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Turkey and the Arab Spring: the Revolutions in Turkey's Near Abroad

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I. Introduction

The Middle East and North Africa (henceforth MENA) are areas of conflict and opposed perceptions. The last three months have seen unprecedented protests and revolutions in almost all Arab countries (“Arab Spring”), starting in Tunisia with the flight of Ben Ali and his family, spreading to Egypt with the overthrow of Mubarak and his government, and to Libya with its civil war and most recently to Syria.

Some of the demonstrators’ criticisms and demands were the same across the region, namely end to corruption, fall of the regime, freedom, creation of employment opportunities, while others were country-specific. The demonstrations of hundreds of thousands of participants, who often occupied the capital’s main square, started peacefully but often turned violent, when the demonstrators clashed with security forces.

The challenged regimes responded with a combination of suppression, including intimidation, beatings, shootings, arrests, and concessions, amongst which increasing salaries for state employees, raising of subsidies for staples and promises of reform. With thousands of demonstrators killed, thousands more imprisoned, some regimes toppled and others still in power, some even unchallenged, but with demonstrations ongoing and the set-up of new governments only just under way, it is hard to predict the future of the region.

This paper aims to examine the role of Turkey in the MENA region. Herewith, we will attempt to answer three basic questions:

What role can Turkey play in the MENA Region? What can the aspiring democracies of the Arab world learn from Turkey? How relevant is the Turkish experience to the future of democracy in the Arab World?

II. Relations of Turkey with the Middle East: A Brief Historical Overview

The relations between Turkey and the MENA countries, since the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in 1918, can be characterised as having been full of misconceptions, contradictions, suspicions and failures on both sides. This was the case even though Turkey and the Arab countries had a long and often shared history. The mutual distrust and suspicion of Arabs and Turks is the outcome of recent history only. Even though Turkey had cultural, religious and historical ties with most of the Middle Eastern territories throughout Ottoman times, Ankara followed a politically and culturally different path from that of most Middle Eastern countries, after the collapse of the Empire.

All Turkish governments between 1923 and 2002 gave priority to Western partners over the Middle East in their international relations. The reason for this was that Turkey's "new republican elites" regarded themselves as European, or as part of the Western world, and not as Middle Eastern. They therefore identified themselves with western political, economic and security institutions such as NATO, the OECD and more recently the EU. Consequently, Turkey took a different path from that of most Middle Eastern states.

In this respect, Philip Robins suggests that "Ankara's main features are strict adherence to the principles of non-interference and non-involvement in the domestic politics and interstate conflicts of all countries in the region".¹ Consequently, it aimed at

¹ Robins, Phillips, 1991: *Turkey and the Middle East* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs/Pinter Publishers): 8.

improving its bilateral political and commercial relations with as many states in the region as possible. Furthermore, Ankara tried to maintain a scrupulous balance in its approach to the Israel-Palestine conflict. However, it has not been possible for Turkey to ignore regional disputes and to remain outside regional affairs, since the Second World War.

III. Why has Turkey kept its distance from the Middle East?

The young Turkish Republic was based on three main pillars: independence, Western (or European) orientation, and the goal of catching up with the advanced economies of Europe. Besides security and economic reasons, which drew Turkey to the Western world, there were two fundamental and supplementary push factors, which have dominated relations between Turkey and the MENA since the foundation of the Republic:

- i. The belief that Islam hinders modernisation. The secularist principle was used as a tool for the elimination of Islamic influences on politics and society, and it was considered as a pre-condition for acquiring a European identity. Turks and Arabs had been ruled by the Ottoman Empire for centuries; they had been part of the same state and shared the same religion, Islam. In order to dissociate itself from Islam and the Arab world, which so powerfully symbolised it, the caliphate was abolished in 1924. Thus, secularism became one of the cornerstones of the young Turkish Republic. It was not always easy to maintain the strict separation of religious and state affairs in a country in which 99 percent of the population is Muslim. Supporters of the Republican movement and the pro-Western elite strongly believed, and do so to this day, that Turkey can only catch up with Western civilisation if the country continues to reject basing the state on Islamic principles. For all these reasons, it seemed to be necessary for the elite to freeze its ties with the newly emerging Arab and other Islamic countries.

