

The Debate on “Turkey as a Role Model” (1990-2011)

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Abstract

This article revisits the debate on the idea of Turkey as a role model by bringing together Turkish and Middle Eastern perspectives between the Justice and Development Party’s (JDP) rise to government in 2002 and the popular uprisings in the Middle East between 2010 and 2011. Participants to the debate were clearly divided over the virtues of the Turkish political system. However, in the Middle East, they were united in their appreciation of the democratic nature of then Turkish foreign policy-making and its balanced approach. Therefore, even though Turkey as a role model idea may not be put into practice, in the period under analysis it is clear that Turkey’s presence with its strengths and weaknesses led to lesson-drawing in the region.

Keywords: *Turkey as a role model, Middle East, Turkish political system, foreign policy.*

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“Bir Rol Modeli Olarak Türkiye” Tartışması

Öz

Bu makale bir role modeli olarak Türkiye fikri üzerinde yapılan tartışmayı, Türkiye ve Ortadoğu’daki yaklaşımları biraraya getirerek 2002 yılında Adalet ve Kalkınma partisi iktidara gelişi ve 2010 ve 2011 yıllarında Ortadoğu’daki halk ayaklanmaları arasındaki süre içinde tekrar ele almaktadır. Tartışmaya katılanlar Türkiye’nin siyasi sisteminin nitelikleri konusunda açık bir şekilde bölünmüştür. Ancak Ortadoğu’da Türkiye’nin o zamanki Türk dış politikasını demokratik doğası ve dengeli yaklaşımı dolayısıyla takdir etme konusunda birleşmişlerdir. Dolayısıyla, bir rol modeli olarak Türkiye fikri uygulamaya koyulmasa bile, analiz edilen dönem içerisinde Türkiye’nin mevcudiyetinin güçlü ve zayıf taraflarıyla bölgede ders çıkarmaya katkı sağladığı açıktır.

Anahtar kelimeler: *bir rol modeli olarak Türkiye, Ortadoğu, Türkiye siyasi sistemi, dış politika.*

1. Introduction

Whether Turkey can be a role model for other countries has been part of the informed political debate in different periods since the 1990s. Turkey does not only bring together political Islam and democracy but also secularism and is peculiar due to the deliberate choice of Westernisation as an ideal by the founders of the Republic. In addition, Turkish membership in international organisations such as NATO, the Council of Europe and recently the process of membership to the EU increase attention to the Turkish experience. These characteristics have made the Turkish example part of the debates on how to reform political regimes first in Central Asia and then the Middle East. However, between 1990s and early 2000s, the prevailing view amongst scholars and journalists on putting the idea of Turkey as a role model into practice has been negative due to mostly differences in historical backgrounds and higher religious allegiances in the Middle East.

The issue resurfaced in Turkey, the Middle East and the West once again during the popular uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria, as the co-existence of Islam with democracy and how these two were reconciled in the Turkish example could be relevant for the future of these countries.² The article revisits this debate by comparing Turkish and the Middle Eastern observations on the idea of Turkey as a role model. Based on an analysis of commentaries and statements of opinion leaders between 1990 and 2011, the article finds that Turkey's democracy and foreign policy during the period after the coming into power of the Justice and Development Party (JDP) has been closely followed by an increasingly growing number of Middle Eastern observers in prominent English publications of the region.³

² For different views on the issue see Ö. Taşpınar, "Egypt and the Turkish Model", *Today's Zaman*, 7 Feb. 2011; H.J. Barkey and M. Abromowitz, "Turkey: Democracy, Yes, But No Model", *Politico*, 19 Feb. 2011; Z. Torun, "Change in the Middle East and North Africa: A Turkish Perspective", *ISS Opinion*, European Union Institute for Security Studies, Feb. 2011, available at www.euiss.eu.

³ Turkey seems to attract even wider segments of the Arab societies. For instance, a commentary draws attention to the common ground between record number of young man and women who were fans of the Arabic-dubbed Turkish soap opera *Noor*, who visited Turkey in 2010, and preachers, imams, and religious figures who are rushing to Turkey in 2011, while calling for TV viewers to support Turkey and spend their summer holidays there – mostly influenced by the Turkish policy towards Israel. See "Turkey: Bringing Together Soap Opera Fans and Religious Figures", *Asharq Alawsat*, 26 July 2010. Surveys of the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV) confirm that Turkish image is increasingly viewed positively in the region. July 2009 TESEV survey conducted in Egypt, Jordan, the Palestinian Territories, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Syria found that 75 per cent of respondents had very favourable and favourable views of Turkey, whereas the figure has risen to 80 per cent in the 2010 survey. Interestingly, the figure of the very favourable and favourable views on Turkey was 85 per

Although participants to the debate were clearly divided over the virtues of the Turkish domestic political system as an example to follow, they were united in their appreciation of the then Turkish foreign policy-making, which did not deny dialogue with any other actor in the international arena, while it did not refrain from criticism either. Therefore, despite the difficulties in applying the Turkish model in the Middle Eastern context, one may argue that the debate functioned as one way of lesson-drawing. Analysis of strengths and weaknesses of Turkey in the newspaper articles presented here suggests that it is Turkey's presence⁴ that counts regardless of whether Turkey is a role-model to be followed or not.

The article will proceed with a brief history of the idea of Turkey as a role model. This will be followed by an analysis of Turkish and Middle Eastern perspectives on the issue in light of the JDP's rise to government since 2002 and the popular uprisings in the Middle East.

2. History of an idea: "Turkey as a role model"

The idea of Turkey as a role model first became part of the international debate on political reform after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of independent Republics in Central Asia in the 1990s. Turkey appeared as a valuable partner for the American administration to avoid these Republics from falling under the political sway of Iran, by offering a role model as "a Muslim country, yet secular and integrally tied into the Western alliance".⁵ The idea was even put forward by Catherine Lalumière, then Secretary General of the Council of Europe in her visit to the newly these states in Central Asia. Nonetheless, academics drew attention to the flaws in the Turkish system. Andrew Mango drew attention to the standard of living in Turkey and rights and freedoms of its citizens in particular with regard to distinctive religious and ethnic identity as compromising its status as an example.⁶ Despite these flaws, Turkish model became popular in the early 1990s, because it was secular and democratic and was close

cent when Iranian respondents were included. Y.P. Doğan, "Survey Shows Turkey Highly Favoured in Many Mideastern Countries", *Today's Zaman*, 3 Feb. 2011.

