

Book Review

Thierry Kellner and Mohammad Reza-Djalili, Iranian and Turkish Rapprochement: Damaged by the Arab Spring? *L'Iran et la Turquie face au «printemps arabe»*? GRIPS: Bruxelles, 2012, ISBN - 978-2-87291-034-2.

Well-researched, and well-documented, *L'Iran et la Turquie face au Printemps arabe* (Iran and Turkey in the face of the Arab Spring), written by authors Mohammad-Reza Djalili and Thierry Kellner, sets out to analyse the Arab Spring from the vantage point of two major non-Arab powers of the Middle East. Given the shortage of academic books on the reaction of these two major powers to the Arab Spring, the authors' book comes at a very pertinent time.

Kellner and Djalili focus the limelight on the resulting differences of opinion between these two major powers since the outbreak of the Arab Spring at the beginning of 2011. The authors argue that the ensuing differences of opinion on Syria run the risk of imperilling the rapprochement recently experienced between Iran and Turkey (p. 5).

In the first chapter, Djalili and Kellner provide an insightful synopsis on how, over the course of the tenure of the ruling party in Turkey, the AKP (The Justice and Development Party), the relationship with Iran has improved. Although both regimes were based on asymmetrically different ideologies, the AKP's moderately Islamic leanings, as expected, changed the course of this relationship, which was previously oscillating between hostility and co-operation. This change of tone from the AKP of Turkey, under the aegis of Erdogan (Turkish prime minister), was also reciprocated by Iran's Ahmadinejad. The bilateral relationship since the AKP's arrival in power evolved into a form of increased co-operation, mostly influenced by the party's zero-problems policy (p. 4-5). This zero-problem policy, one of the foreign policy mottos of the AKP, had envisaged improving the thorny relations with Turkey's neighbours to the extent that lasting peace and stability were to be the cornerstones of the country's foreign policy goals.

The second and third chapters delve into Iran and Turkey's respective policy reactions to the Arab Spring. While differing in their views, both countries were rather unprepared to formulate a clear-cut policy response, and thus shared caution. Soon after the dust seemed to settle, Tehran attempted to capitalise on the changing dynamics of the Middle East by associating the Arab uprisings with an 'Islamic Awakening' reminiscent of the 'Islamic revolution' of 1979. That is why the Islamic Republic attempted to curry favour with the newly empowered Islamic movements in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Libya, and the Shi'a-led demonstrations in Bahrain. On the Turkish side, what seemed to entrance the new Arab regimes was 'Turkish model' that blended electoral democracy with economic success, which formed the country's soft-power advantage (p.58). Turkey, realising its soft-power, attempted to extend its influence further. It was Turkey's support for the uprisings to Syria that laid the foundations for a Turkish-Iranian discord. The Syrian resistance movement quickly dissociated itself from the 'Islamic Awakening' by the regime in Tehran, as Iran sought to aid Syrian people who were victims of "terrorism" (p. 55). However, Tehran's approach was rejected by Turkey's Erdogan, who accused Assad of committing "atrocities" against its own people (p. 86). Thus, the relationship between Iran and Turkey suffered a setback.

The authors conclude that the Arab Spring has laid bare an ideological competition between two models: secular and Western-looking model of Turkey, exerting its soft-power on the region and the Islamic model of Iran. In this competition of ideologies, it is the Turkish model that has managed to make inroads into the hearts and minds of Arab societies whereas the popularity of the Iranian model has been on a free-fall. This fall is attributable, in good part, to the violent response, by the

Iranian regime, to the demonstrations of 'green movement' in 2009 as well as Iran's unflinching support of the Assad regime in Syria.

One of the biggest strengths of this publication is arguably the detailed documentation of the saga of events following the outbreak of the Arab spring. The authors very effectively detail the quick evolution of Iran-Turkey relations. Using diverse sources, the authors document how, on par with Turkey's zero-problem policy, Iran-Turkey relations had finally moved to a promising setting following the arrival of the AKP in power. After a few years of friendly relations, road-blocks cropped up following the Arab spring, notably because of diverging opinions on Syria. The book is a valuable source to gauge this evolution. In fact, although the contradictions of Turkey's zero-problems with neighbours had been abundantly discussed in different works, few publications have so meticulously analysed this contradiction from its outset to the present.

This having been said, although the book's concluding lines highlight the popularity of the Turkish model by emphasising its democratic aspects, its flourishing economy, and its capacity to reconcile religion with modernity, the authors do not provide much critical detail about the functioning of this model. Their analysis avoids the cracks appearing in the democratic aspects of the Turkish model. In fact, the 'Turkish model' of the authors today, according to Freedom House, has some 95 journalists in prison (up from 57 in 2011), almost doubling in one year.¹ Moreover, a few years after the AKP's arrival in power (that is, well before the outbreak of the Arab Spring), the government's commitments to follow through European-Union democratisation reforms have run out of steam. As such, while Turkey has emerged as an economic giant, its democracy has suffered.² The question to ask is, is the Turkish model popular because of (or in spite of) its democratic flaws and thanks to its burgeoning economy and its capability to mix modernity with religion? The book does not address this issue.

Moreover, the popularity of Turkey in the Arab world (correspondingly, the diminishing appeal of Iran) is not restricted to the 'Turkish model'. The authors did not emphasise the fact that it was the flotilla incident that improved the reputation of Erdogan in the eyes of millions of Arabs. This was arguably the first major attempt of Turkey's AKP to assume a leadership role in the Palestinian cause, which has hitherto been dominated by Iran's self-proclaimed leadership of solidarity with Palestine, which it had been championing since the foundation of the Islamic Republic.

VAHIT YÜCESOY

Université de Montréal, Department of Political Science

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¹Freedom House. 2011. "Number of Imprisoned Journalists in Turkey Nearly Doubles." Accessed April 17, 2012. <http://www.freedomhouse.org/article/number-imprisoned-journalists-turkey-nearly-doubles>.

² Kirisci, Kemal. "Can the Turkish model be relevant for the Arab Awakening?" *Confluences Méditerranée* 83(2012): p. 43-57. doi: 10.3917/come.083.0043.