ii. Their experience with its Arab provinces during World War I and Turkey's recent historical and contemporary experience with the Middle East has been a negative one. Even ninety years after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, mutual suspicions - largely unfounded- persist. The founders of the Republic, who fought against the Allies in different parts of the Empire during the First World War, did not forget what they consider as the Arab "betrayal", namely the appeal to the British to help them to gain their independence. Atatürk once said:

*" ... for centuries our people have been compelled to act in accordance with this absurd point of view in solidarity with the Islamic part of the Ottoman Empire and what happened? Millions of them died, in every land they went to. Do you know how many Anatolian boys perished in the sweltering heat of the deserts of the Yemen? "*²

These deep-rooted psychological and historical barriers were constantly reinforced in the public mind, and thus previous Turkish governments did not pursue an activist policy in the region. In addition to the two reasons given above, the following cultural, historical and social factors could also have played an important role in Turkey's relations with the Middle Eastern countries, or lack thereof, which have greatly hindered the intensification of relations between Turkey and the rest of the Middle East.

Although historically, both Damascus and Baghdad have been the capitals of Arab empires in the 7th and (with interruptions) the 8th to the 13th century, the Ottoman Empire dominated the region in the following centuries. For several centuries, a large part of the region was governed politically and economically by the

² Hale, William, 1992: "Turkey, the Middle East and the Gulf Crisis", in: *International Affairs*, 68,4: 679-692: 681.

Another interesting and similar observations concerning Ottoman-Arab relations during the last period of the Ottoman Empire was made in the book "Zeytindağı" by Falih Rıfıkı Atay, 1932, and republished by Bateş A.Ş. İstanbul, 1981.

Ottomans. Some Arab countries seem not to have forgotten the centuries of Ottoman rule and, perhaps, the harsh repression that followed the emergence of their national movements. Some Arabs still suspect Ankara of following "Ottoman ambitions".

Since the Independence War (1919-1922) and the establishment of a Turkish nation state in 1923, Turkey has not been involved in any military conflict with the powerful states of the Western world. However, this was not the case for most of the Middle Eastern countries. Most Arab states continued to suffer under colonialism and imperialism until well after the First World War. Turkey's neighbours Syria, Iraq and Iran were, in their recent histories, controlled by Western powers. Following World War I, Great Britain and France held the League of Nations mandate for Iraq and Syria. Iran was unofficially under the rule of Britain and, from the early 1950s until the Islamic revolution, was under the influence of the United States. Western armed forces entered the region many times, whereas Turkey was able to keep itself out of regional conflicts in which Arabs played a part.

It was obvious that an asymmetry of interests existed in the security realm between Arab countries and Turkey. During the last years of the Ottoman Empire and the foundation of the Turkish Republic, the country was threatened by the expansionist policy of both Tsarist Russia and then later the Soviet Union. This was one of the main reasons which led to Turkey joining NATO in 1952. By contrast, the Soviet Union has never directly threatened the Arab world the way it did Turkey; actual military danger originated consistently and solely with Western powers. Arabs regarded Ankara, in its relation with the West, as advocating the political and economic interests of the Western powers in the region and accused it of acting as America's policeman in the Middle East.

Another point of dissent between Turkey and the Arab world was the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, which came about with the help of Western powers. The neighbouring Arab countries regarded this as a direct threat. The post-war period of

the Middle East was largely characterised by armed conflicts between Israel and the Arab countries, during which time the Palestinians lost their homeland and Israel's neighbour's part of their territory. During these years, Ankara tried to maintain its friendly relations with Israel, based on their mutual interests since 1949, when Turkey, as one of the first Muslim countries, officially recognised Israel. Turkey does not have an easy relationship with its Arab neighbours. It has been pursuing a policy of duality for several years, both recognising Israel's right to exist within its national boundaries and supporting the cause of a Palestinian state.

In 1964, however, Turkey began revising its policies towards the Arab world and favoured it for two main reasons:

Its traditional Western allies, mainly the US, did not support Turkey over the "Cyprus issue" in the 1960s. Ankara, therefore, sought backing from the Arab and Muslim countries in the UN. Meanwhile, the Arab world and non-aligned countries gave Turkey the cold shoulder because of its diplomatic recognition of their main enemy, Israel, and because of its lack of interest in the non-aligned members of the world community. Ankara must have seen that its "one-way" foreign policy, which it had pursued for over two decades, and its dogged loyalty to the USA and the Western camp did not help it pursue its national interests. Its rigid adherence to a pro-Western foreign policy led the country into total isolation in the region. Consequently, Ankara began to diversify its foreign policy and to pay more attention to the Middle East.