⁴ The concept of presence was developed to analyse the European Community through the place it occupies in the perceptions and expectations of policy makers. See D. Allen and M. Smith, "Western Europe's Presence in the Contemporary International Arena", *Review of International Studies*, Vol.16, No.1 (1990), pp.19-38. In this article, however, the focus of analysis in the wider Middle East is opinion leaders in general, which makes it necessary to use newspapers, think-tank reports and journals.

⁵ T. L. Friedman, "U.S. to Counter Iran in Central Asia", *The New York Times*, 5 Feb. 1992, p. 3.

⁶ A. Mango, "The Turkish Model", *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (Oct. 1993), pp. 726-757.

to the West. Besides, there was a supposed common culture, religion and linguistic affinity between Turkey and the Turkic Republics and Turkey had experience in transforming a centrally planned economy into a market economy.⁷

For Turkish politicians, the idea of being a role model was useful for increasing the importance of Turkey in the international arena. For instance, former Turkish Prime Minister Tansu Çiller, in order to justify the establishment of a customs union between Turkey and the European Union argued that “Turkey is a role model... a bridge between Europe and 300 million Turkish -speaking people,” referring to ethnic Turks in central Asia.⁸ For the then President Süleyman Demirel, Turkey could serve as a role model in the region and act as a bridge to the West. Turkish-American cooperation in light of this idea found expression in the Baku-Tbilisi Ceyhan oil pipeline against the competition from Moscow in 1999. Furthermore, Turkey encouraged the involvement of these states in the international system, as seen in the example of participation of the southern Caucasus in the Partnership for Peace Programme of NATO (PfP), and setting up training facilities for peace-keeping forces in Ankara in order to forge a common command and operational language.⁹ Despite these examples of cooperation, no institutionalized mechanism to promote Turkey as a role model was established. In fact, one could argue that by the end of 1993, the popularity of the idea of Turkey as a role model died out mainly because it became clear that there was no concrete danger that the Central Asian Republics would adopt the Iranian model. In addition, Russia’s attempt to control political developments within these countries under its ‘near abroad’ policy, and Turkish problems related with its ethnic and religious minorities led to the decline of Western support for the Turkish model.¹⁰

Subsequently however, the relevance of the idea of Turkey as a role model for the Middle East was discussed widely after the American administration changed its policy towards the region in the wake of September 11 attacks. During this period, democratization in the Middle East was seen as a way to deal with the problems in the region which

⁷ İ. Bal, *Turkey’s Relations with the West and the Turkic Republics: The Rise and Fall of the ‘Turkish Model’* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), p. 110.

⁸ J. Rugman, “EU Veto ‘Would Benefit Islamists’”, *The Guardian* (London), 2 Nov. 1995, p. 14.

⁹ D. Burke-Kennedy, “Turkey: old empire strikes back in new role as model, and bridge towards West”, *The Irish Times*, 29 Dec. 1999, p. 57.

¹⁰ Bal, *Turkey’s Relations*, p. 116.

increased the relevance of the Turkish model. Bush administration attempted to put the idea into practice via the Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative (BMENA) in 2004, which eventually failed since it did not enjoy international support.

The issue caught the attention of a number of analysts and academics, who in general pointed out specific characteristics of the Turkish experience which make it difficult to implement it as a role model in the Middle East. For instance, Ömer Taşpınar highlighted that the historical context made it easier for Turks to accept a regime change towards democracy. Most importantly, Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Turkish Republic enjoyed a high prestige and legitimacy, arising out of a military victory against foreign occupiers and democratic institutions in Turkey were not imposed by outside powers.¹¹ In addition, deficiencies of the Turkish system, such as the failure of tolerance for cultural and ethnic diversity, state control of religion and being a former colonial master in the region who is believed to have turned its back on Islam and adopted a pro-American and Israeli security policy made the Turkish model problematic in the eyes of its target audience.¹² Taşpınar argued in favour of a more liberal balance between secularism, Islam and democracy and a multicultural understanding of citizenship for Turkey to be an attractive role model.¹³ Meliha Altunışık, on the other hand, stated that Turkish experience went beyond demonstrating the compatibility of Islam and democracy since it revealed the significance of reinforcing secularism within democracy. She drew attention to the fact that JDP's rise to power had become an additional asset for the Turkish model as it demonstrated the reconciliation of a party with Islamic roots with democracy and secularism. Nonetheless, Altunışık underlined the issue of the 'will to act' in this regard and pointed out that Turkey has generally been reluctant to accept this role of a model for political reform in the Middle East.¹⁴

Other observers reacted against the idea of Turkey as a role model mostly out of domestic concerns. While conservatives or liberals pointed out that Turkish secularism had to evolve towards tolerating religion instead

¹¹ Ö. Taşpınar, *An Uneven Fit? The Turkish Model and the Arab World*, Analysis Paper No. 5, The Brookings Institution, (Aug. 2003), p. 16.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 25-39.

¹³ Taşpınar, *An Uneven Fit*, p. 39.

