

The 'Turkish Model' for the Middle East: Reproducing Neoliberal Hegemony?

Written by John McSweeney

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2012/08/23/the-turkish-model-for-the-middle-east-reproducing-neoliberal-hegemony/>

JOHN MCSWEENEY, AUG 23 2012

Western anxiety over the apparent 'Islamic' trajectory of Turkish foreign policy prior to the Arab revolutions has been largely allayed in light of recent policy convergence over Syria.[1] Indeed, against the grain of neo-conservative fears over the Islamic roots of the Welfare and Justice Party (AKP), recent publications from influential American think tanks conclude that Turkey's political development should be extolled as the model to which post-revolution Arab countries ought aspire.[2] This is also the stated view of the current US administration.[3]

The renewal of longstanding ties between Turkey and the USA comes at a decisive moment in the geo-strategic trajectory of the Middle East. Historically, Turkey's attention to the Middle East was limited to the extent that it impinged upon the restive Kurdish population living in the country's South East. However, since the end of the Cold War, successive governments made tentative steps to move beyond a purely 'security' oriented foreign policy towards developing a multi-dimensional policy that appreciated the pursuit of economic opportunities. It has only been with the electoral success, and consolidation of power by the AKP over the last decade, that this multi-dimensionality has become an ingrained dynamic of Turkish foreign policy. The ramifications of this shift became increasingly discernable from 2008/2009, with the high profile falling out with Israel over the latter's war on Gaza. This apparent divergence with 'western interests' was coupled with Ankara's insistence on dealing diplomatically with Iran, in spite of American attempts to impose sanctions against its alleged nuclear weapons program, culminating in a Turkish 'no' vote during a crucial UN Security Council meeting in the latter half of 2010.

Whilst these supposed 'anti-western' moves came as a shock to many within Washington, and agitated neo-conservative circles, more academic assessments concluded that divergence in policy was more apparent than real, with differences defined by approach rather than content.[4] Therefore, given Turkey's membership in NATO has never been questioned by the AKP, and that Turkey continues to seek membership of the EU, it should come as no great surprise that Turkey and America are working closely together in Syria. The heat generated by the debate over whether or not Turkey had 'gone rogue' has resulted in the obscuring of an emergent and important dynamic now motivating Turkish foreign policy.

This revolves around conceptualizing Turkey not simply as a successful 'model' of 'liberal democracy' in a Muslim society, but, and perhaps more importantly, as a model for the reproduction of a largely discredited neo-liberalism in a region unhappy with the significant disparities in wealth between the poor and the rich.[5] Armbrust lays stress on the prominence of demands for social justice from amongst the street protestors. Given that the revolutions are occurring at a moment of severe economic crisis, particularly in those nations that have been traditionally considered the 'core' of the global economy, the emergence of a revolutionary region heavily influenced by demands for social justice holds the potential for the emergence of an alternative to the TINA rhetoric long associated with the neoliberal Washington consensus.

The culpability of the neoliberal economic policies pursued by many of the deposed regimes have not been as thoroughly explored as other causes such as the arbitrariness of despotic rule for instance.[6] In fact, when such structural economic factors have been discussed, it has usually been with a view to emphasize the positive contribution made by globalizing influences, as in Thomas Friedman's implicit suggestion that globalization helped

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stimulate revolt due to the penetration of associated technologies like Google earth.[7] Although his neglect of the role of Wikileaks in exposing the extent to which many Arab regimes collaborated with the USA's policies is telling of the ideological prism through which much western -based commentary is based on.

Similarly, Hernando de Soto and the Institute for Liberty and Democracy have been quick to argue that the revolutions express the long repressed entrepreneurial desires of the Arab street.[8] De Soto places significant weight on the fact that the spark for the revolt is the consequence of a bureaucratic state official harassing a lowly street vendor attempting to make ends meet in a market economy essentially repressed by a despotic state. The upshot of this argument is clear, that with the rise of democracy comes the liberation of the free market. This is subtly expressed in the formula of the 'liberal democracy and free markets' equation so often repeated in the policy prescriptions of western based think tanks.[9] There is a push for the continuation of neoliberal economic reforms, particularly in the calls for privatization of state industries.[10]

However, there is more than a hint of historical echo in the call for the linking of democratization with the freeing of markets; recall the image of the now infamous 'shock therapy' perpetuated on Russian society after the fall of the USSR during the 1990s.[11] Richard Seymour argues that any rush, on the part of new regimes in the region, to such a path would be wise to resist these pressures given the eventual outcome of the Russian example: reversion to authoritarianism and the persistence of 'corruption'.