Secondly, following the first and second oil shock in 1973/74 and in 1979, the Turkish economy faced very serious macroeconomic imbalances and was not able to adjust itself to the new economic circumstances. Thus, both the trade deficit and the inflation rate rose rapidly. Ankara became aware of the seriousness of the situation and tried to take advantage of the new recycling of petro-dollars, offered by the OPEC-Arab states, and the "Euro-Dollar Market".

Turkey's Middle Eastern policies during the Cold War and thereafter were mainly determined by the following factors: territorial disputes with Syria over the province “Hatay” and the Baghdad Pact; the Cyprus dispute and PLO policy; economic problems and the financial needs of Turkey resulting from the first and second oil crises (1973/74 and 1979); the Israeli - Arab conflict on the Palestine dispute; the water issue; PKK terrorism; the Gulf war in 1991; and the Iraq war in 2003.³

IV. What are the main economic and political problems in the MENA countries?

MENA countries, besides Israel and Turkey, can be divided into two groups. On the one hand, there are the resource-poor authoritarian states of non-oil producing countries, with lower income and insufficient economic and social living conditions (lower per capita income, life expectancy at birth and adult literacy), such as Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Yemen and Jordan.

The second group covers the rich OPEC countries, with relatively higher per capita income and better economic and social infrastructure, such as the Gulf States, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Iraq, Algeria and Iran. In the second group of countries, the oil and natural gas revenues have benefited the population and improved its living standards. They have tax allowances and paid for social benefits and health services offered by the states.

Besides the differences in economic conditions, a shared characteristic of both groups is authoritarian regimes. The second important feature is that the populations of all these countries, besides Israel, share the same faith, “Islam”, and none of them

³ For a detailed analysis on Turkey’s Middle East Policy see Benli-Altunisik, Meliha, 2011a: “Challenges to Turkey’s ‘Soft Power’ in the Middle East”, in: *Turkey and the Middle East Series*. Turkish Economy and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV): 14-17.

practice the principles of secularism in a basic meaning. Everybody has the right to his own belief, and state and religious affairs should be separated from each other in their daily life. Religion is regarded as an integral part of private life, and religious affairs are not admitted in the public sphere. Religious communities are allowed to operate under public law and public order.

According to the Report published by the European Commission on the theme of *Euro-Med 2030: Long Term challenges for the Mediterranean area*, the following economic and social problems need to be addressed:⁴

i. Rapid population growth and the high level of structural unemployment.

55 million new jobs are required until 2030. A higher growth rate will be essential and it is not expected that macro economic growth will create enough jobs or greatly reverse social deprivation. Large sections of the population are excluded from the benefits of growth. The rural population is large and on the increase, while poverty is still widespread.

ii. Scarcity of natural resources such as water and the impact of climate change.

There are important resource constraints that operate on both sides of the Mediterranean. The shortage of water is a serious concern on both shores and is likely to get worse as a consequence of climate change; the impact of water shortage on agriculture and rural communities will be dramatic. The Mediterranean basin will be among the worst affected regions in the world as a consequence of climate change.

⁴ European Commission, 2011: *Euro-Med 2030. Report of an Expert Group* (Brussels: European Commission):11-25.

iii. Education.

Improving the educational system and rising levels of education is a huge challenge. In spite of real progress, much remains to be done to adapt the education systems of MENA countries to the requirements of more developed countries. Public expenditure on education in the region has been less effective than elsewhere in the world.

iv. Authoritarian regimes may persist.

If they do, there will not be change, because that would bring about uncertainty and thereby threaten the regimes' continuity. Authoritarian states in Arab countries have little desire to seek Islamic models of pluralist politics.

Furthermore, the empirical research results show serious institutional deficiencies in terms of government effectiveness, control of corruption, as well as political rights and civil liberties, which continue to constrain future growth in many Arab countries.⁵

It is obvious that all these tensions induced and contributed to the revolutions in Turkey's near abroad. The revolt against the ruling classes in some of the MENA countries is closely related to socio-economic factors. The lack of future economic development perspectives and a very high unemployment rate among young people, the lack of educational opportunities, and democratic deficiencies are main sources of unrest, especially in poorer countries such as Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen.