¹⁴ M. Altunışık, "The Turkish Model and Democratization in the Middle East", *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 27, Winter/Spring No. 1&2 (2005), pp. 45-64.

of controlling it for Turkey to be attractive as a role model, secularists such as Onur Öymen, then deputy chairman of the Republican People's Party warned against neglecting secularism while trying to establish democracy in the region.¹⁵ Another remarkable and stronger comment came from President Ahmet Necdet Sezer at the opening session of the parliament in October 2004, who stated that the portrayal of Turkey as an Islamic republic or a model for moderate Islam as part of this initiative was unacceptable.¹⁶

In addition to this fragmented opinion within the country, Turkey's ill-remembered Ottoman past, scepticism of the Middle Eastern countries towards Turkey and lack of international support emerged as obstacles to put this idea into practice. Furthermore, policy-makers within the JDP government stated that Turkey could only serve as an example or inspiration for a reform program in the Middle East, but not as a model. They expressed that Turkey would be happy to see its neighborhood transformed into an area of peace, prosperity, and democracy but had no desire of assuming a role model position with regard to the BMENA Initiative of the US.¹⁷ This was a position which could be attributed to the impact of Ottoman legacy on Turkish foreign policy that leads to concerns of neo-Ottomanism in the region and self-restraint in Turkey.¹⁸

The policy of not institutionalizing mechanisms to put the idea of Turkey as a role model into practice in order not to be seen as patronizing the Middle East continued even during the popular uprisings in the region. However, this does not mean that JDP policy-makers did not make references to Turkey as an example or a source of inspiration for other countries.¹⁹ For instance Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan underlined that Turkey has achieved “what people said could never be achieved – a balance between Islam, democracy, secularism and modernity”. In his words, his party members “are absolutely against ethnic nationalism, regional nationalism, and religious chauvinism” and “Turkey, with its

¹⁵ Y. Beriş and A. Gürkan, *Broader Middle East Initiative: Perceptions From Turkey*, Turkey In Focus, Issue: 7, Turkish Industrialist's and Businessmen's Association Washington Office, (July 2004).

¹⁶ “İlmli İslam Kabul Edilemez”, *Hürriyet*, 2 Oct. 2004.

¹⁷ A. Sever, “Turkey's Constraining Position on Western Reform Initiatives in the Middle East”, *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Vol.18, No.4 (Fall 2007), p. 137.

¹⁸ Ş. Yılmaz and İ.K. Yosmaoğlu, “Fighting the Spectres of the Past: Dilemmas of Ottoman Legacy in the Balkans and the Middle East”, *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 5 (2008), pp. 677-693.

¹⁹ See comments of the Turkish Prime Minister's advisor, İ. Kalın, “Turkey serves as a role model for Arab world”, *The Japan Times*, 26 May 2011.

democracy, is a source of inspiration to the rest of the Islamic world.”²⁰ Nonetheless, while Erdoğan continued to argue that Turkey can be a source of inspiration for other countries since it has shown that Islam and democracy can co-exist perfectly, he underlined that Turkey does not seek to be a role model.²¹

3. The debate in Turkey on ‘Turkey as a role model’ during the popular uprisings in the Middle East

Despite this official policy, the debate on the idea of Turkey as a role model has intensified in Turkey and the West during the popular uprisings in the wider Middle East, although increasing number of Middle Eastern analysts seems to have focused on the idea since the consolidation of Justice and Development Party in the Turkish political system. To start with a general comment from Turkey, Mehmet Ali Birand, a prominent columnist, argued that it was inevitable for a middle class, educated Egyptian or Tunisian - who watch Turkish television series which showed the difference between these countries more clearly - to question why the Turks, being similarly Muslim can elect whomever they want, while they can’t. From this perspective, Turkey constituted a role model despite the deficiencies, because democracy worked, and thanks to secularism, people see a Muslim Turkey that is stable and progressively becoming rich.²²

However, based on similar premises, a group of Turkish analysts and scholars argued that the Turkish example cannot be applied to the Middle Eastern context, as social and political structures display huge differences. Turkish system is characterized by strict secularism enshrined in the Constitution. Secularism is strongly upheld by political parties and most importantly by the military, which has intervened in politics either directly by staging coups or indirectly by statements warning the governments against threats to the regime. People in the Middle East, however, are far more religious and the strong and institutionalized support for secularism, which led to change in Turkish Islamic movements, is missing. For instance, Burhanettin Duran argued that Turkey has a unique political culture and Turkish political vocabulary does not provide for such concepts as *shura* or *sharia* to advance an ‘Islamist’ political agenda, as promoted

²⁰ R. T. Erdoğan, *Newsweek*, 12 May 2008.

²¹ “Turkey can be ‘inspiration’ for Arabs: Erdogan”, 24 Feb. 2011, <http://www.france24.com/en/20110224-turkey-can-be-inspiration-arabs-erdogan> Accessed on 11.04.2011.

²² M.A. Birand, “Look around and then look at us”, *Hürriyet*, 1 Feb. 2011.

by groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood. Therefore, Duran stated that Turkey would not stand out as an appropriate model for many Muslims who would be unable to reconcile ‘pseudo-democratic practices’ with their expectations from a democratic regime.²³

Another group of analysts in the debate argued that the value of Turkish example comes from the experience of the Justice and Development Party (JDP), which has been in government for consecutive terms.²⁴ Although JDP has defined itself as conservative democrat, the backgrounds of the majority of its members in Islamic movements led to characterisation of the party as a representative of political Islam. It has been established in 2001 by a group of younger members of the Virtue Party, when the party was closed down by the Constitutional Court, which shows that Turkish political Islam had to evolve in order to survive. Dropping criticisms against secularism off their rhetoric and insufficient credibility of opposition political parties among the electorate led to JDP becoming a dominant actor in the political system. Therefore, analysts argued that it is particularly the JDP experience that should constitute an example for the countries that are about to undergo change.

In this light, Ergun Babahan stated that the achievement in Turkey was sufficient to be taken as a model, since Turkey was a good example of how Islam and democracy can coexist. Babahan also argued that with its economy, legal, education and health systems, Turkey might contribute to the process of change in these countries.²⁵ Following this line of thought, İhsan Dağı pointed out that the people of the Middle East were previously squeezed between putting up with a repressive regime or a totalitarian Islamist state. However, the Turkish experience with democracy presented a third option for the Middle East, consisting of representative and accountable government through the experience of JDP and free, fair and regular elections.²⁶

Alternative points of view urging for caution mostly about the framework of the transfer of know-how on transition to democracy and the

²³ B. Duran, “Whose Model? Which Turkey?”, www.setavakfi.org.tr/public/HaberDetay.aspx?Dil=tr&hid=68545 Accessed on 11.04.2011.

