

## Analysis

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**Summary:** It was fashionable in the early aftermath of the Arab Spring to embrace the view of a “Turkish model” for the Middle East. However, things have not worked out the way Ankara expected. Not only did Turkey’s web of relations not prove strong enough to absorb regional change, but the same bonds have now entrapped Turkey in the region’s many conflicts. If it is able to revive its reformist credentials, Turkey will start to look strong again.

## The Return of History? Turkey in the New Middle East

by *Emiliano Alessandri*

### Introduction

It is probably revealing of how disappointing the Arab Spring has been so far that, setback after setback, the discussion about the future of the Middle East has increasingly become one about the region’s past. As transitions face daunting challenges, hard historical realities are recalled to explain a variety of destabilizing regional developments, from the hardening Shite-Sunni divide to the revamping of long-standing issues such as the statelessness of the Kurds. Deep-rooted exclusivist identities such as ethnicity are seen as trumping universal aspirations like democracy. The complex legacy of international agreements such as Sykes-Picot,<sup>1</sup> until recently the interest only of historians, is now frequently discussed in policy circles in relation to a possible collapse of the Arab state system. Indeed, a growing number of leaders seem to fear the region plunging into the divisions and conflicts that have characterized its past. In recent remarks, Turkish President Abdullah Gul, a man of moderation known for weighing his words, went so far as to warn that an “era of recession” similar to the Euro-

pean Middle Ages may await the Arab world if the present trajectory is not reversed.<sup>2</sup>

But as much as history is part of the current Middle Eastern crisis, a rear-mirror look at the region’s future would only take us so far. Although tensions have accumulated over a long period of time, what awaits the Arab world is not the return of history. Rather, old divides have become more visible as new societies — the ones that revolted in 2010-11 after being deeply transformed by globalization in the past decades — are struggling to find new political representation, more advanced social contracts, and more effective governance. It would be shortsighted to take the failure of democratization in the MENA region so far to mean that the Arab Spring was an ephemeral flare. The powerful forces of modernization and capitalist development — the ones that created broad-based access to technology and more independent Arab women with fewer children but also arrays of unemployed graduates and new inequalities — will not cease to operate across the region just because unmet

<sup>1</sup> The 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement was an agreement between the United Kingdom and France, with the assent of Russia, identifying respective spheres of influence in the Middle East in a post-Ottoman Empire scenario.

<sup>2</sup> Sevgi Akarçesme, “Gul Warns of Dark Middle Ages in the Middle East,” *Today’s Zaman*, October 4, 2013, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-328196-gul-warns-of-dark-middle-ages-in-muslim-world.html>

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demands may have exacerbated deep-seated animosities. From Morocco to Libya, from Egypt to Syria, the region's socio-demographic transformation will continue to raise demands for change despite current democratic setbacks, economic disruptions, and war. Indeed, it is in this combustion of old and new that the future of the region will take shape.

### Turkey's Entrapment

It had become fashionable in the early aftermath of the Arab Spring to embrace the view of a "Turkish model" for the Middle East. Especially to Western policymakers oblivious to the plurality of the region's experiences, the international applicability of the Turkish experience with democracy and Islam could not but look attractive. But perhaps more appealing was the idea that Turkish regional dynamism could compensate for the shortcomings of Western actors. The thick web of relations that Ankara had built with its neighbors during the same years when the EU and the United States had lost much of their regional credibility seemed to give Turkey a special role in the sudden Middle Eastern transformation. As a matter of fact, on the heels of an impressive decade of economic growth, expansion of Turkish trade, and diplomatic activism, Ankara seemed confident that it could easily ride the tumultuous wave of change sweeping its neighborhood.

As is now amply clear, however, things have not worked out the way Ankara expected. Not only did Turkey's web of relations not prove strong enough to absorb regional change, but the same bonds have now entrapped Turkey in the region's many conflicts. Turkey's downfall into the quicksands of Middle Eastern instability has been actually faster than the strategic rise that had nourished hopes of Turkish regional leadership until 2010. From the Syrian civil war to the convulsions of post-Saddam Iraq, Turkey is faced with dynamics around its borders that threaten its interests and its security. As instability spreads and brings old contentions to the surface, Turkey not only has no neighbor without a problem, but has no problem with a straightforward solution. Deepening sectarian divides increasingly threaten to drag it into larger contests for regional influence; the weakening of already fragile state entities presage dangerous spillovers; the unfreezing of the region's many conflicts seems poised to create domestic challenges for

Turkey as it hosts minorities that have a place or stake in them.