⁵ Nunnenkamp, Peter, 2003: "Economic Policy, Institutional Development and Income Growth: how Arab Countries Compare with Other Developing countries", *Kiel Working Paper* 118, Institute for the World Economy, Kiel: 31.

V. Turkey as a model for the transformation process in the region

One might think that Turkey, as a successor state to the Ottoman Empire, which ruled parts of in the Middle East for over 400 years, could not use its wealth of experience in political, economical, and cultural affairs in the contemporary context, without coming across as arrogant and reminding people of unpleasant events. But Ankara could indeed help Middle Eastern states find their identities and cooperate with them, particularly in the economic field and in conflict resolution, without giving up its ambitious aim of becoming part of Europe.

It is a fact that Turkey has gradually been moving closer to the Middle East since 2007. Turkish-EU relations, on the other hand, are markedly cooling, as all present economic and political indicators show. Due to the EU's indecisive policy towards Turkey's accession, the attention of Turkey's foreign policy moves from the West via Russia to the Middle East and North Africa.

In order to explain the role of Turkey in the MENA region, it is important to understand the shift in Turkey's foreign policy from the West to the East since 2007. In other words, what are the reasons for the fundamental changes in Turkey's foreign policy, which had been consistent from the foundation of the Republic in 1923 until 2002?

Following Ahmet Davutoğlu's appointment as Minister of Foreign Affairs, the relations between Turkey and the MENA countries remarkably intensified. In his book *Strategic Depth*, Davutoğlu identifies the "three most important geopolitical areas of influence" as follows: (1) "near land basins", namely the Balkans, the Middle East and the Caspian; (2) "near maritime basins", the Black Sea, The Adriatic, the Eastern Mediterranean, the Red Sea, the Gulf and the Caspian Sea; (3) "near continents", namely Europe, North Africa, South Asia, Central Asia and East Asia. The Balkans, the Middle East and the Caucasus constitute

three zones of interactions. Turkey which is located on the Anatolia-Balkan axis can only be a real power if it controls the surrounding sea and water ways.⁶

According to Davutoğlu, Ankara must not only solve bilateral problems and conflicts with its neighbouring countries, but also between countries, in order to become a soft power in the region. It would act as a mediator making “zero problems with neighbouring countries” its motto. As a second step, Ankara would create a sort of “free trade area without visa restrictions”, that allows for the free movement of goods and services by intensifying its economic and diplomatic relations with the three regions.

Ankara thereby hopes to achieve two aims. First, it seeks to realise regional economic integration and to create a zone of peace and prosperity under the leadership of Turkey. Secondly, it wants to increase its bargaining power in the negotiations process for EU membership, and balance the EU by upgrading its strategic position.

It is a well-known fact that one of the main arguments for Turkey’s membership in the EU is, that through Turkey the EU can become a global political power. Turkey already has indisputable geo-strategic importance which would help Brussels establish a political and economic bond. It would bring strategic advantages, not only for the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean region, but also for Russia, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia.

As far as economic relations are concerned, Turkey has been improving its economic relations remarkably since 2002. MENA countries accounted for 17% of Turkey’s international trade, which was \$300 billion in 2010. Since the 2000s, Turkish investment in the neighbouring countries increased rapidly.

⁶ Davutoğlu, Ahmet, 2001: *Stratejik Derinlik* (Istanbul: Kure Publications): 151-152.

Turkey has now established close ties with many neighbouring countries by helping in their infrastructure of airports, roads and housing. Interestingly, however, the share of foreign investments of MENA countries in Turkey was only 7.4% in 2010.⁷ Due to free-entry visa policy agreements with the countries in the region, the free movement of persons and tourists has intensified greatly.⁸ Turkey's main competitors in the region are China, the EU and Indian companies.

As long as the present AKP remains in power, the economic and political relation between Turkey and the Middle East/Eastern Mediterranean region will intensify. The AKP was born from an existing pro-Islamic oriented party, and its leadership has been closely associated with movements in political Islam from its inception.⁹ One of the reasons is the present government's shared faith and cultural heritage with the Middle East. The familiar social and political environment brings about a greater ease or confidence, and is more comforting than facing unpleasant and arrogant European attitudes.