²⁴ Y. Baydar, “Turkish Experiment Through Egypt’s Prism”, *Today’s Zaman*, 2 Feb. 2011 and C. Çandar, *Turkey’s ‘Soft Power’ Strategy: A New Vision for a Multi-Polar World*, Brief No: 38, Foundation for Political Economic and Social Research (SETA), (Dec. 2009).

²⁵ E. Babahan, “Human Dignity and Egypt”, *Today’s Zaman*, 1 Feb. 2011.

²⁶ İ. Dağı, “Turkish Model: Neither Authoritarian nor Islamist”, *Today’s Zaman*, 14 Feb. 2011.

deficiencies of the Turkish system also emerged. One argument for instance, stated that Turkey could rather be a companion for the Middle East since it wanted to maintain a balance between having relations in equal terms and acting in support of these countries. Thus, an institutionalized interaction might inspire these countries to develop their own models, while such an interactive process might help both sides in developing democracy.²⁷ Another comment highlighted that Turkey constituted an exception among former Ottoman territories for having solved the legitimacy problem of its political system, in particular with its recent experience with a conservative party which believed in democracy and showed efforts towards integrating with the world and especially the EU. Thus, Turkish experience served as an inspiration for the Muslim world by showing that the basis of the political structure is not religious beliefs and values but concepts like democracy, human rights, expansion of civilian control, transparency, and accountability. However, in this view, Turkey needed to improve the rule of law and democracy and resolve long-standing problems, such as religious freedom and the Kurdish issue in order to influence the Muslim world.²⁸

4. The Debate in the Middle East on “Turkey as a Role Model”

Turkish comments, which draw attention to the relevance of the JDP experience, are shared in the Middle East.²⁹ As stated above, Turkey’s experience with JDP started to attract significant attention in the Middle East as early as 2002, when it first came to government. For instance, Mohamed Sid-Ahmed underlined that JDP’s leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has been conveying the message that “Islam and democracy are not incompatible, and has succeeded in convincing European leaders that the Turkish experiment ‘should be given a chance’”. Therefore, the victory of the JDP was of enormous significance, not least because for the first time a Muslim country with an Islamic party in power was pleading for reconciliation with and not hostility towards the West.³⁰ Another comment in 2007

²⁷ International Strategic Research Organisation (USAK) Center for American Studies, 5 April 2011, <http://www.usak.org.tr/EN/hyazdir.asp?id=571> Accessed on 11.04.2011.

²⁸ T. Küçükcan, “Turkey a Model for Islamic World insofar as It Changes”, *Today’s Zaman*, 28 Feb. 2011.

²⁹ This view found expression in *Contemporary Arab Affairs*’ ‘Editorial’ in 2010. Haseeb argued that there is an Arab need to benefit from the current pioneering Turkish experience of ‘enlightened secularism’ as implemented by JDP – a party with an Islamic background, which practises democracy and separates the religion and the state in its practice completely -. K. El-Din Haseeb, “The Future of Arab-Turkish cooperation; some remarks”, *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (2010), p. 136.

³⁰ M. Sid-Ahmed, “Turkey’s new experiment”, *Al-Ahram Weekly*, Issue No. 612, 14-20 Nov. 2002, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2002/612/op3.htm> Accessed on 28.04.2011.

stressed the difference of Turkey's Islamic political experience "in terms of accepting the other and emphasizing the fact that the state is comprised of all its citizens regardless of their beliefs and orientations (religion is a relationship between man and God but homeland is for all citizens)" and argued that the JDP has always emphasized "respecting the constitution and secularism - which constitutes the legitimacy of the modern Turkish state". Moreover, having emerged out of the Turkish Islamic experience, Prime Minister Erdoğan's support to Turkey's accession to the European Union pioneered him in an Islamic world which "lies perplexed between a past that it cannot return to and a modern elusive world". According to this perspective, Turkey's affiliation to the West and the dissolution of the historic bonds with the East entailed many benefits for Turkey, one of which is Erdoğan's practice of politics not dominated by a religious perspective but by a practical and realistic perspective.³¹

Statements of those who were involved in the Middle Eastern politics support these positive comments. For instance, after JDP won 47 per cent of the vote in 2007 parliamentary elections, a leading Muslim Brotherhood member Essam El-Erian stated that JDP's success showed that 'a political party does not have to be limited to Islamist members alone' and pointed to ways in which Islamists can reach accommodation with the West, while its economic success and dealings with other political parties and currents in Turkey should also be reflected upon. Abul-Ela Madi, a former Muslim Brotherhood member who left the group to form the moderate Wassat (Centre) Party, on the other hand, argued that the lesson Islamists should learn from the JDP's success is moderation. Madi appreciated JDP's "pragmatism" and the way they have focussed on their objectives without any religious grandstanding.³² Another example is the Islamist leader Rachid Ghannouchi of the Ennahda (Awakening) movement, who returned Tunisia after more than 20 years in exile and while rejecting comparisons to the Iranian leader Ayatollah Khomeini, compared his movement to the JDP.³³ Moreover, one comment went so far as stating that even the new

³¹ "Turkey: Avoiding a Lame Democracy!", *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 9 May 2007, <http://www.aawsat.com/english/news.asp?section=2&id=8903> Accessed on 28.04.2011.

³² A. Howeidy, "Lessons from Turkey", *Al-Ahram Weekly*, Issue No. 855, 26 July-1 Aug. 2007, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2007/855/eg8.htm> Accessed on 28.04.2011.

