁷ 'Turkey, Egypt form strategic cooperation council', *Today's Zaman*, 13 September 2011.

The AKP's 'zero problems with neighbours' policy is in tatters, whereas King Abdullah's vituperative campaign against Iran is now the order of the day, waged not just by Washington, Israel, the Sunni world and the EU but by Wall Street, too, with only Russia and China holding out against the international vendetta. While the convulsion of Syria confronts Ankara with the sudden strengthening of its domestic enemy, the PKK, the House of Saud can expect to see Lebanon back in its pocket if Hezbollah is undermined by Assad's weakness or fall. Moreover, the Turkish leadership has consistently demonstrated its willingness to put sectarian *Realpolitik* before the principles of democratization and self-determination. Bahrain, with its Shiite majority and Sunni autocratic monarchy, served as a litmus test. Not only did Turkey turn a blind eye when the monarchy violently crushed the protests; in the first months of 2012, as a prelude to increasing cooperation with the Gulf regimes, Gül visited the United Arab Emirates and demanded democracy for Syria during his friendly meetings with the autocrats there. Nothing could better illustrate the nature of Ankara's commitments to democracy and non-intervention in the region. Throughout the Arab Spring, Turkey only solidified its relations with the Saudis; it is tail-ending not just Washington's and Israel's policies, but Riyadh's as well—further strengthening the forces of reaction in the region.