The shifting of Turkey's interest from the West to the East has been described by some commentators as "Neo-Ottomanism", in the sense that Turkey aims to re-establish the dead and buried Ottoman Empire.¹⁰ However, the term 'Neo-Ottomanism' is

⁷ Kirişci, Kemal, 2011: "Turkey's 'Demonstrative Effect' and the Transformation of the Middle East", in: *Insight Turkey*, 13,2: 33-55: 37-39.

⁸ State Planning Organisation (DPT), 2011: *Foreign Investments in Main Economic Indicators*. Available at: www.dpt.gov.tr.

⁹ "The Rise of the AKP which tempered the anti-Islamic secularism and Anti-Arab Westernism of the Turkis and rebuilt Turkey's links to its regional and Muslim past[...]Turkey's stand against American use of its bases in the 2003 invasion of Iraq and Turkey's stand against Israel after The Gaza Flotilla incident in May of 2010". See, Salem, Paul, 2011: *Turkey's image in the Arab World*, Turkish Economy and Social Studies Foundation (Istanbul: TESEV): 1.

¹⁰ Ömer Taşpınar describes the Neo-Ottomanism as follows: "[...]Three factors help define the Neo-Ottoman tendencies of the AKP. The first is the willingness to come to terms with Turkey's Ottoman heritage at home and abroad. The second characteristic of Neo-Ottomanism is a sense of *grandeur* and self-confidence in foreign policy. Neo-Ottomanism sees Turkey as a regional superpower. Its strategic vision and culture. reflects the geographic reach of the

misleading for two reasons. First, the term Neo-Ottomanism has a negative dimension. Some Turkish commentators overlook this dimension, unlike Eliot A. Cohen: “[t]o be an empire ... is to be envied, resented, suspected, mistrusted, and, often enough, hated” by others.¹¹ People in the countries ruled by the Ottomans will easily remember this. Undoubtedly, this would have a negative impact on the relations between countries of the region and Turkey, rather than improve them.

Secondly, it would be difficult to re-establish anything resembling the multi-cultural and multi-religious Ottoman Empire stretching from the Adriatic Sea to Yemen, because Turkey’s demography, legal system and legitimisation are very different. The Ottoman Empire’s legal system was based on the Sharia and represented by a powerful religious class of priests (*ulema*), who became civil servants of the State in the Republic. From 1774 onwards, the Ottoman sultans exercised the function of head of the Empire and leader of the Muslim community (caliphate). The Turkish Republic abolished both Caliphate and Sultanate in the 1920s. Neo-Ottomanism would thus require the establishment of a religiously-legitimised government.

In conclusion, the Ottoman Empire is remembered as a great empire comparable to the Roman and British ones that both ruled parts of the Middle East. The positive and negative experiences of Ottoman times should help Turkey overcome its internal and external problems and build genuine cooperation, progress and prosperity by working side by side with its neighbours and allies,

Ottoman and Byzantine Empires. The third aspect of Neo-Ottomanism is its goal of embracing the West as much as the Islamic world. Like the imperial city of Istanbul, which straddles Europe and Asia, Neo-Ottomanism is Janus-faced. In that sense, the fact that the Ottoman Empire was part of Europe matters a great deal to AKP’s neo-Ottoman vision.”; See Taşpınar, Ömer, 2011: “The Three Strategic Visions of Turkey”, *US-Europe Analysis Series 50* (March), Center on the United States and Europe at Brookings: 1-2.

¹¹ Cohen, Eliot A., 2004: “History and the Hyper power”, in: *Foreign Affairs*, 83,4.

for an enduring peace in the region. But in fact, it is dead and buried forever.¹²

VI. How relevant is the Turkish experience for future democracy in the Arab World?

Turkey's role and its possible contribution to the democratisation process of the revolted Arab countries has been greatly debated recently, and this not only in Turkey, but also by Western think-tanks and the media. A number of other factors should make Turkey an attractive model for the Arab world. As a Muslim country with a secular state in a democratic system and a market economy, it offers a credible alternative and a counterweight to pro-Islamic movements and fundamentalism. However, not only the Arab states, but also Iran fears the loss of ground because democratic movements and secularism challenge and de-stabilise their, to some extent, autocratic political and non-competitive, underdeveloped economic systems.