³³ In his words, "The Turkish experience remains the closest to the Tunisian situation, culturally, politically and socially, Turkey is the closest case to Tunisia. So al-Nahda, if you were to compare it [with another movement], cannot be compared to the Taliban or Iran, the closest comparison would be to the AKP". N. Moshiri's Interview with Rachid Ghannouchi, *Al Jazeera*, 7 Feb. 2011, <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/africa/2011/02/2011233464273624.html> Accessed on 24.06.2016.

leaders of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood found “in modern Turkey a role model to be emulated” and saw “the Egyptian army as a stabilizing force and a guarantor that a genuine multi-party, democratic political system can be maintained, just like the Turkish army.”³⁴

However, mirroring the differences among Turkish participants to the debate on Turkey as a role model, Middle Eastern analysts disagreed on the value of secularism or the role of the military in the political system, namely, restrictions to political Islam. For instance, one comment pointed to a widespread belief that Turkish society has already achieved a true balance between the secular identity of the state and the choices of civil society “after the failure of oppressive westernization policies that aimed to strip the country of its religious and cultural roots”. This was helped by the fact that the ruling JDP contained the secular vision with ease and leant on Islam as a cultural and valuable reference without building a political legitimacy upon it.³⁵ In a similar comment, Amr Hamzawy underlined that JDP was distinct in not raising slogans such as “Islam is the solution” and in highlighting the ability of religious views “to compete with other intellectual and value-based frameworks”. For Hamzawy, the tolerance of the Turkish political system for Islamist powers to participate in public affairs, secular nature of the state and role of the military as an ultimate guarantor of the system allowed gradual integration of Islamist movements in politics within the context of constitutional, legal and organisational restrictions and propelled them towards committing to the rules of the game. Hamzawy pointed out that the JDP was an example of the maturation of Islamist movements which revealed itself not only with an interest in the formulation and application of public policies competently, but also with formulating a successful model for Islamist activity that was open to and in communication with the Other (the non-Islamic, the secular, the Western, etc.), based on inclusive citizenship, not on mixing politics and violent action. Overall, Hamzawy pointed out the importance of democracy as a value and practice that formed the ultimate reference point for Turkish Islamists and guaranteed continuation of their political role.³⁶

³⁴ M. Keilani, “Wrong Assumptions About Egypt”, *Jordan Times*, 13 Feb. 2011, supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring.

³⁵ “Turkish Secularism and the Current Political Stalemate”, *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 15 May 2007, <http://www.aawsat.com/english/news.asp?section=2&id=8967> Accessed on 28.04.2011.

³⁶ A. Hamzawy, “Islamist lessons in Turkey Flexible and focussed on policy”, *Al-Ahram Weekly*, Issue No. 858, 16- 22 Aug. 2007, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2007/858/op23.htm> Accessed on 28.04.2011.

Another comment went so far as exceptionally appreciating strong presence of not only legal and constitutional buffers, but also forces that protect the general situation - the military in Turkey and the royal palace in Jordan. From this perspective, both cases seemed relevant for the accession of Islamists to leading posts in the government and preventing the monopolizing of power by one party after a democratic election until the culture of pluralism and accommodating differences are reinforced in the Arab world.³⁷ A similar comment defined secularism as “defense against sectarianism, division and ethnic conflicts” and welcomed the persistence of JDP in protecting secularism. JDP differed from Arab Islamist movements in not assuming power by killing, bombing or bloodshed and “it never advocated fatwas (religious rulings) created by ignorant individuals that denounce others as infidels and divide members of the same community into categories of atheists and infidels.” Therefore, JDP’s accession was a qualitative leap in the modern model of governance in the Islamic world and offered a quite different example of rational and balanced governance.³⁸ Similarly, Mustafa El-Labbad, argued that secularism has been a fateful choice for Turkey and concluded that an objective assessment of that society today “suggests that the decision was largely right”, even if secularism was taken to an extreme. For El-Labbad, this was because secularist values and peaceful rotation of civil authority inherent in the multi-party parliamentary system permitted for the rise to power of a party with an Islamist frame of reference.³⁹

In contrast to these positive approaches to the Turkish system, but still mirroring the lines of fragmentation within the Turkish debate, Galal Nassar argued that Turkey could offer useful insight for Arab societies insofar as it urges caution against a secularism which may endanger existing systems of values and ethics. Nassar argued that “the “tyranny of enlightenment” can be just as disruptive as the “tyranny of fundamentalism”.⁴⁰ Instead of secularism, Nassar emphasized JDP’s belief that democracy is a universal, humanitarian political creed with strong roots in Turkish and

³⁷ “No to Democracy!”, *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 18 Jan. 2007, <http://www.aawsat.com/english/news.asp?section=2&id=7694> Accessed on 28.04.2011.

³⁸ “The Valuable Turkish Lesson”, *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 1 Sep. 2007, <http://www.aawsat.com/english/news.asp?section=2&id=10062> Accessed on 28.04.2011.

³⁹ M. El-Labbad, “Turkey in Arab eyes”, *Al-Ahram Weekly*, Issue No. 925, 3-9 Dec. 2008, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2008/925/op35.htm> Accessed on 28.04.2011.

⁴⁰ G. Nassar, “In Focus: More than an identity crisis”, *Al-Ahram Weekly*, Issue No. 845, 17-23 May 2007, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2007/845/op3.htm> Accessed on 28.04.2011.

Islamic heritage. He argued that JDP's "allegiance to democracy" was the reason for its rising popularity among the urban middle class, in contrast to its predecessor, the Welfare Party of Necmettin Erbakan, which viewed "democracy as a Western import and, hence, alien to Islamic society".⁴¹ Raghida Dergham, on the other hand, pointed out that the model has to "prove its merit in terms of achieving social peace, economic progress and political development" in Turkey, which means that it "needs to solve the Kurdish issue and its 'political Islam' (or sometimes public Islam) problem by maturing its democratic institutions." Furthermore, Kemalism's efforts to associate Turkey with the Western world was perceived in the Middle East as "turning its back to the Muslim world" and reforms such as the abolition of the Caliphate, introduction of the Latin alphabet, closing of Sufi orders and madrasahs, changes in the dress codes and legal reforms that eliminated Islamic principles were unacceptable to the Arabs. Therefore, Dergham argued that "in order to propose a Turkish model that can be appealing to the wider masses in the Middle East, Turkey needs to demonstrate that democracy and secularism in the Muslim world are not mutually exclusive, or have to grow only at the expense of the other."⁴²