In spite of the ideological attempts to downplay or spin the presence of 'social justice' away, its presence in the articulation of demands from amongst the protests is undeniable. Furthermore, the significant presence of social justice results in an unspoken fear within policy circles, which is obfuscated in the conflation of democracy with the liberalization of free markets. In a recent paper entitled 'Fear of Tahrir', Kerem Öktem highlights that it is this 'fear' of social justice that partly informs the AKP's approach to the revolution.[12] The prominence of social justice demands, and the antagonism towards neoliberalism which this represents, requires the AKP to carefully balance its intervention. The AKP would feel much more comfortable helping to influence a process of democratization within Egypt defined primarily as a process transferring military governance to a civilian one, thus imitating the AKP's own efforts within Turkey. However, the AKP's embracement of neoliberalism could potentially limit its credibility. In this light, therefore, Turkey acts as a double edge sword when it comes to being touted as an alternative expressed in the clichéd 'Turkish Model'. Therefore, Turkey's role as a potential counter-revolutionary anchor by acting as a velvet glove for the iron fist of neoliberalism poses a real threat to the demands for social justice amongst the revolutionary crowds at Tahrir.

Öktem points therefore, that Turkey has a real stake in the eventual outcome of the revolution, and implies that Turkey's role should not be read simply as being the result of constituting a proxy for the USA, rather, given Turkey's unstable economic project and its own large disparity in wealth, if the revolutionaries make progress in constituting a successful anti-neoliberal bloc within Egypt, then this holds out the potential for being an undesirable alternative for internal opponents to Turkey's own neoliberal trajectory. In other words, rather than Turkey constituting the model for the Arab spring, Egypt may become an undesirable model.

It is clear that there are many powerful global actors with an interest in salvaging the legacy of neoliberalism, and continue the integration of Middle Eastern economies into the global order. It is partly in this light that Turkey's role can be understood, and specifically when it comes to deciphering what underpins her attraction as a 'model' for the region, both from the perspective of transnational capital and local pro-neoliberal circuits of capital.

In this sense, Turkey's apparently independent foreign policy proves to be a highly lucrative commodity. Erdogan's refusal to act as a simple stooge of the west in terms of relations with Israel and Iran, has endowed Turkey with a great deal of purchase on influencing the shape of the regions' eventual political economy. Recent opinion polling by the Arab American Institute Foundation found that large majorities across the Arab world rated Turkey's role in the Middle East very highly, whilst America constitutently polled very low and at times found itself as (un)popular as Iran.[13]

Thus, the conceptualisation of Turkey as a model needs to be understood beyond simply the reaffirmation of the

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compatibility of democracy within a Muslim country. Combatting 'Orientalist' assumptions is only half the battle, and does not in itself get to the bottom of the wider contestation of how Middle Eastern societies should be governed. On this basis, we can begin to appreciate the agency of the AKP as representing a hegemonic project around an emergent bourgeoisie with a pro-free market outlook whilst being committed to Islamic tropes and values. This project has been able to stabilize the contested trajectory of neoliberalism in Turkey by uniting the winners and losers of globalization associated with neoliberal policies, around a form of hegemony that speaks to the interests of several sets of otherwise competing constituencies.[14]

As such, the lessons of the AKP's development serves as an appealing model for both a West interested in reproducing neoliberalism, and Islamic actors such as the Muslim Brotherhood who wish to consolidate power through the mobilization of a societal alliance against the forces of the old regime. From Turkey's point of view, this is a role it will be more than happy to play given it's desire to undermine attempts to build an alternative model imbued with a significant social justice program.

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[9] See the Carnegie Papers, previously referenced.

[10] Seymour, R., (2012), 'I own, you own, we own', *The Middle East*, August/September, 435, p 48-49.

[11] Ibid, p 48.

[12] Öktem, K (2012), 'Fear of Tahrir: US-Turkish Projects for a New Middle East', paper delivered at *The Egyptian Revolution, One Year On: Causes, Characteristics and Fortunes*, conference which took place on the 19 May 2012, Oxford University.

[13] Zogby, J., (2011) Arab Attitudes, *Arab American Institute Foundation*, p. 4.
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