But Turkey's neighbourhood policy also faces some risks and complications. We have to keep in mind that Turkey is an integral part of the Middle East and that Iran, Iraq and Syria have common borders with Turkey. This raises the possibility of boundary disputes and involvement in all kinds of conflict between these four countries. In contrast to Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria have suffered under authoritarian rule during the last few decades.

Thus, it is quite possible that policy-makers of all three countries will divert their populations' attention from domestic difficulties to outside events, by creating a potential enemy. In the event of unrest in the surrounding Muslim countries (as has taken place in Iraq during the Gulf War and in Syria presently), uncontrollable masses of refugees, as well as terrorism, could

¹² Somel, Akşin, 2011: "Von Türk-Pop und Osmanen-Pomp: Die neue Sicht der Türkei auf ihre imperiale Vergangenheit", *Zenith*, 01/2011:1.

cross the border and create chaotic situations in Turkey. This would consequently have a negative effect on Turkey's political and economic stability.

From my point of view it is also questionable whether Turkey can act as a role model. As pointed out in various editions of the "Progress Report on Turkey", which the European Commission has been publishing since 1999, Turkey still has huge economic and democratic deficits.¹³ When looking at the Turkish experience of the democratisation process which started in the 19th century, it is clear that it requires patience and perseverance. The greatest difficulty consists in getting society to a point where it internalises freedoms and human rights. A further requirement is the establishment and smooth running of political institutions.

In the case of Turkey, most of the institutional reforms were implemented with the help of external actors, as recently by the EU. The creation and reform of present institutions were undertaken according to the blueprint approach¹⁴ with "more haste and less speed". Turkey adopted all political and economic institutions,¹⁵ the

¹³ Global rankings show that the country is seriously underperforming in a wide range of areas. It stands 67th in the Economic Freedom Index 2010, 58th in Transparency International's 2010 Corruption Index, 83rd in the latest UN Human Development Index, 138th in the Reporters Without Borders 2010 Press Freedom Index and 123rd in the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Index. It is listed as only "partially free" in Freedom House's 2008 Freedom in the World Report, and as a "hybrid" regime, ranking 88th, in the Economist Intelligence Unit's first-ever survey of democracies (2007). See Schmidt, Laura; Dehnert, Jörg, 2011: "Die neue Rolle der Türkei angesichts der jüngsten Entwicklungen in der Arabischen Welt", *Paper 6/2011*, Friedrich Naumann Stiftung: 9-11.

¹⁴ The definition of the blue print approach is "largely top-down, relying on expertise on the part of technocrats and foreign advisers". See Rodrik, Dani, 2008: *One Economics, Many Recipes: Globalisation, Institutions, and Economic Growth* (Princeton University Press):166.

¹⁵ We define the political power as a set of politicians, political parties and represented by free elected governments. Definition of political and economic institutions. Acemoğlu, Daron, 2005: "Political Economy of Development and Underdevelopment- What are institutions", Gaston Eyskens Lectures, Leuven, 10 October. Acemoğlu, Daron; Johnson, Simon; Robinson, James, 2005: "Understanding Institutions", Lionel Robbins Lectures, LSE, 23-25 February.

rule of law, and accepted fundamental principles of Western type democracy. But Turkey's political power did not allow it to improve the quality of these institutions because they were not fully respected.¹⁶ The basic problem seems to be the unwillingness, weakness and operational inability of political powers, to restructure the state apparatus from the bottom up over time, under changing national and international circumstances. Knowing what is the right policy is not enough; it is also necessary to have both the political will and the power to implement it.

Another important difference between Turkey and other Islamic countries is the secular basis of its state, which is one of the fundamental pillars of the Republic and a great achievement of an Islamic country. Turkey adopted the so-called French integrationist model, which is based on the separation of state and religion. According to this model, religion is considered part of private life and religious affairs are not admitted in the public sphere, while religious communities must operate under public law.

Among a series of secular/Europeanisation measures put into force was that the weekend holiday was moved from the Islamic holy day to the Christian Sunday, which is the Christian weekly holiday. Also, the Islamic lunar calendar was replaced by the Gregorian calendar. The discrimination of women in public life and public institutions was officially ended and the Sharia replaced by the Swiss Civil Code. The Islamic education system was abolished and public religious schools were closed, in order to facilitate the spread of secular ideology.