To conclude this section, the debate in the Middle East demonstrated the lines of fragmentation within the debate in Turkey. Overall, whereas those who were against the idea pointed out secularism and deficiencies in multiculturalism, those who viewed the idea of Turkey as a role model positively stressed its moderate version of Islam, its reforms to cope with modernization and globalization and its democracy. They also argued that Turkish example showed Arabs and Muslims that Islam, modernization, and democracy are not necessarily incompatible concepts.⁴³ However, the debate among the Middle Eastern analysts on Turkey as a role model is different from the one in Turkey due to its focus on Turkey's recent foreign policy towards the Middle East and in particular, the Arab-Israeli conflict. As will be presented below, while there were analysts who analysed Turkey's foreign policy in terms of balance of power within the region, it is striking that many analysts who praised Turkey's more critical approach

⁴¹ G. Nassar, "In Focus: Turkey and democracy" *Al-Ahram Weekly*, Issue No. 909, 7-13 Aug. 2008, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2008/909/op3.htm> Accessed on 28.04.2011.

⁴² R. Dergham, "Egypt's Youths are Responsible for Defending their Revolution from Those who Would Climb upon It", *Daral Hayat*, 4 Feb. 2011, <http://www.daralhayat.com/portalarticlendah/231058> Accessed on 28.04.2011.

⁴³ E. Podeh, "The Final Fall of the Ottoman Empire': Arab Discourse over Turkey's Accession to the European Union", *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (2007), pp. 317-328.

towards Israel tended to attribute this approach to the democratic system in Turkey and drew lessons for the Arab world.

5. Turkish Foreign Policy within the debate on Turkey as a role model

For decades since the establishment of the Turkish Republic, Turkish-Middle Eastern relations have been mired in mutual suspicions due to negative collective memories related with the rule or the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Turkish orientation towards Europe and reluctance to engage with the Middle East. Furthermore, when Turkey increased its military and economic cooperation with Israel in the 1990s, Arab scepticism turned into anger.⁴⁴ The 1990s, therefore, marked an era in which Turkey was seen increasingly as a source of direct threat to the Arabs and in this context, even Turkish domestic system was criticized by Arab writers and journalists.⁴⁵ To give an example of the nature of relations in this period, Arab League meetings during the years before 2003, adopted resolutions not only protesting against the Turkish-Israeli military cooperation, but also against Turkish development projects on the Euphrates River which could decrease allocation of water to Syria and Iraq.⁴⁶ However, when the JDP came to power, they explicitly set on a foreign policy program based on the “strategic depth” doctrine of former Minister of Foreign Affairs and Prime Minister, Prof. Ahmet Davutoğlu in order to develop cooperative relations with Turkey’s neighbourhood and in particular with the Middle East⁴⁷ which was put into action by high level official tours at the governmental level and initiatives to bring together different actors. Together with these efforts, Turkish foreign policy actions have also influenced Arab public and elite opinion. In general, Turkey was seen as being in a position to counter European Islamophobia on the one hand and worldwide fundamentalist Islamic organizations on the other, by

⁴⁴ I. Nafie, “Crossing a new threshold”, *Al-Ahram Weekly*, Issue No. 406, 3-9 Dec. 1998, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/1998/406/op1.htm> Accessed on 28.04.2011.

⁴⁵ O. Bengio and G. Özcan, Old Grievances, New Fears: Arab Perceptions of Turkey and its Alignment with Israel, *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (2001), pp. 62, 59.

⁴⁶ El-Labbad, Turkey in Arab eyes. For an analysis of the factors that affected Turkey’s relations with its Middle Eastern neighbours particularly until the JDP’s rise to power, see D. Jung, “Turkey and the Arab World: Historical Narratives and New Political Realities”, *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (2005), pp. 1-17.

⁴⁷ For an in-depth analysis of the implications of this doctrine for Turkish foreign policy, see A. Murinson, “The strategic doctrine of Turkish foreign policy”, *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 6 (2006), pp. 945-964. For a Middle Eastern account of this, see D. Ezzat, “Very daring ideas”, *Al-Ahram Weekly*, Issue No. 620, 9-15 Jan. 2003, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2003/620/re2.htm> Accessed on 28.04.2011.

being the spearhead of Islam in Europe and the spearhead of Europe in the Islamic world.⁴⁸

More specifically, the way Turkish parliamentary system works since the negative vote on the American request to de facto open a second front on Turkish territory against Iraq in 2003 impressed opinion at both the elite and public level. As Azmi Bishara underlined, that the government put the matter to a vote in parliament in line with democratic procedures and its grassroots base was an unfamiliar behaviour on the part of a Middle Eastern ally of the US. For Bishara, the way the government used real democracy as an expression of sovereign will and in order to reject subordination to the US was “perhaps the most important lesson that Arab public opinion could gain from Turkey’s pioneering experience”.⁴⁹ Nader Fergany, on the other hand, highlighted Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s strong-worded criticism of Israeli actions towards Palestine and reluctance to accept posing one model for the Greater Middle East, even if that model is Turkey. Fergany also attributed the contrast between Erdoğan’s stand and that of Arab leaders to the fact that Erdoğan is democratically elected and accountable to the nation that put him into office and concluded that leaders elected in free and fair elections cannot afford to ignore the feelings of their people.⁵⁰ Bishara’s comments on the decline in Turkish-Israeli relations⁵¹ once again emphasized the importance of a democratic system for foreign policy. Bishara argued that the decline came as a result of Turkish solidarity with the people of Gaza during the Israeli attacks, anger over the Israeli treatment of the Turkish ambassador, and the civil society initiative that organized the Freedom Flotilla in order to break the siege of Gaza. It reflected opinions of the JDP’s constituency and Turkish public at large, since “the JDP is a political party in the modern sense of the term, with a broad grassroots base” and the “public voted in a government that it felt would act in a way that reflected a Turkey that was not subordinate to the US, that was angry with Europe, and that was

⁴⁸ Podeh, *The Final Fall*, p. 323.