However difficult, though, a way out of this entrapment is not impossible. Much of what is needed at this delicate juncture rests on rediscovering the real connection between Turkey and the region while de-emphasizing some of the links that had been prioritized in recent years. Clearly, the main challenge for Turkey is to avoid responding to a seeming return of history with a return to the worst of its past, be it the securitized, isolationist Turkey that had turned its back on the Middle East during the Cold War or the Turkey that more recently wanted to found a new regional hegemony on historical legacies and religious affinities.

### The Real Turkish Model

The real Turkish model that created domestic and regional opportunities in recent years, and that can continue to give it leverage going forward, is one of embracement of globalization. Prospects looked bright for Turkey when its strategic rise reflected the improving material conditions of its citizens and the growing competitiveness of its companies, as well as the increasing vitality of a burgeoning civil society. On the political front, what made the new Islamic elites attractive — and constituted their greatest achievement — was not their rediscovery of pre-Republican traditions and identities, but the ability to combine a relentless demolition of the non-democratic elements of the old Kemalist Turkey with the active support to modernizing trends, from economic liberalization to the goal of EU membership.

Dynamics started to deteriorate when visions of a "neo-Ottoman" Turkey, and the exaltation of one cultural-social bloc over other segments of Turkish society, led to the building of relationships and adoption of policies that no longer equated the Turkish national interest with Turkey's "opening," but rather with domestic factionalism and partiality to the regional political landscape. From the support to regimes that were seen close to the ruling party either because they were Islamist or anti-Israel, to a nationalism no longer aware of the value of Turkey's Western connections, Ankara has squandered its potential by making Turkey part of its neighborhood's problems instead of using its influence to move the region beyond its difficult past. Examples of this entrapment abound, from Turkey



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becoming a part to the Arab-Israeli tensions instead of a broker to Ankara's envelopment in Iraq's power struggles. In Syria and Egypt, after having boldly chosen to support change, Ankara has ended up aligning too closely with segments of the opposition groups, neglecting others and in any case effectively finding itself on one side of the respective internal divides.

What now needs to be recovered is a focus on the larger logics that connect Turkey to the region. Notably, Turkey needs to stand out again as the example of political and economic reform that had won it the status of rising actor. In order to achieve this, Turkey needs to urgently revive its relationship with the EU. Irrespective of possible eventual membership, in fact, that relationship has historically created the right incentives for Turkey's political and economic development and increased Turkey's regional attractiveness. Turkey should also continue to liberalize its internal market and avoid the formation of a crony type of capitalism. To that effect, the rule of law should be strengthened and principles of pluralism and free media should have actual application. Indeed, a new type of political leadership *representing* Turkey's diverse civil society — instead of aiming to shape it — would help mitigate domestic polarization while sending a powerful message abroad.

If it is able to revive its reformist credentials, Turkey will start to look strong again. Despite recent setbacks, Turkey could in fact be respected and admired for what it is: a country that, thanks to a close relationship with the West and the acceptance of modernity and interdependence, has been able to navigate globalization quite successfully. As a post-imperial entity and a transition country itself, Turkey could share experiences with societies all around without raising fears of domination. Not so much historical legacies, therefore, but the promise of the economic and political opportunity that Turkey has been able to offer its own citizens should be again at the center of Turkish foreign policy discourse.

Notwithstanding present challenges, the focus should be on the resilience of the true Turkish model and its dynamic element. To take one example, the violent repression of the Gezi protests in the summer of 2013 showed the weak democratic credentials of Turkish leaders. The Gezi movement also showed, however, how strong Turkish civil society has become. While questions remain about the

future political course, few would question that authoritarian tendencies will be kept in check after Gezi. However bumpy, the future will hardly see a return to Turkey's semi-authoritarian past.

Providing living proof that challenges can be overcome and setbacks will not reverse longer trajectories is precisely what should characterize the Turkish model for Middle Eastern transitions. Such a model could go a long way toward inspiring those forces that are yet to find adequate political representation, but who have already changed the course of the region. As the region is pulled back by its heavy past, Turkey's work should continue to be building its future.

### About the Author

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