It should be borne in mind, that Turkey is the only Islamic country that has consistently imposed laicism, despite the various political fluctuations and tensions over the decades, both

¹⁶ According to the opinion polls made by International Republican Institute, USA, 86.5% of Turkish citizens trust the military forces more than any institutions including political power in Turkey. See Yalçın, Doğan, 2008: *Hürriyet* (10 June).

domestically and internationally. What Islamic countries can learn from the Turkish experience is the adaptation and implementation of secularism.

Speaking on a popular Oprah-style talk show on Egypt's Dream TV, on his official visit to Egypt on 14th of September, Prime Minister Erdoğan had said:

*"Do not be wary of secularism. I hope there will be a secular state in Egypt." He added that secularism doesn't mean a lack of religion, but creating respect for all religions and religious freedoms for individuals...Secularism does not mean that people are secular. For example, I am not secular, but I am the prime minister of a secular state".*¹⁷

Paradoxically, rapid capitalist development and anti-secularism/conservatism/re-Islamisation have gone hand in hand in Turkey, during the last three decades. This appears to totally contradict Max Weber's assertion that the enlightenment, religious reformation and industrial revolution are closely related. In fact, reformation may be partly regarded as the reflection of deep-seated economic changes, which accompanied the expansion of Europe, the dawn of capitalism and the end of feudalism. In other words, the reformation movement was influenced by economic factors. Meanwhile, however, it has also been argued, that it was the reformation which broke the position that the church had exercised over economic life.¹⁸

¹⁷ Champion, Mark; Bradly, Matt (2011, September 15). Islamists Criticize Turkish Premier's Secular Remarks. *The Wall Street Journal*. Available at: <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424053111904491704576570670264116178.html>. The statement made by PM Erdogan has been heavily criticised by Muslim Brotherhood: see, same article "[...]It's not allowed for any non-Egyptian to interfere in our constitution", said Mahmoud Ghazlan, a spokesman for the Brotherhood, "if I was to advise the Turks I'd advise them to crop the secular article in their constitution, but I'm not allowed. It's not my right".

¹⁸ Cole, Clough, 1952: *Economic History of Europe* (Boston: Heath): 151-152.

Interestingly, the rapid economic development in Turkey since 2002, though, together with the AKP, created a new conservative industrial class dubbed “Anatolian Tigers” with help from the state and rent economy. This may be referred to as Neo- Calvinism (or Islamic Calvinists) in an Islamic country.¹⁹ It has challenged the big capitalist and Western-oriented class located mainly in Istanbul.²⁰ This new business class does not see any conflict in their economic activities with Islamic principles. They accepted the rules of the capitalist game and international economic order and have adjusted themselves to global economic conditions. On the one hand, the Turkish economy is almost integrated in the world market, but on the other hand, Turkish society has become more conservative and the practise of secularism has been slowly weakening since 1945.²¹

The result indicates that the Turkish economy has become an integral part of the world economy, while conservatism has spread and the national identity has been replaced by an “Islamic” identity. The worst scenario may be a chaotic one, with Turkey moving from “secularism” via “moderate Islam”, to “a state ruled by Islamic principles”. In that case, a fundamental pillar of the secularist state would have collapsed. In the extreme case, Turkey could be fully anchored in the Middle East with all the features of an Islamic society. Turkey is widely presented as a role model depicting how capitalism and Islam can work together.

¹⁹ Max Weber regarded the Calvinism of the main sources of capitalist spirit, which made it possible to ‘worship God and Mammon at the same time’. See Cole, 1952, art.cit.: 153.

²⁰ Özel, Soli (2011, July 1). Democracy, Islam and the AKP. *On Turkey. Analysis*. German Marshall Fund (GMF). Available at: <http://www.gmfus.org/turkey>: 2.

²¹ Secularism began to be rolled back and Islam began to play an important role in the political rivalry, because unstable governments with weak electoral bases were likely to embark upon populist policies in order to increase their chances of re-election at a low cost. For example, the Ministry of Education has allowed the “Koran Courses” to open outside the public schools and the pilgrimage to Mecca was permitted. For this reason even the scarce hard currencies were available for Hajji.