⁴⁹ A. Bishara, ‘The Arabs and Turkey’, *Al-Ahram Weekly*, Issue No. 1006, 8-14 July 2010, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2010/1006/op11.htm> Accessed on 28.04.2011.

⁵⁰ N. Fergany, ‘More Arab than the Arabs?’, *Al-Ahram Weekly*, Issue No. 694, 10-16 June 2004, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2004/694/op3.htm> Accessed on 28.04.2011.

⁵¹ For a discussion of factors behind the recent decline in Turkish-Israeli relations, and the implications of these for Turkish foreign policy see M. Altunışık and E. Çuhadar, Turkey’s Search for a Third Party Role in Arab-Israeli Conflicts: A Neutral Facilitator or a Principal Power Mediator?, *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol.15, No.3 (2010), pp. 371-392.

not in Israel's pocket with regards to the Palestinian cause and relations with the Arabs".⁵²

Other analysts agreed with these comments in general and argued that Turkey recently became a role model for many Arabs, because it started to act as an independent actor who still talked to Israel, while it has not left the Palestinians either.⁵³ Put differently, Arabs were impressed with Turkey since it was a country that has close ties not only with the Americans, Europeans and Israelis, but also with Iran and other Gulf states.⁵⁴ For instance, Ramzy Baroud argued that "the AKP began to lead a self-assertive Turkey" by "rejecting the use of Turkish territories as a launch pad for a US strike against Iraq in 2003" and by honouring past military deals with Israel, while making many successful overtures to Syria and Iran. Turkey under the JDP government succeeded "in being willing to be seen as a unifier in an age of Muslim and Arab disunity", since it maintained good ties with all its neighbours and refused to be drawn into "the game of moderate and extremist camps".⁵⁵ Therefore, many Arab analysts agreed that the way that Turkey is handling its disputes with Israel, inclusive of Turkish civil society's peaceful activism against Israel, is appropriate and effective precisely because of the context of traditionally peaceful relations between Turkey and Israel.⁵⁶

Arab observers of Turkish foreign policy not only drew attention to the making of foreign policy in a balanced manner and the role of public opinion in this, but also evaluated these in terms of balance of power within the Middle East and attributed Turkish foreign policy actions to its national

⁵² Bishara, *The Arabs and Turkey*. See also Aijaz Zaka Syed, who argued that the criticism of Erdoğan against Shimon Peres at the World Economic Forum in Davos following Israel's Gaza offensive and his other remarks were results of the Prime Minister's political courage and candour. Syed also attributed Turkey's rejection to go along 'with the shameful double standards' and its 'unique eminence of leadership across the Middle East and in much of the Muslim World' to the personality factor. A.Z. Syed, "We need more Erdogans", *Al-Ahram Weekly*, Issue No. 971, 5-11 Nov. 2009, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2009/971/op6.htm> Accessed on 28.04.2011.

⁵³ It should be noted that despite the contrary perceptions in the Arab world and complications, pursuing a balanced foreign policy has been a goal of policy-makers even at the height of the tilt towards a pro-Arab approach in the mid-60s. For this and the Turkish-Israeli rapprochement of the 1990s which led to improved economic and security cooperation, see M. Altunışık, "The Turkish-Israeli rapprochement in the post-Cold War era", *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.36, No.2 (2000), pp.172-191.

⁵⁴ S.A. Salama, "Turkish glamour", *Al-Ahram Weekly*, Issue No. 982, 21-27 Jan. 2010. <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2010/982/op4.htm> Accessed on 28.04.2011.

⁵⁵ R. Baroud, "New Turkey, right time", *Al-Ahram Weekly*, Issue No. 983, 28 Jan.-3 Feb. 2010, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2010/983/op33.htm> Accessed on 28.04.2011.

⁵⁶ Bishara, *The Arabs and Turkey*.

interests.⁵⁷ Mostafa Zein argued that Turkish embrace of the Palestinian cause and distancing itself from the alliance with Israel without great concern for the US reactions was part of its goal to return as a regional power in the Middle East and not a result of Arab efforts. The Palestinian issue, in this context represented a gateway for Turkey to form ties with its Arab neighborhood at both the popular and official levels.⁵⁸ For another observer, Turkey made enormous political and economic progress and it was no longer ‘the great powers’ façade’ in the region. Put differently, Turkey was a regional power which was trying to implement a new foreign policy strategy with the intention to become a more independent or neutral actor in contact with diverse parties simultaneously.⁵⁹

In these balance of power analyses, Turkey and Iran were seen as opposing poles not only in terms of offering two different role models, but also in terms of power. Arab analysts saw Turkey as a counterweight to Iran’s new imperial thinking and its desire to export its revolution which endanger the security of its neighbors. One comment, for instance, pointing out the need for an Arab presence, as well as an Arab vision and initiative in this balance, argued that “in order to reign in the Iranian advance, Turkey has to be present.” In this view, Turkey’s model of a positive relationship between religion and state is attractive in order to bring about development and democracy, whereas Iranian “political and fundamentalist model doesn’t interest anyone, except the supporters of wilayet-e-faqih... and Hugo Chavez”, despite its huge oil capabilities and strong state.⁶⁰ Similarly, Urayb al-Rantawi argued that Turkey offered a lesson of “gentle force”, as seen in its policy towards the “Freedom Flotilla”, a civil society initiative to draw attention to the Israeli blockade in Gaza. In this context, JDP’s foreign policy offered lessons of ‘democratic civil Islam’ and Turkey proved that “between fatalistic silence and submitting to the US and Israeli will on one hand and the waging of a comprehensive war and uncalculated

⁵⁷ For a good illustration of all of these in one scholarly assessment see, M. Nouredine, “Turkey’s internal and external challenges: course and limitations”, *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (2008), pp. 465-70.

⁵⁸ M. Zein, “No Thanks to Arabs”, *Daral Hayat*, 18 Dec. 2010, <http://www.daralhayat.com/portalariclendirah/214556> Accessed on 28.04.2011.

⁵⁹ El-Labbad, Turkey in Arab eyes. See also his positive analysis of Turkish foreign policy after the Flotilla Incident between Turkey and Israel M. El-Labbad, “Turkey and the Freedom Flotilla”, *Al-Ahram Weekly*, Issue No. 1002, 10-16 June 2010, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2010/1002/op3.htm> Accessed on 28.04.2011.

⁶⁰ “Turkey and the Arabs... the Equilibrium of a New Middle East”, *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 14 Aug. 2006, <http://www.aawsat.com/english/news.asp?section=2&id=5998> Accessed on 28.04.2011.

risks” on the other, there were a broad range of “politically, economically, diplomatically, morally, and legally” effective options and alternatives. Rantawi argued that Arab moderate resistance should incorporate Turkish “reason, pragmatism, and modernity” into their rhetoric, since the Turkish model, which “is based on ‘gentle force’, unlike the Iranian model, has international credibility and respect”.⁶¹

These positive commentaries do not mean that criticism waned in Arab platforms. However, critics of then Turkish foreign policy did so more on the grounds of limited results of these positive actions or approaches. As an example, Elias Harfoush argued that Turkey sought “to achieve commercial, economic and political interests” and on its path to this it did not “mind relying on a discourse of mobilization”, but it had not been able to alter “the balance of power between the Arabs and Israel”. Examples included the collapse of Turkish mediation between Syria and Israel, the failure to prevent strengthened sanctions against Iran, and approving NATO’s missile shield, aimed at what NATO considers to be an “Iranian threat”.⁶² Zuheir Kseibeti joined the criticism of the results with regard to Turkish position on transition to democracy in Syria and argued that Ahmet Davutoğlu’s offer to help Damascus implement the reform programs reminded “the fate of all the Turkish initiatives in the region, starting with the mediation between Syria and Israel and ending with the interference to ensure calm in Lebanon and the action on the war arena in Libya”.⁶³ Lamis Andoni also underlined the emergence of Turkey and Iran as regional powers, which he attributed to the decline of pan-Arab power and the absence of strong Arab leadership. In this context, whereas the West criticized Turkey for supposedly ‘turning eastward’ and favouring its ‘cultural affinity’ with Muslim countries, the Arab world continued to see it as a bridge to the West and a potential mediator with the US and Israel. However, while the Arab street portrayed Turkey as the new leaders in ‘the Islamic world’s struggle to liberate Palestine’, this is a role Turkey did not claim. For Andoni, since the Turkish prime minister did not abandon his declared goal of being a bridge between East and West, as opposed to a

⁶¹ U. al-Rantawi, “As Turkey Scatters its Lessons to the ‘Moderates’ and the ‘Resistance’”, *Al-Dustur*, Amman, 6 Jun 2010, supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring.

⁶² E. Harfoush, “Is there a Turkish Plan?”, *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 27 Nov. 2010, <http://www.daralhayat.com/portaliarticlendam/207084> Accessed on 28.04.2011.

⁶³ Z. Kseibati, “The Fragments of ‘Rejectionism’ in the Gulf”, *Daral Hayat*, 07 April 2011, <http://www.daralhayat.com/portaliarticlendam/252976> Accessed on 28.04.2011.

champion of the East against the West, Turkey could only be a stabilising force in the Arab world.⁶⁴

Despite criticisms which focus more on the results rather than the policy itself, the then Turkish foreign policy found almost universal appreciation in the Arab platforms. Arab observers highlighted the democratic nature of foreign policy making and the readiness to engage in dialogue and cooperate with all actors in a balanced manner as examples to be followed.

6. Conclusion

The debate on Turkey as a role model emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of independent Republics in Central Asia. There was no attempt to put the idea into action through institutionalized mechanisms and its popularity soon declined. The second period when the idea was intensely debated can be distinguished with an attempt to put the idea into practice via the Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative (BMENA) of George W. Bush administration of the US in 2004, which eventually failed since it did not enjoy international support. The third and final period when the idea resurfaced particularly in the Middle East can be said to have started with the consolidation of Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkish political system, since it is during this period that the Turkish example has been analysed as a role model for the first time by a growing number of Middle Eastern observers. The idea became part of the debates in the Middle East and Turkey, due to the popular uprisings in the region, which aimed to change the nature of these political regimes in one way or another.

Analysis of commentaries and statements of opinion leaders in prominent newspapers in both Turkey and the Middle East showed that the debate on Turkey as a role model is a mirror image of one another. Discussion of Turkey's democracy, secularism and the experience of political Islam in the case of JDP's rise to power were popular topics. However, characteristics of the Turkish political and social structure lead to clear lines of fragmentation in the assessment of Turkey as a role model in both contexts. One main line of argument emphasized differences between Turkey and the Middle East which arguably make Turkish experience unique, whereas another line of argument focused on the experience of Justice and Development Party (JDP/AKP) in particular, a party which has

⁶⁴ L. Andoni, "Erdogan 'is no Gamal Abdel Nasser'", *Al-Jazeera*, 20 June 2010, <http://english.aljazeera.net/focus/2010/06/201062093027892694.html> Accessed on 24.06.2016.

political Islam in its roots, and argue that this makes Turkish experience quite relevant for the future of these countries.

The debate in the Middle East however, differed from the one in Turkey in focusing on Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East. Many analysts praised Turkey's more critical approach towards Israel and tended to evaluate this foreign policy change in terms of balance of power within the region. They attributed this critical attitude to the democratic system in Turkey and drew lessons for the Arab world. Although opinion was divided over Turkish political system, opinion makers were united in their appreciation of the democratic nature of Turkish foreign policy-making and highlighted the balanced approach, which did not deny dialogue with any international actor in principle.

In this light, the article concludes that regardless of the difficulties in applying the Turkish model in the Middle Eastern context, even Turkey's presence functioned as an inspiration or example, with its strengths and weaknesses. During the period under focus, opinion-leaders were interested in how the Turkish system functions at social, political, economic and foreign policy levels and drew lessons from this.

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