Some commentators also argue that Ankara has a hidden Islamic agenda aimed at distancing it from the West. Middle Eastern historian Bernard Lewis stresses that "... the AKP aims to establish "Islamic Democracy...".²² If such is true, how can it therefore be possible for an Islamic country like Turkey, which is itself threatened by the re-Islamisation process, to play a guiding role for authoritarian Islamic countries?

VII. Conclusion

Based on past experiences, recent development in the MENA countries suggest that one authoritarian regime will follow another under different colours and political names, but like the previous one based on Islamic ideology and perhaps Arab nationalism. Besides one-sided and rigged elections, most Arab countries and Iran have never embraced democratic values such as freedom of speech, individual freedom and religious freedom continuously.

It is obvious, that the country's necessary radical transformation process cannot be realised with the traditional policy instruments and practices. Also, it is clear that the degree of transformation will largely depend on the replacement of the politicians and civil servants, who served the previous regime by a more open-minded new generation. Those who desire the replacement of leadership in the political parties have, however, not yet demonstrated their willingness and ability to set in motion and resolutely affect tough, long-overdue processes of change.

²² Princeton historian Bernard Lewis argued in *Wall Street Journal* on 2 April 2011 (interviewed by Bari Weiss) that "In Turkey, the movement is getting more and more toward re- Islamization. The government has that as its intention—and it has been taking over, very skillfully, one part after another of Turkish society: the economy, the business community, the academic community, and the media. And now they're taking over the judiciary, which in the past has been the stronghold of the republican regime". *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman wrote that "Turkey's Islamist government is seemingly focused not on joining the European Union but the Arab League" (June 15, 2010).

The MENA countries have a long way to go to restructure their social and economic life and to implement universal democratic values. Each country must decide on its own democratisation process. The reformation movement is painful and unforeseeable in its economic and political consequences. Another important question which should be asked is whether the MENA countries ought to take Turkey as a role model. If a model is needed, they can adopt the democratic values and institutions from the mainspring of civilisation, namely Europe which Turkey itself adopted as a model.

At present, Turkey is regarded as an important middle-sized regional power in economic and political realms and Erdoğan's popularity on Arab streets has increased strongly. His speech at the AKP headquarters on 12th of June, following his election victory, gives the impression that under his leadership Turkey will take an active role in all regional and international disputes as a mediator.²³

Undoubtedly, it will be a great disappointment for people in the Arab world, if Ankara turns out to be unable to fulfil such expectations. Turkey's decision and policy makers are, therefore, well-advised not to be involved in the events directly. Instead, Turkey should carefully and conscientiously draw lessons from its past experiences with the MENA region. It is a historical fact that the friends, enemies and coalitions in this region can quickly change overnight. Nobody knows how the emotional and unpredictable crowds would behave, and on which side they will be tomorrow.

With the Arab Spring, it has become clear that major and long term programmes of radical changes in the region can only be realised through international collaboration with the USA and the

²³ See Ferguson, Niall (2011, June 19): Mideast's next Dilemma, Newsweek. Available at: <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2011/06/turkey-the-mideast-s-next-dilemma.html>.

EU. Ankara should not put the future economic and political stability of the country at stake.

Finally, we may predict the following:

The economic integration process with the Community will help Turkey transform its economy and catch up with the EU. Besides the question of Turkey's full membership, Turkey will be fully integrated into the European Single Market in the next decade. For the time being, Russia, Central Asia and the Islamic countries cannot provide serious alternatives to economic relations with the OECD and particularly with the Community. Only an economically strong country, which is fully integrated within the world's most advanced economies, can have influence and play a leading role in the region. At this stage of economic development, the new markets in the region have a complementary character and will not be able to replace the industrialised countries anytime in the near future.

The negotiation process for membership in the EU will help Turkey reduce its democratic deficits, through adopting and implementing European norms and standards. To achieve its proclaimed goal as a regional power, it is obvious that the need for political and economic change and its implementation made the initiation of radical reform measures in all fields of political and economic life inevitable. If Turkey is able to complete the whole process successfully, its political and economic role in the region could change markedly and could subsequently be regarded as a significant role model. Until then, the road to success is too long, challenging and the going is rough.